

AMBUSH - NOT THE ULTIMATE TACTIC

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A favorite tactic of Viet Cong is the ambush. By the use of the ambush the Viet Cong seek to offset their overall inferiority in manpower and weaponry through surprise and concentration of force at one location. In the typical ambush (Figure 1) the Viet Cong will attempt to bring fire to bear on the ambushed unit from all directions. The blocking force may consist of mines, demolitions or VC units with automatic weapons. Assault or killer units will usually be positioned from 20 to 120 meters from the ambushed unit. This distance will vary with the terrain. The VC will attempt to cut off all routes of withdrawal and destroy the unit in the killing zone.

There are many actions which commanders can take to reduce losses from enemy ambushes and to convert the ambush to their advantage.

PRINCIPLES OF THE AMBUSH

If a unit commander is to become skilled in defeating ambushes he must first understand the basic principles of the ambush. These principles are:

(1) Prior knowledge of the enemy. Information of the enemy to include his habits, formations, strength, weapons, morale and if possible his intentions must be collected by the ambushing force.

(2) Surprise. Secrecy of the ambush must be preserved to gain the element of surprise in order to avoid detection and to destroy the enemy before he can react.

(3) Terrain. The ambush site must be selected to enable the ambushing force to take maximum advantage of the terrain. The ambush site should be located in difficult terrain to prevent the enemy from deploying his forces.

(4) Violence and speed of action. Fires of all available weapons should be delivered simultaneously to destroy the bulk of the enemy force, to demoralize the survivors and to clear the way for the killer teams. The purpose of the killer teams is to assault to exploit the success and then to withdraw quickly.

FINDING THE AMBUSH

Before the unit can fix or destroy the ambush it must first find it. All means available must be employed to discover the ambush as soon as possible. Reconnaissance by map study, foot and motorized patrols and aerial reconnaissance should be completed in as much detail as possible prior to movement. This reconnaissance should be accompanied by a thorough study of all available intelligence.

In finding the ambush security is a must. Point and flank guards should be used to prevent the enemy from employing surprise against the main body and to reconnoiter all likely ambush sites. In Vietnam it is often difficult for flank security elements to maintain the same rate of movement as the main body. The "picket technique" (Figure 2) can be utilized to protect the flanks and rotates the point without adversely affecting forward movement. These pickets are deployed from the lead element and return to the column as it passes to become the rear guard. When using this technique commanders must be careful not to deplete the strength of the point before sending another unit to continue this mission.

Maximum use of air observation by fixed and rotary wing aircraft should be made. These aircraft should carry trained forward observers who are capable of detecting and marking possible ambush sites and of adjusting artillery fire on targets.

FIXING THE AMBUSH

Once the ambush has been discovered, all available means must be employed to fix the enemy in place. These means include supporting fires, blocking forces, natural obstacles and deception.

Prior to movement all available automatic weapons, mortars, artillery, close air support and armed helicopters must be planned for and coordinated. Planning must include pre-planned artillery concentrations and the positioning of weapons in the formation where they can provide continuous support.

Communications must be established and maintained with all elements. External communications must also be available to enable the unit to gain maximum advantage of pre-planned artillery fires and supporting aircraft.

Plans should be made for the use of forces to block enemy withdrawal, to force him against any natural obstacles in the area and to deceive him and direct his attention from the main maneuver effort.

DESTROYING THE AMBUSH

Once the ambush has been fixed in place it should be quickly destroyed through fire and maneuver. Each unit should develop reaction drills to enable it to react to any type ambush. To be successful these drills must be rehearsed until every man knows how to react to the particular situation with the minimum amount of control. Thorough training and rehearsal is the key to success in destroying the ambush.

Basically there are two types of reaction drills which should be developed. These are reaction to be taken in the event the entire unit is caught in an ambush and reaction to be taken when only a portion of the friendly unit is caught in the kill zone.

There are many variations which can be developed from these two types.

Figure 3 is an example of a reaction to be taken in the event the entire unit is caught in the ambush. All units caught in the killing zone should immediately return fire with their organic weapons and assault the ambush force in an attempt to break out of the killing zone. The use of the M79 and WP grenades are very effective in assisting in this break out. All available artillery, mortars, close air support aircraft and armed helicopters should be used to cut off the withdrawal of the enemy and destroy him by fire.

Figure 4 is an example of a reaction to be taken when only a portion of the friendly unit is caught in the ambush killing zone. The portion of the unit in the kill zone will immediately return fire while attempting to break out. Units that are not caught in the kill zone should attack the flanks and rear of the main ambush position by assault to cut off enemy routes of withdrawal. All available fire support should be used to destroy the enemy as he attempts to withdraw.

NOT THE ULTIMATE TACTIC

The ambush is not the ultimate tactic for which there is no defense. Our forces must train and rehearse to find, fix and destroy the enemy ambush. One of the main problems in anti-guerrilla warfare is to bring the enemy to combat. When he ambushes, he volunteers to fight. Thus, the destruction of the ambush must become a main objective of our forces in counter-guerrilla warfare.

COUNTERAMBUSH CHECKLIST

BEFORE MOVING:

- Examine all intelligence data.
- Request air cover.
- Make Detailed fire support plans.
- Sandbag vehicles.
- Reconnoiter the route.

WHILE MOVING:

- Take a forward observer.
- Maintain communications with all elements.
- Maintain noise and light discipline.
- Vary formations and time of movement.
- Keep dispersed.
- Move by bounds.
- Use point and flank security.
- Keep off roads and trails when possible.
- Skirt open areas.
- Watch for mines and booby traps.
- Clear suspected areas.

IF THE ENEMY IS DISCOVERED:

- Use artillery, air and automatic weapons.
- Call for reinforcements if required.
- Keep higher headquarters informed.
- Flank him and attack.
- Ambush his withdrawal.

AT ALL TIMES:

- Deny the enemy information.
- Expect an ambush.
- Rehearse reaction drills.

(Note to Publisher: This checklist should be placed at the end of the article.)

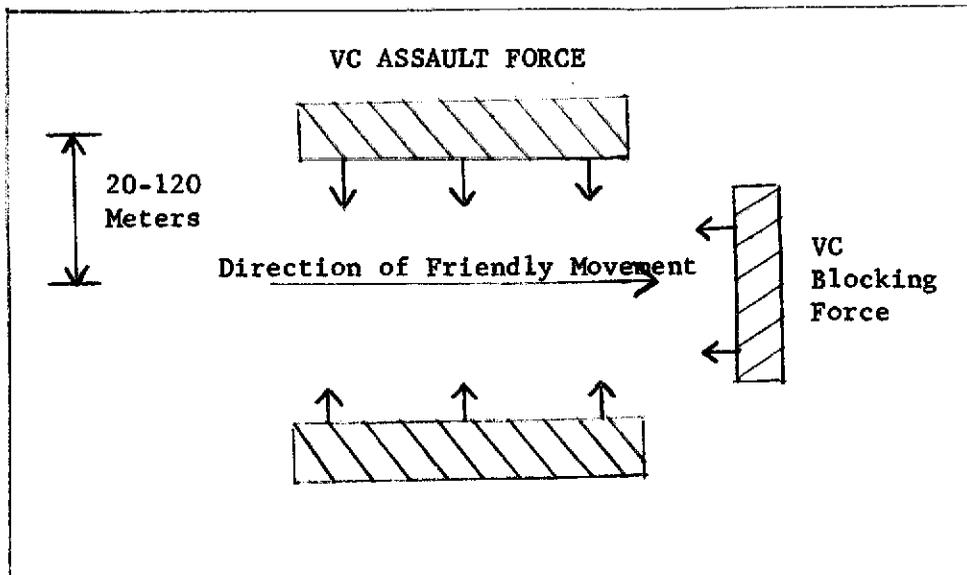


Figure 1

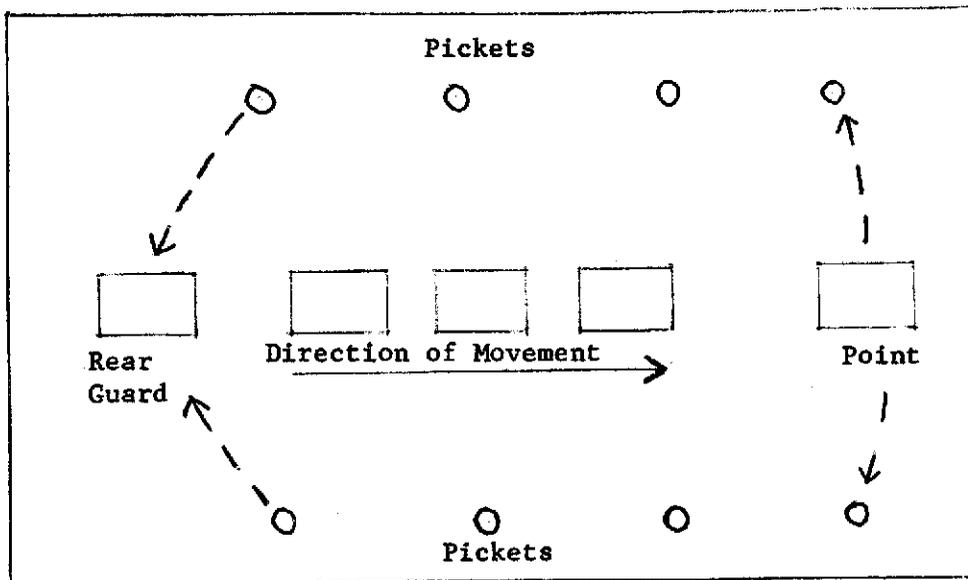


Figure 2

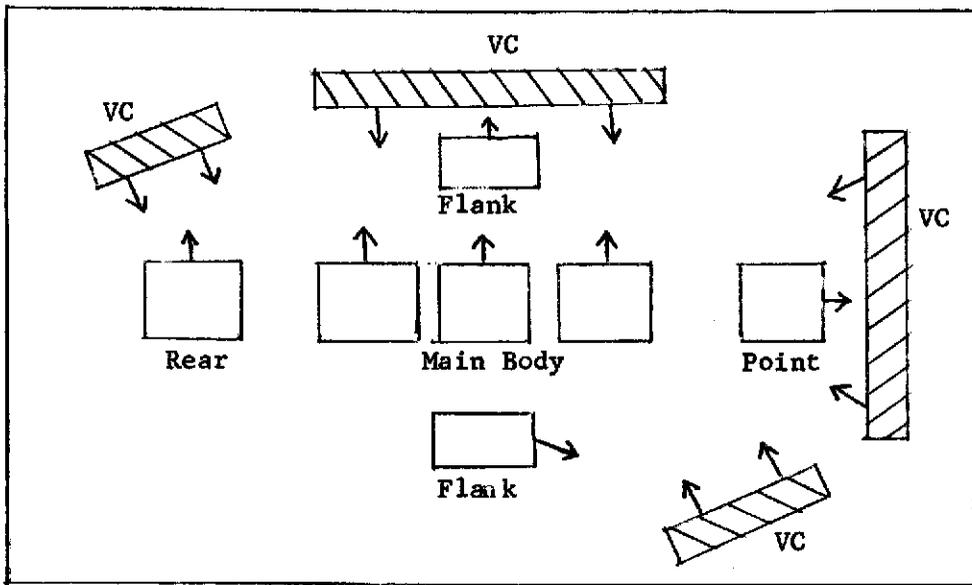


Figure 3

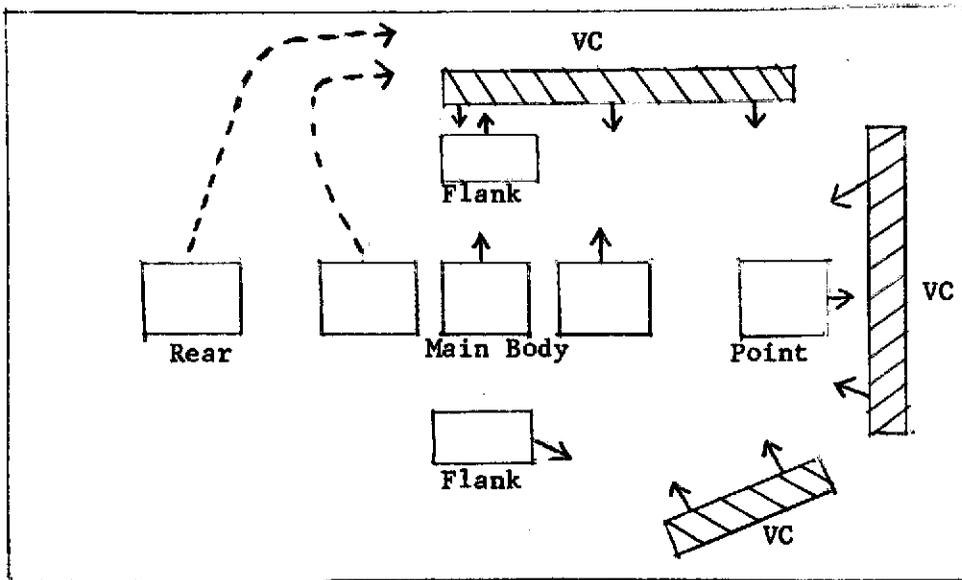


Figure 4