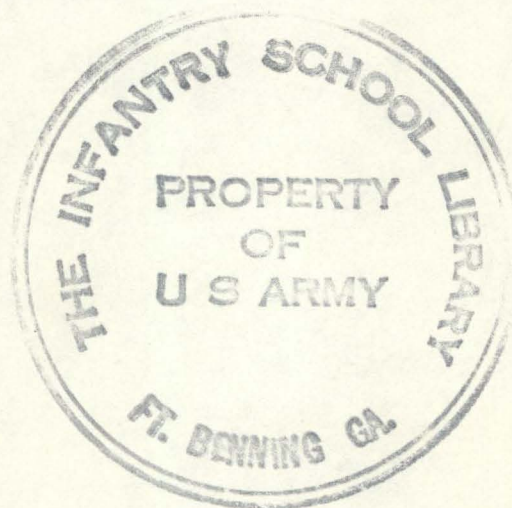


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OPERATIONS OF THE 3d COMPANY, 2d BATTALION, 1st
INFANTRY REGIMENT, 1st INFANTRY DIVISION (ARVN),
IN THE ATTACK OF A FORTIFIED HAMLET ON 28 MAY
1965 IN QUANG TRI PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM.
(PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF AN ASSISTANT BATTALION
ADVISOR.)



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INTRODUCTION

During the early months of 1965, it became apparent that U.S. ground forces would be required in South Vietnam. The first troops commenced to arrive in March. It was expected that this would relieve some of the hard pressed Vietnamese units from security type missions and allow them to conduct more offensive type operations. Perhaps this did occur around the Da Nang area; however, in Quang Tri Province no increase in friendly strength occurred. All offensive operations were still being conducted by Vietnamese since very few American troops arrived until months later. It was during this period that a battle took place in Van Van Hamlet, Quang Tri Province.

FRIENDLY FORCES

Quang Tri, the northern most province in South Vietnam, is the home of the First Vietnamese Infantry Division. This division conducted operations in both Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces; however, two regiments, the First and Second, operated in Quang Tri Province. The Third Regiment spent most of its time in Thua Thien Province. The Second Regiment operated near the demilitarized zone (DMZ), however, it was hampered by the number of static posts that it occupied. The First Regiment actually conducted most of the operations in the province.

The First Regiment had three organic battalions, but one of these was normally detached and operated under I Corps control. The remaining two battalions, First and Second, tried to work harder and cover a greater area, but they were understrength. The authorized strength for an infantry battalion was 714 men; however, my battalion, the Second, operated with an average of 330 men. Replacements never kept pace with casualties. The shortage of officers was extremely critical, and the Second Battalion could normally muster only six officers.

The two battalions spent about twenty days a month in the field while the operations ranged from one to five days and covered an extremely large area. It was not unusual to move 25 kilometers a day. When not in the field, the battalion furnished half of its strength for ambush patrols and local security each night. During the day inspections, convoy escort, and police details consumed the time.

In order to train it was necessary to sweep an area and then secure it for the night. The following day the battalion would conduct its training and return to its base. Because of the great number of operations and the distance of training areas from the base, only one day of training had been conducted by the Second Battalion since March. That consisted of marksmanship training at ranges from 25 to 300 meters.

THE ENEMY

Since early April the Viet Cong had become much bolder in Quang Tri Province. On 9 April approximately 150 Viet Cong

assembled in Phu Lieu Hamlet, seven kilometers northeast of Quang Tri. They successfully defended against repeated attacks by the Second Battalion and escaped during darkness. (See Map A) On 12 April the Viet Cong mortared the regimental command post and the advisor compound. The following day a Viet Cong battalion fought a regimental size Vietnamese force approximately ten kilometers south of Quang Tri in Cau Nhi Hamlet. (See Map A) The Second Battalion took the brunt of that battle, and casualties had not been replaced by the end of May.

The enemy at this time consisted of local guerrillas and at least two hard core battalions. The 801, 800, and 804 Battalions had all been identified in the province at one time or another. They were equipped with recoilless rifles, mortars, and machine guns. Their leadership and training had increased to the extent that they did not fear to fight a numerically superior Vietnamese force.

INTELLIGENCE

During the month of May, intelligence reports continued to show that the Viet Cong were increasing in strength. On 18 May a multi-battalion air assault was planned for Ba Long Valley, twenty five kilometers southwest of Quang Tri. Intelligence reported a Viet Cong regiment in that area along with training facilities and a hospital. The choppers and troops were made available and stood by at Dang Ha Airfield; however, the cloud cover in the valley refused to shift and after a day the effort turned to the south with negative results. (See Map A)

On 25 May the First Company from Second Battalion received orders to return immediately from an operation because of a pending attack. Defectors reported that five Viet Cong battalions had moved into the Ba Long Valley, and that they planned to attack Quang Tri City. This attack never materialized. At 0005 hours on 27 May the Viet Cong mortared three locations in the outskirts of the city with little damage. During the regimental briefing that day the intelligence officer reported that three enemy battalions were in the area. The regimental commander stated that he had an operation in mind, and the discussion ended there.

THE AREA

The terrain in the province varies from coastal lowlands and sand dunes to jungle and mountains; however, the area of interest is primarily rice paddies and sand dunes. The latest crop had been harvested, and many of the fields had not yet been replanted. The ground was firm since only one rainfall had occurred in over a month. The terrain was suitable for tracked vehicles except in the various streams and rivers where the banks were too steep to negotiate. On the day of the battle visibility extended for several kilometers, and the temperature ranged in the high 90's.

Van Van Hamlet is situated on a piece of ground that is only slightly higher than the surrounding terrain. To the north the hamlet is protected by the Vinh Dinh River. A small stream branches from the main river and protects the east and southeast approaches. The east, south, and west are all open rice paddies

with excellent fields of fire. To add to the defense, the hamlet is surrounded by a bamboo fence. This allowed the enemy to look out, but restricted the attackers ability to see into the hamlet. The only cover in the paddies consisted of the dikes and a few large grave mounds. To all of these advantages the enemy added his camouflage and emplacements. (See Map B)

PRIOR TO CONTACT

The Battalion Senior Advisor and the Assistant Advisor drove to the battalion command post on 28 May to talk to the battalion commander. Artillery fire could be heard in the background and its tempo continued to increase. The battalion commander informed the advisors of a plan that had been hastily drawn up and executed. The Third Battalion, which had recently returned from I Corps control, had moved east from Quang Tri on the south bank of the Vinh Dinh River. Popular Forces (PF) moved east from Quang Tri on the north bank of the river. The Second Battalions's Third Company trucked south and then moved cross country with the mission of establishing a blocking position. (See Map C) The battalion commander had not bothered to request advisors for the company; he did not feel that they would be needed.

The senior advisor mentioned the fact that advisors could always be of assistance to a maneuver element. The battalion commander agreed and said that he would try to have advisors join the company in the field. He also stated that he had been ordered to send a company south to escort a truck convoy from Hue. To add to his problems a company had also been ordered

west of Route 1 on a security mission. The entire battalion had been piecemealed, and only a few troops were left in the garrison.

While this talk continued the artillery fire increased even more. It became apparent that perhaps this operation consisted of more than a wild goose chase. The battalion commander said that a force of Viet Cong had occupied Van Van Hamlet and a small PF unit had made contact. It had withdrawn and requested help. This action had precipitated the operation.

After a short period the advisors excused themselves and returned to the advisor compound. They attempted to get more information, but no one could shed any light on the situation. The two company advisors checked their gear to insure that they would be able to leave at a moment's notice. At 1200 hours the battalion commander arrived and requested a helicopter for medevac for the Third Company. It had suffered one KIA and three WIA from friendly artillery. Fortunately, there were choppers available, and two advisors flew out with the medevac to join the company.

NARRATION

The two company advisors arrived at the company and talked to the company commander, Lieutenant Mung. This company commander had more experience than any other officer in the battalion with the exception of the battalion commander. Normally he was quite aggressive and well versed in tactical principles. The advisors had worked with him often, and a good rapport had been established. The company commander had little more detail

to add to what was already known. He did not know the disposition or strength of the VC except that they were definitely located in Van Van Hamlet. He had been ordered to move north and establish a blocking position to the south of the hamlet. A Regional Forces (RF) company moved on the left flank to assist in the mission.

As soon as the casualties were evacuated, the company started to move north. The area, consisting primarily of sand dunes, was open, and the company moved with two platoons up and one platoon back. It covered a frontage of at least five hundred meters and a depth of one hundred meters. The company moved slowly and cautiously. As it approached, artillery could be seen landing in the hamlet. The radio traffic was light, but the company advisor heard the regimental advisor on the net. Up until then it was not known that he had joined the operation. The regimental advisor said that he was with an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) troop southeast of Tra Tri. The regimental executive officer (XO) had been sent by the regimental commander to exercise tactical control of the operation, and he was with the regimental advisor. The regimental XO ordered the Third Company to link up with the APC troop. By 1330 hours the company had positioned itself to the southeast of Tra Tri. The RF company continued on the company's left flank. These forces linked up with the APC troop, and the advisors conferred. (See Map D) The regimental advisor stated that a Viet Cong battalion occupied Van Van. All units had been ordered to hold their present positions because of an air strike that had been

requested by someone at higher headquarters. As the advisors talked a group of Viet Cong attempted to break out of the hamlet and were taken under fire. They returned to their defensive positions.

The time passed slowly, and troops became restless and uneasy. The advisors recommended that the air strike be cancelled and that the maneuver units attack using the artillery, APC's, and armed helicopters in support. The XO did not have authority to cancel the air strike or order the attack. We waited!

Two Skyraiders arrived at 1430 and circled the area. After about thirty minutes it was determined that the troops were not properly disposed to use the air effectively. The air was cancelled, and the RF company and APC troop were ordered to move to the southeast of Van Van. They both moved in a column formation with the enemy on their right flank. Shortly thereafter the Third Company also received an order to move. It too moved in a column formation with the enemy on its right flank.

Several armed choppers and an L-19 circled overhead. The L-19 had an artillery FO aboard who was calling in fire. The L-19 pilot radioed that he could see the enemy in their holes in various places on the perimeter of the hamlet. His F.O. continued to call artillery fire.

By 1530 hours the forces were disposed in the following manner: RF company, APC troop, and Third Company were all to the southeast of Van Van. Third Battalion had moved and was positioned to the west of Van Van. The PF unit occupied the

other side of the river. (See Map E) All units waited for what appeared to be hours-in reality only one hour-while no maneuvering took place. During this time artillery landed in the hamlet; however, no return fire was noticed.

The company advisor called the Third Battalion and asked the advisor about the situation there. He learned that Third Battalion also waited for orders from someone and had not moved for several hours. Lieutenant Mung and the advisor conferred about the impending attack. They talked about fire and movement and the necessity to close rapidly when, and if, they received the order to attack. On this point they were both in complete agreement.

Shortly after this the regimental advisor joined the company because his radio had gone dead. At 1630 hours the company received the order to attack, and Lieutenant Mung placed all three platoons on line. Each platoon remained well dispersed. The armed choppers were still in the area, so the advisor called the leader and informed him that he would give him a call when he had a target.

The company closed to within one hundred meters of the hamlet and still did not receive fire. The advisor became involved with the company so he did not notice what the RF company did at this time. The APC troop moved forward and fired into the hamlet with their 50 cal machine guns. By this time the company had closed to within 75 meters of the hamlet, and the Viet Cong commenced fire with machine guns and small arms fire. It was

the most effective fire that the advisor had seen since his arrival in country. The company faltered and then stopped. Small groups dove behind the paddy dikes. The APC troop also halted, but it continued to fire into the hamlet. A squad on the left attempted to move forward, and every man fell from wounds. Several men on the right moved, and they, too, became casualties. The enemy had picked and sighted his weapons well. (See Map F)

Soon after the Viet Cong commenced fire the company was hopelessly pinned down. The headquarters group had dashed behind a mound; however, this offered only limited protection. An automatic rifleman with the headquarters group put his weapon into action and became a casualty immediately. The artillery F.O. attempted to get a better view and was shot in the head. The advisor placed the BAR back into action, and then a soldier relieved him. This was one of the only weapons returning fire. Each time an individual attempted to move the VC singled him out and soon created another casualty.

The regimental advisor left the protection of the mound and dragged a wounded soldier behind cover. The company advisor ran to an APC and had it provide cover and assist in helping some of the wounded. A soldier with the headquarters group moved to assist a wounded soldier and became a casualty himself. Medevac had been requested, and a chopper landed about 100 meters from the hamlet. The chopper was loaded and evacuated some of the casualties. It took several hits, but no one was hurt. The choppers landed well to the rear for the remainder of the

battle, and the casualties had to be taken to them.

The armed choppers remained in the area and provided some fire support. One of the pilots radioed that he had a target and was told to take it under fire. These choppers raced in to fire their rockets during lulls in the artillery firing.

Artillery commenced to fall again on the hamlet, but it landed in the center of the target rather than on the treeline. The L-19 pilot radioed that he could see the location of a recoilless rifle. The advisor marked it with tracers and tried to get the troops to take it under fire, but they were reluctant because of the effective fire the enemy returned. The APC troop continued to fire its machine guns, but most of the rounds went high. Another soldier with the headquarters group was hit.

Third Battalion was called and asked how it was doing. The battalion advisor said that it was also pinned down in the paddies and could not move. No help would be coming from that direction. The headquarters group and the APC troop were the only ones returning fire. The Viet Cong merely took their time and delivered devastating fire.

The recoilless rifle that had been spotted earlier finally commenced fire and hit an APC on the right. That started a chain reaction. The APC troop withdrew in a cloud of dust. They lost absolutely no time in pulling back. The XO issued orders and the company started to withdraw. Company headquarters provided covering fire while the company disengaged. The headquarters became so engrossed with this mission that

it was left in contact about fifty meters from the enemy with everyone else about three or four hundred meters to the rear. The APC's received orders to come forward and assist, but they refused. The command group continued to fire into the hamlet, and after some delay one APC finally did move forward and assisted in the withdrawal of the small group. It returned to the rear, and the advisor talked to the regimental XO.

The XO said that the troop commander refused to obey his orders. Both Vietnamese officers were the same rank, and a misunderstanding arose as to who actually had overall command. This would also create problems later.

Artillery fire continued to land on the hamlet while the XO planned another attack. The planned assault was to be preceded by an intensive artillery preparation. The company advisor recommended that half of the rounds be variable time (VT) and that the final round be white phosphorus (WP). That would provide a clear signal for all hands to commence the attack. The XO agreed and requested it. The artillery battery reported that it would fire 100 rounds as preparation.

Daylight was fading rapidly, and by the time the preparation started it was 1840 hours. Only thirty minutes of daylight remained. The artillery landed on target, but only one VT was observed. The smoke landed, and yet all units sat for another five or ten minutes. The APC's hadn't even started their engines. After the correction of this mixup, the advance started with Third Company moving on line dispersed among the APC's. The regimental advisor returned to the APC troop since the company advisor's radio was almost

dead.

About two hundred meters from the hamlet fire was received from the right flank. It came from Tra Tri where some VC had moved to the flank to deliver effective enfilade fire. The two company advisors watched for muzzle blasts from the treeline on their right. They both hit the deck and waited for the fire to start again. When it did, each advisor fired and hit a V.C. The remaining VC must have been behind cover because the advisors could see their tracers ricochet into the air. They both jumped up and ran forward to join the attack. They tried to use the radio, but it went dead.

The Viet Cong in Van Van opened up again, but the fire was not as intense. Suddenly, as the company started to falter again, a few men broke through on the right. This was pointed out to Lieutenant Mung, and he directed the company to that location. (See Map G) It plunged for the gap. Now the sun had set, and darkness came rapidly. The communications of the company picked this precise time to fail. As a result of the darkness and the poor communications, the progress of the company slowed to a snail's pace. The enemy had withdrawn; however, they left a delaying force to slow the attack. It worked!

To add to the other problems, ammunition had dwindled. Many of the troops had very little left since they had been firing rapidly during the final assault. The two company advisors had about three rounds apiece. They checked the troops as they entered the hamlet and managed to acquire a magazine each.

It took the better part of an hour for the remainder of the company to move into the hamlet. Poor visibility, poor communications, the bamboo fence, and the VC delaying force added to the slow movement. Artillery fired illumination, but it did little good because cloud cover had closed in. By 2100 hours the clouds opened up, and it poured rain. This decreased visibility even more. Fire fights had broken out in various portions of the hamlet, and it was impossible to determine friend from foe. Lieutenant Mung informed his platoons to cease the search for fear that they would take casualties from each other's fire.

The company contracted and established a perimeter for the remainder of the night. The company commander informed the advisor that the RF Company had withdrawn prior to the final attack and returned to its base. The APC troop, which had received numerous casualties to include the advisor killed and company commander wounded, withdrew after the hamlet had been taken. The Third Battalion was on the left flank somewhere, but its exact location remained unknown. All of these factors added reason to establish the perimeter and wait for daylight. The remainder of the night passed with no incident.

At daybreak the company commenced a thorough search of the hamlet. The advisor walked the line along the east and southeast portions of the hamlet. The Viet Cong had dug trenches and holes around the perimeter. Half of the holes were either L-shaped or had some sort of overhead cover to

provide protection from artillery. The defensive positions were quite impressive and indicated a great deal of organization and imagination. As usual, camouflage was excellent.

Some blood trails were located, but only five VC bodies could be found. Particular notice was paid to the fact that there was very little brass in the area. The Viet Cong had taken the expended rounds with them so they could be refilled. Three submachine guns, seven ammo cylinders for a heavy machine gun, and a large amount of assorted ammo, demolitions, and grenades were located in the perimeter.

The Third Company had sustained four KIA and twenty WIA out of a total of eighty men. The wounded were all serious and would be out of action for some time. A high price had been paid for the occupation of the hamlet.

The company moved to Tra Tri and searched that hamlet also. The Viet Cong had not prepared it for a defense, but a few fighting holes could be seen. After a thorough search of the area, the company returned to its base at LaVang.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. The major problem in counterguerilla operations is to find and fix the guerrilla. This operation was the classic example of finding and fixing him and then not being able to exploit the situation. The enemy had placed himself in a vulnerable position. It would have been a simple matter to surround the VC and block all avenues of escape. That was not done. Rather than provide a blocking force to the east of Tra Tri and eliminate the only covered escape route, the forces de-

ployed to the west and left this route open. Later reports indicated that the VC did withdraw to the east and then south.

2. Lack of coordination and unity of command caused much delay and confusion throughout the battle. These shortcomings first appeared when the forces halted in order to await an air strike. No one knew who had requested it, yet it could not be diverted until after its arrival. Only then could the decision be made that the friendly forces were too close and improperly disposed for its efficient use. The friendly forces could have been withdrawn to a safer distance, but that would have allowed the VC even more time to defend or escape. The decision by the XO to cancel the strike held. This delay caused the loss of much needed daylight. It also allowed the VC time to improve his defenses and look for an escape route.

After the units in the south shifted to the west, time was wasted again. The company commander awaited orders but nothing could be done until they were received. No forces maneuvered although artillery continued to fall on the objective. No one really knew who was in charge. The regimental XO had the command, but the regimental commander made decisions and issued orders from his location at the base camp.

3. The fire support during the battle left much to be desired. The company advisor accepts responsibility for not properly using the armed choppers. They could have assisted substantially when the company came under fire. The helicopters remained in the area during the battle except when they returned to Quang

Tri to rearm or refuel. The company advisor failed to give them a target throughout the battle. Artillery fire landed in the center of the hamlet rather than the treeline where the Viet Cong usually defend. This occurred each fire mission except for the fire prior to the final assault. With respect to the artillery fire, the company failed to take full advantage of its shock effect. It was either lifted too soon or the friendlies waited too long after it stopped prior to attacking. This allowed the Viet Cong time to reorganize and prepare for the attack of our forces.

4. Once the Viet Cong opened fire with such excellent results, aggressiveness left the company. Fire was not being returned. This allowed the Viet Cong to take well aimed shots and pick us off almost at will.

5. Lack of coordination and command authority became evident again when the APC troop withdrew from the battle. This loss of fire power forced the infantry to withdraw with very little covering fire. The small detachment that was left in contact was unable to withdraw without the support and cover of the APC's. In this case the troop commander refused to move forward until finally he was threatened. Precious time was lost while this small force remained in contact.

6. Once it was decided to attack the hamlet again, some of the units failed to receive the order. The signal to attack was the smoke round from the artillery. Apparently the APC troops failed to get the word. They had not started their engines and were not ready for the attack when the time arrived to jump off. This resulted from the lack of cooperation exhibited by the APC

commander. He wanted to fight his own battle any way he saw fit.

7. One encouraging note throughout the battle was the medevacs. This had always been a problem during other engagements. Medevacs arrived to the rear of the fighting throughout the battle. The troops received excellent medical care and were flown to Quang Tri soon after being wounded. This probably saved many lives, and added to the morale of the company.

8. Another encouraging note was the dispersion of the troops. They remained well dispersed throughout the entire battle. The large number of casualties could be attributed to the marksmanship of the VC and not to the troops being too close together.

9. All of the mistakes and shortcomings that arose during this battle also occurred the previous month. At that time they were brought to the attention of the commanders involved. This battle showed that these problems had not yet been solved. It would take several more months before a solution did occur.

10. The battle reinforced the principle of integrated and coordinated fire from supporting arms with movement from ground troops. Supporting fires alone can not successfully do the job. Ground troops must take full advantage of the supporting fire, and they must close with the enemy.

TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

1. Unity of command must not be violated. It must be made quite clear prior to an operation that a designated commander has overall control. This commander must be given the means,

authority, and backing to exercise this control.

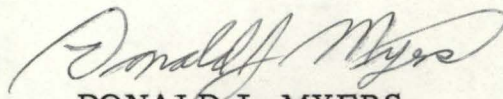
2. Supporting arms should be adjusted so that the fires land on the edge of a defended hamlet. The Viet Cong invariably defend the edges of the hamlets first. The fuses should be mixed, and VT should be used against enemy in open fox holes.

3. Training must be conducted at the small unit level with emphasis placed on fire and movement. Small training areas should be established close to base camps to allow the troops to take advantage of all available training time.

4. Every effort should be made to close with the VC prior to darkness.

5. Armed helicopters should be directed the same as any other close air support. This will produce much better results.

6. Communications must be maintained at all times.



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