

UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL

Fort Benning, Georgia

9 October, 1968

OPERATIONS OF THE TUYEN DUC SECTOR INTELLIGENCE
PLATOON (ARVN) IN THE AIRMOBILE REINFORCEMENT OF
TAHINE, REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM, 8-18 DECEMBER 1967.
(PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF AN ASSISTANT SUB-SECTOR
ADVISOR.)

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IOAC 4-68

Roster No. 10, Advisory Group No. 5

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OPERATIONS OF THE TUYEN DUC SECTOR INTELLIGENCE PLATOON (ARVN) IN THE AIRMOBILE REINFORCEMENT OF TAHINE, REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM, 8-18 DECEMBER 1967. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A ASSISTANT SUB-SECTOR ADVISOR.)

INTRODUCTION

In the late fall of 1967, guerrilla activity had increased to such an extent in the 11 Corps Tactical Zone that the Republic of Viet Nam Armed Forces supported by Free World Military Forces were heavily engaged in a variety of counterinsurgency operations in support of existing pacification and revolutionary development programs.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The 23d Infantry Division (ARVN) with headquarters in Ban Me Thuot, Darlac Sector, was widely dispersed throughout its DTA with the mission of supporting revolutionary development operations. The mission implied a general defensive role down to and including company level throughout the DTA thereby limiting the Division's capability to conduct large scale offensive operations. Free World Military Forces assumed the offensive and possessed the capability of providing brigade sized reaction forces to the DTA. Advisory Team 34, with its headquarters co-located with headquarters 23d Infantry Division (ARVN) in Ban Me Thuot, was actively engaged in advisory and assistance duties within the 23d Infantry Division (ARVN) and throughout the DTA. (See Map "A")

THE SPECIAL SITUATION

In late November 1967, Tuyen Duc Sector was engaged in military, para-military, and civil assistance operations in support of revolutionary development and pacification programs. The disposition and mission of the Regional and Popular Forces are generally defensive in nature. Offensive operations were limited to Popular Force squad sized night ambush operations and occasional Regional Force company sized search and destroy operations. ARVN units included three 105 mm howitzed platoons and one intelligence platoon. At the time, there were no other Free World Military Forces in the Sector. Static security and revolutionary development support missions prevented the ten Regional Force Companies in the Sector from conducting search and destroy operations and greatly reduced the Province Chief's capability to conduct a joint battalion sized operation. (See Map "B")

Early in December 1967, Local and Main Force Viet Cong activities increased. Platoon and company sized attacks against popular force outposts occurred frequently throughout the sector. Revolutionary development teams were harrassed daily. Local elections of village and hamlet officials continued despite Viet Cong threats, occasional kidnappings, and assassinations. The Viet Cong attacks occurred at night and were characterized by well planned small unit raids designed to demoralize rather than to destroy RF and PF units.

At 0800 hours 8 December, the Hamlet Chief from

Tahine Hamlet, Don Duong Sub-sector, appeared at Duc Trong Subsector Headquarters and reported that a Viet Cong force had attacked his hamlet at 0100 that morning killing 55 of 71 popular force soldiers comprising his two popular force platoons, and burned his hamlet. The survivors of the two popular force platoons had fled. He further stated that the Viet Cong force was still in the vicinity of Tahine and had indicated to him that they were part of a battalion size force and would wait for a reaction force and destroy it. His life was spared, he said, so that he could report the incident. The information received from the Hamlet Chief was relayed by radio to Sector Headquarters in Dalat and Don Duong Sub-Sector Headquarters in Don Duong. The Hamlet Chief was then transported to Sector Headquarters for further questioning.

Further questioning of the Hamlet Chief at Sector Headquarters revealed that the Viet Cong force had attacked the hamlet and adjacent outpost during a funeral ceremony. The Popular Force had left one squad in the outpost and the remainder of the force had attended the funeral ceremony. The majority of the male population of the hamlet including the Popular Force that attended had congregated in the center of the hamlet and incapacitated themselves with rice wine during the celebration. According to the Hamlet Chief, one platoon of Viet Cong had entered the hamlet from the north and south, avoiding the outpost, and executed the Popular Force in the hamlet. Some civilians had been killed and wounded during the attack. When

the Popular Force squad in the outpost moved to the hamlet to assist, it was ambushed and destroyed. Although the Popular Force had an AN/Prc-10 radio in the outpost, they had been unable to contact Don Doung Sub-sector. The radio had been confiscated by the Viet Cong together with the weapons, amunition and equipment of the Popular Force. The remainder of the Viet Cong force occupied the high ground to the south and east of the hamlet and had indicated they would wait for a reaction force and destroy it at any cost. The majority of the hamlet population had evacuated the hamlet and were congregating in the southern portion of Duc Trong Sub-sector. (See Map "C")

THE SECTOR PLAN

The fact that Tahine Hamlet was accessible only by foot and air and was located well beyond the range of the artillery platoons in the sector had made it vulnerable to Viet Cong harrassment. The success of local elections, the above average size of hamlet, and the presence of two Popular Force platoons made Tahine a formidable target.

At 1000 hours on 8 December, LtCol Lloyd Michaels Senior Advisor of Tuyen Duc Sector, and the Province Chief, LtCol Trung Bich consulted with members of the Sector Staff and decided that the location and size of Tahine Hamlet made its existance of vital importance to the success of the pacification and revolutionary development program in Don Duong Sub-sector. Major Charles Wilkie, Senior Advisor in Don Duong Sub-sector,

agreed. The impact of the destruction of Tahine and two Popular Force platoons would have a demoralizing effect throughout the Sector.

Plans to reconstitute the force that had been destroyed at Tahine were hastily begun. LtCol Michaels reasoned that previous Viet Cong hit and run tactics had been generally successful throughout the sector and reaction forces had seldom been successful in locating Viet Cong forces. At 1015 hours 8 December he directed a Sector FAC to conduct an aerial reconnaissance of Tahine Hamlet and the surrounding area. The results confirmed the destruction of the hamlet but revealed no trace of a Viet Cong force in the area. Civilians were observed leaving the hamlet with their live stock and personal belongings. The hamlet was still burning. The results of the aerial reconnaissance further convinced LtCol Michaels that the Viet Cong platoon that had attacked Tahine was not organic to a battalion and that no battalion sized force lay in ambush at Tahine.

LtCol Michaels, LtCol Bich and Major Wilkie evaluated the forces available to reconstitute the defense at Tahine Hamlet and concluded that the capabilities and availability of the Sector Intelligence Platoon (ARVN) made it well suited for the mission.

The inaccessability of Tahine and the need to quickly provide protection and assistance to the population brought about the possibility of conducting an airmobile operation. At 1100 hours 8 December, LtCol Michaels submitted a report by radio to the Senior Advisor, 23d Infantry Division (ARVN) and requested six

UH-1D helicopters and an armed helicopter escort to transport the 36 man Intelligence Platoon to Tahine. At 1130 8 December, the 23d Division Tactical Operations Center replied by radio that the helicopters were available with one light armed helicopter fire team for an escort. LtCol Michaels confirmed the airborne concept with LtCol Bich and Major Wilkie. At 1145 hours 8 December, a radio message from the 23d Division Tactical Operations Center stated the helicopters would be provided by I Field Force Headquarters, Nha Trang, and would arrive at Dalat Army Airfield at 1500 hours 8 December.

The Sector Plan was to airlift the Sector Intelligence Platoon from Dalat Army Airfield to Tahine Hamlet prior to darkness, occupy the hamlet outpost, and conduct an investigation of the Viet Cong attack. Intelligence information gained during the operation was to be reported by radio at regular intervals. 1Lt Frank Moore, the Sector S-2 Advisor would accompany the Intelligence platoon. The 266 RF Company in Duc Trong Sub-sector would move from its outpost to Sub-sector Headquarters and be prepared to move on foot to the vicinity of Tahine and conduct a search and destroy operation. As Assistant Sub-sector Advisor, Duc Trong Sub-sector, I was directed to accompany the 266 RF Company. Sector FAC would be available during daylight hours to act as a radio relay and direct tactical air support if required. No further instructions were given to the Sector Intelligence Platoon or the 266 RF Company.

LtCol Michaels, Sgt Robert Ames (Sector Communications Chief), Major Wilkie, Captain Trung Qui (Sector Operations Officer), Captain Le Luan (Deputy Province Chief), 2Lt Van Tuy (Sector Assistant S-2 and 2Lt Lo Cuc (Assistant Sector S-4) would accompany the Intelligence Platoon to Tahine, conduct inspection and return to Sector prior to darkness.

THE PREPARATION

1Lt Tin Van, Sector Intelligence Platoon Leader, received his mission orally from LtCol Bich at Sector Headquarters at 1200 hours 8 December. I received my mission orally from Major Cecil Wallis, Senior Advisor, Duc Trong Sub-sector at Sub-sector Headquarters at 1300 hours 8 December. After receiving my mission, I called Sector Headquarters on the radio and requested a FAC to land at Lien Khong Airport and pick me up ASAP. At 1330 hours 8 December, the FAC and I departed Lien Khong Airport and flew to Tahine where I began an aerial reconnaissance of the area surrounding the hamlet.

The 266RF Company arrived at Duc Trong Sub-sector Headquarters at 1530 hours 8 December in four 2½ ton trucks provided by the Sector RF/PF Training Center in Duc Trong Sub-sector. Upon arrival, the 266 RF Company established security positions around Sub-sector Headquarters and awaited further instructions.

After receiving his mission, 1Lt Van instructed his platoon sergeant to feed the platoon, draw 2 days rations and ammunition and be prepared to move the platoon

platoon to Dalat Army Airfield at 1330 hours. 1Lt Van went to the Sector S-2 Section, drew maps of the Tahine area and received a brief intelligence briefing. At 1330 hours 8 December, the platoon loaded two 2/ ton trucks and moved to Dalat Army Airfield. Upon arrival at 1345 hours, 1Lt Van briefed the platoon on the mission and awaited the arrival of the helicopters. At 1430 hours 8 December, LtCol Michaels and his inspection party arrived at Dalat Army Airfield. (LtCol Bich was unable to accompany LtCol Michaels on the operation due to a prior commitment). At 1445 hours 8 December, LtCol Michaels conducted final co-ordination with 1Lt van and the FAC.

NARRATION

The troop lift helicopters and their armed helicopter escort arrived at Dalat Army Airfield at 1600 hours 8 December; one hour late.

LtCol Michaels briefed 1Lt Van, the helicopter flight commander, and the armed helicopter team leader on the air movement plan. The Intelligence Platoon would utilize five UH-1D helicopters with seven troops in each helicopter. LtCol Michaels and his inspection party of seven would utilize the sixth lift helicopter. The movement would consist of one lift of six helicopters. The two armed helicopters providing escort during the movement to Tahine, at the LZ, during the inspection, and during the return flight of the inspection party helicopter to Dalat Army Airfield. The five lift helicopters would return without escort to

to Dalat Army Airfield after unloading the Intelligence Platoon at the LZ, refuel and return to Nha Trang. The lift and landing at the LZ would be executed in a column formation with the command helicopter leading. The LZ would be the dry rice paddy area at the south-west corner of Tahine hamlet. The lift would follow Highway 1 south from Dalat to the 305 RF Company outpost, turn east, approach the LZ and land in an easterly direction. All helicopters would return to Dalat using the same route. The flight time from Dalat Army Airfield to Tahine Hamlet was estimated to be 25 minutes. The LZ was assumed to be secure. (See Map "D")

THE AIR MOVEMENT AND LANDING

The air movement began at 1630 hours 8 December. In route to the LZ, LtCol Michaels received a radio message from the FAC flying over Tahine that the situation on the ground had not changed. The air movement was executed as planned and without an incident. At 1700 hours 8 December, the six lift helicopters with LtCol Michaels' helicopter leading, landed at the LZ in column formation. The two armed helicopters executed low-level orbits to the north and south of the hamlet. The inspection party dismounted their helicopter and stood in a group in front of it. The Intelligence Platoon was slow in dismounting and began to walk towards the outpost. At 1701 hours, the LZ was engulfed in small arms and automatic weapons fire. Five mortar rounds exploded in the vicinity of the

lift helicopters. The enemy fire came from the outpost and all along the wood line on the high ground to the south and east. I told the FAC we were receiving hits on our aircraft from automatic weapons fire.

THE VIET CONG AMBUSH

Sgt Ames was wearing an AN/PRI 25 radio. LtCol Michaels transmitted to the FAC that they were receiving mortar fire. The helicopters on the LZ immediately began to lift off while receiving heavy enemy fire from the outpost. Their direction of flight took them between the outpost and the high ground to the south and east at low level. All six helicopters departed. Four helicopters began to malfunction in flight and reported to the flight commander that two crewmen had been wounded. The flight commander decided to land his flight at Lien Khong Airfield adjacent to Duc Trong Sub-sector Headquarters. At 1735 hours 8 December, the six helicopters landed at Lien Khong. Two helicopters were on fire.

As the helicopters departed the LZ, the FAC and I observed the Viet Cong assault the LZ from the high ground to the south. We estimated the assault consisted of two Viet Cong companies. We estimated also that another Viet Cong company occupied the outpost. The inspection party remained in a group and ran for the nearest cover at the southern edge of the hamlet.

The Viet Cong small arms and automatic weapons fire from the outpost and the Viet Cong assault on the LZ separated the Intelligence platoon from the LZ.

inspection party at the southern edge of the hamlet. 1Lt Van managed to direct the Intelligence Platoon to a drainage ditch on the northern edge of the LZ. The time was now 1730 hours, 8 December. It was nearly dark. (See Map "E")

The FAC attempted to call LtCol Michaels on the radio but received no answer. At 1735 hours 8 December, the armed helicopter fire team leader radioed the FAC that he had attacked the outpost with rockets, received heavy automatic weapons fire and had made a forced landing one km east of the outpost. The remaining armed helicopter monitored the transmission and the pilot stated he would land and rescue the crew. He further stated he had expended his ordnance and requested that FAC destroy the downed helicopter following the rescue. The rescue was successful and the FAC destroyed the downed helicopter with two WP rockets. The time was now 1805 hours. It was dark. Further attempts by the FAC to contact LtCol Michaels by radio failed. At an altitude of 5000 feet above Tahine Hamlet, tracer rounds from enemy automatic weapons burned out just beneath our aircraft. The FAC and I estimated the heavy enemy machine gun firing at us was a .50 caliber weapon.

At 1815 hours 8 December, the FAC radioed Sector Headquarters in Dalat and submitted a current situation report. 1Lt Van and the Intelligence Platoon had last been observed withdrawing north from Tahine Hamlet with one Viet Cong company in pursuit. Communications had been lost with friendly forces on the ground. The exact disposition of the platoon and the inspection

party was unknown.

The FAC and I returned to Lien Khong Airport and landed. The three damaged UH-ID helicopters had been secured by one platoon from the 266 RF Company. The flight commander had returned to Nha Trang with the three remaining helicopters and the one remaining armed helicopter. The three wounded helicopter crewmen had been given medical aid at Lien Khong for small arms wounds and evacuated by the helicopter flight commander to the 8th Field Hospital in Nha Trang.

At 1815 hours 8 December, Major Edward Vaughn, the Deputy Sector Advisor, submitted a situation report by radio to the 23d Infantry Division Tactical Operations Center and requested an armed flare ship (dragon ship) to support the ground operation at Tahine. The request was approved and the armed flare ship arrived at Tahine at 1900 hours 8 December.

With no communications with the friendly forces on the ground at Tahine, Major Vaughn made the assumption that if LtCol Michaels, the inspection party and the Intelligence Platoon had survived the Viet Cong ambush at Tahine, they would have attempted to secure and defend the outpost. He, therefore, directed the armed flare ship not to fore into the outpost.

Illumination of the area detected no movement or ground action, friendly or enemy. Continued attempts to establish communication with LtCol Michaels were unsuccessful. At 2300 hours 8 December, the armed flare ship reported that it had expended its ordnance and was departing Tahine for its base in Pleiku. A

second armed flare ship requested by Major Vaughn arrived at Tahine at 2400 hours 8 December and remained at Tahine until 0400 hours 9 December with negative results.

Aerial observation of Tahine continued through the night. Two Sector FACs were used to maintain continuous observation. Attempts by the FACs to establish communications with LtCol Michaels were also unsuccessful.

At BMNT (0530 hours) on 9 December, Major Vaughn requested two air strike sorties attack the area of Tahine; again excluding the outpost. A Sector FAC directed the air strikes and reported no friendly or Viet Cong activity in the area.

THE RETURN AND DEBRIEFING OF THE INTELLIGENCE PLATOON

At 0830 hours 9 December, the Sector Intelligence Platoon appeared at Duc Trong Sub-sector Headquarters with all platoon personnel. The Platoon Leader, 1Lt Van and the platoon sergeant, Sgt. Trung, were questioned separately by Major Wallis and I. Their accounts of the ground action at Tahine coincided and confirmed what the FAC and I had observed prior to darkness on 8 December.

After organizing his platoon and taking cover in the drainage ditch on the northern edge of the LZ, 1Lt Van had observed the two Viet Cong companies moving to his right and left in an obvious attempt to envelop his position. The Viet Cong company in the outpost was in a position to support the envelopment and

ruled out any attempt by the Intelligence Platoon to move to and occupy that position. 1Lt Van, therefore, directed his platoon to execute an involuntary withdrawal to the north and attempt to break contact with the Viet Cong in the jungle. Darkness would provide concealment for the platoon during the withdrawal. 1Lt Van further stated that LtCol Michaels and Sgt. Ames had been killed on the LZ by Viet Cong small arms fire. Neither 1Lt Van or Sgt. Trung knew what had happened to the remainder of the inspection party.

THE SEARCH AND DESTROY OPERATION

Aerial observation of Tahine continued with no sign of enemy or friendly activity in the area. At 0900 hours 9 December, Major Vaughn and LtCol Bich arrived at Duc Trong Sub-sector Headquarters to further debrief 1Lt Van and the members of the Intelligence Platoon and formulate a plan to determine the fate of the inspection party at Tahine. Although the armed flare ships had saturated the area around Tahine all night and the air strikes at BMNT had also devastated the area, Major Vaughn considered it a gamble to send the 266 RF Company on an operation in the area around Tahine. LtCol Bich agreed. At 1000 hours 9 December, Major Vaughn sent a message by radio to the 23d Division Tactical Operations Center requesting the assistance of US ground forces to conduct a search and destroy operation in the area surrounding Tahine.

At 1200 hours 9 December, the 1st Brigade, 101st airborne, operating in Lam Dong Sector to the south,

received instructions to consider the employment of its reserve battalion for the mission at Tahine.

Meanwhile LtCol Bich moved the 105 mm howitzer platoon (ARVN) from Duc Trong Sub-sector to the 305 RF Company outpost using the 266 RF Company mounted in trucks as a convoy escort. The convoy arrived at the 305 RF Company outpost at 1100 hours and the 105 mm howitzer platoon (ARVN) registered its two guns on Tahine A sector command post was established at the 305 RF company outpost. At 1300 hours, the Deputy Brigade Commander of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne arrived at the 305th RF Company outpost to began coordination for the employment of the brigade's reserve battalion in a search and destroy operation at Tahine. At 1345 hours 9 December, a plan for the operation had been formulated and approved by the Brigade Commander. At 1530 hours 9 December, a 105 mm howitzer battery from the 1st. Brigade arrived by helicopter and a battalion fire base was established three kilometers south of the 305 RF Company outpost along Highway 1. The 266 RF Company was employed to secure the battery position. The battery began registration of its guns on Tahine. At 0700 hours 10 December, the assault elements of the 2d Bn. 327th Infantry (ABN) landed on multiple landing zones and secured Tahine and the surrounding area. No enemy resistance was encountered. (See Map "F")

At 1730 hours 10 December, LtCol Michaels, Major Wilkie, 1Lt Moore and Sgt Ames were found dead in Tahine Hamlet.

The 2d Bn. 327th conducted company sized search and destroy operations in the area surrounding Tahine from 10-17 December with negative results. At 0900 hours 11 December, Captain Qui and Captain Luan were found dead three kilometers north of Tahine. At 1330 hours 12 December, 2Lt Tuy and 2Lt Duc were found dead two kilometers south of Tahine. On 18 December at 1700 hours, the 2d BN, 327th Infantry (ABN) was extracted by air from Tahine by the 1st Brigade and returned to Phan Rang.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. LtCol Michael's analysis of the situation at Tahine and subsequent concept for the airmobile operation were influenced by the following facts:

A. Viet Cong activity in the Sector had been characterized by small unit night raids conducted against Popular Force outposts.

B. Sector reaction force operations had seldom been successful in locating Viet Cong forces.

C. Aerial observation of Tahine Hamlet and the surrounding area on the morning of 8 December had produced negative results.

LtCol Michaels was not influenced by the following facts:

A. Local force Viet Cong possessed the capability to conduct a battalion size operation.

B. The inhabitants of Tahine were evacuating their hamlet.

C. The Viet Cong were proficient in the use

of camouflage, cover and concealment.

D. The Hamlet Chief from Tahine was considered a reliable source of intelligence information.

2. The Sector plan included a search and destroy operation to be conducted on order by the 266 RF Company. Although the company was repositioned, its assembly area at Duc Trong Sub-sector Headquarters was not close enough to Tahine Hamlet. Consequently, the time-distance factor involved precluded the rapid employment of the company when the Intelligence Platoon was ambushed on the LZ at Tahine. Although the 266RF Company did not constitute a reserve force, it could have been used as such.

3. The Sector Plan did not include the use of all available fire support. The 105 mm Howitzer Platoon (ARVN) located at Duc Trong Sub-sector Headquarters could have been repositioned to provide preparatory fires on the LZ and support a ground tactical plan. The 266 RF Company could have been used as an escort force. The 305th RF Company outpost, located three kilometers north-west from Tahine Hamlet, was a secure fire base.

Tactical air support was available upon request with the capability of executing pre-planned, immediate, and combat air patrol missions in support of the airmobile operation.

4. LtCol Michaels' decision to land his command and control helicopter at the LZ with the assault helicopter lift jeopardized the success of the operation and the lives of eight key sector personnel. As Senior Sector Advisor and Commander of the airmobile operation

he had the responsibility to locate himself where he could best control the operation and influence the action.

5. Although 1Lt Moore had planned to use an AN/PRC 25 radio for communications during the ground operation, he did not select a member of the Intelligence Platoon to carry the radio and act as his radio operator. Consequently, the platoon and the radio became separated on the LZ. Furthermore, 1Lt Moore did not accompany the platoon in one of the lift helicopters. When the platoon was ambushed on the LZ, 1Lt Moore was cut off from the platoon by Viet Cong ground fire.

6. The assault landing at 1700 hours allowed the Intelligence Platoon and the inspection party less than one hour of daylight to secure the outpost and make an inspection of the hamlet and surrounding area. Consequently, darkness in the latter stage of the ambush concealed the actions and movement of the Viet Cong force and prevented aerial observation of the ground action.

TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

1. When planning an operation, a thorough and objective analysis of all available intelligence information is required to insure the successful accomplishment of the mission.

2. Landing zones are never assumed to be secure.

3. A deserted hamlet is usually an indication that there are heavy forces in the area. Civilians will normally leave their homes and hamlet only to

protect their lives.

4. The capabilities as well as the limitations of the enemy must be given equal consideration in an intelligence estimate.

5. The plan for an airmobile operation must provide for the use of all available fire support. Preparatory fires on LZs are co-ordinated and delivered by artillery, tactical air and armed helicopters.

6. The command and control element of a airmobile operation can best control the operation from the air. Once landing zones are secured and the ground tactical plan is executed, the commander may land and establish command and control on the ground.

7. An advisor to a unit conducting an airmobile operation must accompany the unit during the assault lift.

8. The small unit leader must not become separated from his communications equipment.

9. The time of execution for the airmobile operation must be given careful consideration. An airmobile operation conducted during hours of darkness make command and control more difficult and restrict the ability to observe and adjust supporting fires.

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