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OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 7TH CAVALRY REGIMENT, 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION (AIRMOBILE), IN SUPPORT OF REVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENT OPERATIONS 25 AUGUST 1966 THROUGH 25 FEBRUARY 1967, OPERATION BYRD, IN BINH THUAN PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A BATTALION TASK FORCE S2.)

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### INTRODUCTION

By the latter part of August 1966, the military and political situation in Binh Thuan Province had deteriorated to such an extent that the immediate commitment of US Forces in the province was necessary. Since the first of the year, the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) forces had suffered five major defeats at the hands of crack battalion of Viet Cong local forces. Government control extended little beyond the city of Phan Thiet itself, and the protective wire of ARVN, Regional, and Popular Forces. Even during daylight, security could not be provided for travelers beyond the outskirts of Phan Thiet. During darkness those areas belonged to the Viet Cong. A three week operation conducted by the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in April-May of the year had provided only temporary respite. The enemy had chosen to withdraw from the area and await for the American unit to leave.

### MACV AND I FIELD FORCE VIETNAM CONSIDERATIONS

To the eyes of the Corps and Army planners Binh Thuan must have seemed one of the less significant military areas of II Corps in January 1966. A low level of GVN effort had been met with a seemingly low level of enemy action. Binh Thuan based no Viet Cong Main Force or North Vietnamese Army Units. Elements of

the 44th ARVN Regiment, varying from one to three battalions in strength, seldom made contact with Viet Cong local forces. The Chieu Hoi rate was low. However, in January 1966, the enemy began to step up his military effort.

Why did the enemy decide to increase his military effort at this time? Undoubtedly, the province had been slowly slipping under Viet Cong control. Perhaps it was an effort to draw US units into the province. Possibly local leaders felt that a total takeover was possible. Elated with their initial success in 1966, they might have gotten out of control of higher headquarters and pushed their campaign too far, too fast. Whatever the reason for Viet Cong escalation in 1966, by August it was obvious to US planners that rapid introduction of US forces was necessary. At the same time the new program of revolutionary development was ready for pilot testing. The seaside location of Phan Thiet, easy to supply by sea, and the generally favorable terrain conditions prevailing in the province (see below) contributed to Binh Thuan's selection for a trial of the latest concepts of revolutionary development .

#### THE EXISTING SITUATION

In five battles local force Viet Cong units of battalion size attacked ARVN or Regional Forces of up to two companies. Friendly force casualties were heavy in each of these actions. The loss of crew-served weapons was critical. In addition to its trouble in the field the GVN effort in the province was weakened by a breakdown in cooperation between the province chief and the commander of the 44th ARVN Regiment. No clearcut chain of command existed between the two men. The ARVN commander

often chose to disregard requests made by province headquarters.

When ARVN operated in force within Viet Cong controlled areas no contact was made. When he was careless he was harrassed or attacked.

#### PREPARATION

Plans had been laid at I Field Force to begin Operation BYRD one week before national elections scheduled for 12 September. That time schedule had to be altered when on 23 August, an RF Company was attacked and decimated in daylight on the outskirts of Phan Thiet itself. The 2d Battalion 7th Cavalry had been designated to be committed in Operation BYRD. The battalion was in division reserve at the close of operation (PAUL REVERE) IV preparing to return to An Khe when the order was received on the night of 24 August, to prepare for air movement the following day to Binh Thuan. There was only time for a commander's briefing at Nha Trang and dispatch of an advance party a few hours before lead elements of the battalion were airborne enroute to the new area of operations.

#### NARRATION

Binh Thuan Province contains the most favorable terrain for airmobile operations that the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry had experienced. To understand its operation there it is first necessary to know something of the characteristics of the area of operations that were to shape US and enemy tactics.

## ANALYSIS OF THE AREA OF OPERATIONS

Binh Thuan is the southernmost province of II Corps tactical zone. It is bounded by Binh Tuy province on the west (III Corps tactical zone), Lam Dong on the northwest, Thuyen Duc on the north, and Ninh Thuan on the northeast. Although all but a fraction of Binh Thuan's population inhabits the coastal plain, the southern tip of the Hoanh Son Cordillera falls within the province boundaries. Phan Thiet, capitol and principal city, lies 140 km east of Saigon on the sea. Its harbor is poor and supports only a local fishing industry and junk traffic. Phan Thiet lies along the path of Highway 1 and the coastal railway. Only that portion of the railway between Phan Thiet and Muong Man, a distance of some 12 km, is in operation. Highway 1, on the other hand, is open to daylight traffic in both directions from Phan Thiet. Travelers are subject to Viet Cong taxes between Phan Ly Cham in northern Binh Thuan and Phan Rang. The primary military and administrative lines of communication with the province are by air and by sea using shallow draft landing craft.

The best estimate of Binh Thuan's population is over 250,000; making it one of South Vietnam's smaller provinces. Phan Thiet's population is approximately 75,000. There are two population centers within the province. The first, and most important to our operation, can be described by an

approximate right triangle with Phan Thiet at its base and Muong Man and Thien Giao forming the other two corners. The sides of this triangle are formed by the railway between Phan Thiet and Muong Man, and Munong Man and Thien Giao, and by Highway 8B between Thien Giao and Phan Thiet. The Portion of the population contained within and bordering the triangle is the most significant. Control of this population center became the object of Operation BYRD. While exact figures are not available, the triangle contains the majority of Binh Thuan's population and economic resources and is the heartland of the province's administrative machinery. The second population center lies northeast of the triangle along Highway 1 and is composed of the villages of Song Mao, Hoa Da, Phan Ri, and at the northeast extreme, Phan Ly Cham. This area is secondary population wise and economically, and forms a subordinate administrative and military axis. Outside of the two centers described lie the populated fringes of the province. From Phan Thiet southwest along Highway 1, an area of sparse population exists. Another fills the gap between the triangle and Song Mao. A third area of sparse population lies northeast of Phan Ly Cham along Highway 1. Finally we must consider the Montagnard minority inhabiting the highlands in the north and northwest portions of the province who are under the domination of the Viet Cong. These people were encountered infrequently during the operation.

## ECONOMICS

Binh Thuan is a rice importing province. Two rice crops are harvested per year. A considerable amount of rice is lost to the Viet Cong. For the Viet Cong, Binh Thuan is a rice exporting province. Binh Thuan rice goes to Lam Dong and Ninh Thuan provinces. Small amounts of rice and the majority of Viet Cong requirements for vegetables are grown in enemy controlled area by production units. The vast majority of rice is obtained from government controlled or contested areas. More than 200 tons of rice were destroyed or evacuated by the task force during the first six months of operation BYRD. Even so, at no time did the enemy appear to suffer a shortage.

There are two other significant productive aspects of Binh Thuan's economy. The fishing fleet is active out of Phan Thiet and its derivative industry, the production Nuoc Mam is an important export source of revenue.

## POLITICS

Because of the physical isolation imposed by enemy action, and the obstacle of the highlands to the west and north, Binh Thuan is an out-of-the-way area. With the exception of the three week operation by the 1st Brigade 101st Airborne Division mentioned above, US forces had not been employed in the province prior to operation BYRD.

The low military priority of Binh Thuan was reflected on the enemy side by a corresponding lack of main forces. No main force

unit had been employed in the province prior to operation BYRD. Viet Cong political and military objectives were being furthered by a well organized province political organization commanding one, excellent, local force battalion and several local force companies. Each Viet Cong district headquarters commanded one local force company as well as separate guerrilla squads based in hamlets throughout each district.

### CLIMATE

Binh Thuan is influenced by the summer monsoon (June through September). In the interior of the province as much as 50 inches of rain falls during the period. During the latter part of the 1966 monsoon, it was noted that cloud formations and rainfall were regularly confined to the interior mountainous portions of the province and the areas immediately adjacent to the coast were not subject to daily rainfall. Airmobile operations were not greatly restricted by the monsoon because of the low altitude of the majority of the province. Rainfall occurred during late afternoon and early evening hours. Air movement was planned around it.

By the end of October, rainfall had diminished to tactically insignificant proportions. Water resupply became a necessity along the coast. As the monsoon ended, temperatures increased. Heat exhaustion became a problem though it occurred mostly among new replacements.

With two exceptions, wind conditions caused no difficulty for aircraft. In the dry season winds of 25-35 knots were common

along the coastal strip. This caused some difficulty for fixed-wing aircraft because the wind direction was perpendicular to the one runway at the Phan Thiet airfield. Winds over the highground to the northwest of Phan Thiet sometimes restricted the use of light fixed-wing observation aircraft but did not interfere with helicopters.

In summary, weather was less a limiting factor to foot and air movement than the battalion had experienced elsewhere in II Corps.

#### MILITARY ASPECTS OF TERRAIN

The area to be controlled, the triangle and its surrounding area, features good aerial observation by Vietnam standards. The ground is flat and open enough to be effectively patrolled by aircraft during daylight. The triangle itself is mostly rice paddy interspersed with grassy, unirrigated grazing areas and villages. The triangle is cut by several fordable streams having vegetated banks that provide concealed avenues of approach for units up to company size during daylight. They afford the opportunity for enemy movement on parallel axes, of battalion size elements at night. During daylight such movements are necessarily canalized by open grassy areas and rice paddies between the streams, which form potentially excellent killing zones for air support weapons and deployed infantry. Such approaches were not <sup>used</sup> by enemy units larger than platoon size during daylight. With half moonlight or its artificial equivalent and starlight scopes used in aerial patrols, the same restrictions could have

been imposed on enemy night movement when weather permitted. Such a program was limited by available aircraft and restrictions on flying hours.

Adjacent to the triangle on the north and northwest, vegetation begins to thicken. The gaps between streams are filled sufficiently by trees to afford the opportunity for movement undetectable from the air. After attacks within the triangle these areas became the enemy's initial withdrawal objectives. Although excellent concealment prevails in these areas little cover is available outside of the stream banks.

To the east of the triangle concealment is more sparse except for a well forested area immediately east of Phan Thiet. As the distance from Highway 1 increases, vegetation increases until at a distance of 3 km from the highway movement undetectable from the air is possible. Here the ground is gently rolling and provides fair to good cover from flat trajectory fire. Since the distance to areas of good concealment is greater in the east than in the north and northwest this approach was less favored by the enemy even though it provided him direct access to the Le Hong Phong secret base area. (See map)

The taskforce base area at Phan Thiet airfield interdicted an otherwise good approach to the triangle from the south. The area within the peninsula to the south of the city offered good concealment from aerial observation but had a restricted water supply and no logical base area for units larger than company size and poor lines of communication to the west. This avenue of approach was used only <sup>by</sup> the local force company stationed on the peninsula. Once effective ambush patrols were established

around the airfield penetration into the triangle became very difficult for the enemy.

Farther from the triangle at distances varying from 5 to 10 km, rises the foothills of the Hoanh Son Cordillera. These provide the most secure base areas within striking distance of the triangle. This area features sufficient water, concealment, lines of communication (to Military Region VI headquarters to the west) and limited tillable acreage for production units. As operation BYRD progressed, this area became the most suitable base area for enemy major headquarters and larger units. Observation of approaching aircraft was excellent. Due to the distance from the task force primary area of interest, and its size, friendly patrolling was infrequent.

To the east of the triangle lies the large Le Hong Phong base area. This area had been a sanctuary for Viet Minh and Viet Cong forces. A heavy tree canopy provides the area with complete concealment from aerial observation even during the dry season. ARVN had never attempted to penetrate this area. A series of battalion size base complexes was in use long before the arrival of the task force. Enemy production units raised the majority of the fruit and vegetables grown by the Viet Cong within the province around the periphery of the forested area. The Le Hong Phong area affords opportunity for resupply and communication by sea. Water is the chief logistical burden to be overcome by a larger force using the area during the dry season. Prior to operation BYRD lines of communication west to province headquarters could be kept open without much trouble. As the operation progressed frequent

patrolling by US and ARVN made necessary a shift of the enemy's lines north. A B-52 strike was staged against the base in December. This action together with a ground follow-up destroyed an aura of impregnability that had grown up about the place. Gradually the Viet Cong phased out the area as one of their major bases.

The secondary population center of the northeast mentioned above was not effectively controlled by the task force during the period covered by this monograph due to the distance from the area of emphasis and restrictions placed on the number of flying hours authorized organic aircraft. The most effective government military effort in the area was sustained by a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) camp at Long Son, coordinates 160390, and Regional Forces maintained in the populated area. GVN control was maintained over the populated area astride highway 1 from coordinates 090390 to 550510. In order to operate in the area the enemy was forced to attack in battalion size. GVN control did <sup>not</sup> extend outside the populated areas. Patrolling except by the CIDG was shallow. CIDG operations served to maintain control over the portion of highway 1 from coordinates 090390 to 240420. The CIDG patrolled in depth in the north portion of the LE Hong Phong Forest harrasing the enemy and increasing his security requirement. At night control of the CIDG's area passed to the enemy.

#### INITIAL TASK ORGANIZATION

The airmobile task organization of Task Force 2/7 Cavalry provided a degree of mobility unmatched by any other unit of its size in the 1st Cavalry Division. Its great mobility allowed the

task force to make its presence felt throughout the contested areas of the province, and when desirable conduct deep striking operations out to the fringes of the area of operations. Just as important as the equipment assigned to the task force was the ideal command relationship which attached or placed under operational control all combat, combat support and combat service support units supporting the operation for elements of the 1st Logistical Command and a company minus of heavy construction engineers which was placed in direct support of the operation. Working together, daily, the task force was able to achieve what I can only describe as a rapport between combat and combat support units that allowed the task force commander to conduct complex operations with extreme precision, little lead time, and a minimum of formal coordination.

The force committed in Binh Thuan for sustained separate operation was tailored as follows:

2d Battalion 7th Cavalry consisting of:

Battalion headquarters (which was task force headquarters)

Battalion headquarters company

3 rifle companies

1 combat support<sup>company</sup>/including

a reconnaissance platoon

a mortar platoon of 4-81 mm mortars

an anti-tank platoon mounted with 106 mm recoilless

rifles and .50 cal machine guns.

1 air cavalry troop

1 light helicopter company reinforced (25 UH1-D,

4 UH1-B gunships)

1-105 mm How battery

3 CH-47 Medium Transport helicopters

1 platoon aerial rocket artillery (6 UH1-B w/48 2.75" rockets each)

1 platoon combat engineers

pathfinder team (1 officer and 3 enlisted men)

IPW Team

1 counterintelligence officer

1 psychological warfare team

1 civic action team

Combat Service Support

1 forward service support element (from 1st Cavalry Division) including:

Helicopter maintenance

Ordnance maintenance

wheeled vehicle maintenance

Signal maintenance

Class I, III, V distribution

1 medical company from 1st Cavalry Medical Battalion

1 forward support area established by 1st Logistical

Command which serviced the Forward Service Support Element and provided water and shower points.

INITIAL OPERATIONS 25 AUGUST THROUGH 12 DECEMBER 1966

The mission assigned to Task Force 2/7 Cavalry was to support revolutionary development within its assigned area of operations. After establishing its base at Phan Thiet airstrip and receiving its attachments, the initial objectives of the task force

were to: (1) secure its base at the airfield; (2) regain the offensive within the province; and, (3) provide an atmosphere for national elections to be held 12 September.

Objective (1) was of primary importance for the three day period required to receive all assigned units and the task force basic load of supplies. A perimeter was established by the three rifle companies and ground patrolling was conducted in sufficient depth for local security. The air cavalry troop conducted air and ground reconnaissance in the triangle and surrounding area.

Once initial reception of units had taken place, the second objective could be pursued. The main effort of the task force was directed against the most lucrative enemy targets that could be supplied by the sector intelligence advisor. The target selected for the first operation was a suspected base camp location of the province's Local Force Battalion, the 482d Battalion. The location given was the general area of Dang Gia, coordinates 230230. Artillery was split between Phan Thiet airfield and LZ Judy, just outside Muong Man. In this way, one artillery battery was split to provide fire support for the Phan Thiet Airfield, the fire support base at Muong Man, and the search operation itself. The enemy was expected to avoid contact, withdraw to more secure areas, and await the withdrawal of US forces as he had done during the 1st Brigade 101st Airborne operation earlier in the year. For this reason the initial effort of the task force was directed against fixed installations rather than reported enemy location. The air cavalry

troop conducted separate operations; mostly reconnaissance in force, throughout the remainder of the area in and around the triangle to: effect maximum casualties; gain intelligence; and make an obvious display of force to impress the populace.

In retrospect it is easy to see that initial task force operations were too ponderous and inflexible to be effective against the light hitting but extremely mobile enemy local forces. Battalion experience up to this time had been exclusively against North Vietnamese Army units in the northern portion of II corps tactical zone. Experience in fighting a more heavily armed and more conventional foe caused the task force to proceed much more cautiously than was necessary. The task force later learned that to tie itself down to its artillery was unnecessary, and too much of a hindrance to its mobility. Results of initial ground operations were large amounts of rice and huts destroyed but little contact.

The air cavalry troop made the most significant contribution during this period. It was involved in actions up to platoon size. Through the use of its organic gunships and supporting aerial rocket artillery it was able to inflict approximately 80 KIA during the first month of operations. Such success highlights an important weakness displayed by the enemy during early operations. The experience gained by Viet Cong fighting helicopters in other areas of Vietnam had failed to penetrate this area which had experienced little fighting against armed helicopters. The enemy was poorly prepared. His anti-aircraft fires were completely

ineffective and troops needlessly exposed themselves to helicopter fires. It took several months of experience and intensive training for local forces to learn methods of concealment and deception when dealing with helicopters that were well known to units in other parts of the country. This point suggests that a more aggressive policy of movement and heavy emphasis on helicopter borne fire support, i. e. , air cavalry tactics would have met with excellent results during this period.

For two days before election day, the task force deployed in static, company sized positions within the triangle and assumed defensive posture against a possible enemy offensive move prior to elections. Such a move was not forthcoming but the Phan Thiet airfield was mortared for the first time on the night of 11 September. The attack caused only light damage to three helicopters but rounds falling in the aviation fuel storage area caused spectacular fire that was easily visible from Phan Thiet. There were no friendly casualties. An off-balance enemy was unable to take counterelection measures other than propaganda and the election went smoothly.

Once the elections were out of the way, offensive operations resumed using targets provided by sector. Ground action was light. Occasionally, the enemy harrassed defensive perimeters and sniped at units on the move. Other than that, little contact was made. Tons of rice and smaller amounts of other grains were located and destroyed. Secret hamlets were destroyed. The enemy had ceased offensive operations and awaited the withdrawal of US forces.

The air cavalry troops continued to range throughout the area of operations outside artillery range. The enemy still had not learned to hold his fire at aircraft when he was not effectively concealed. Therefore, the majority of enemy losses continued to be inflicted from the air.

During the final week of September the decision was taken to resume offensive operations in spite of the presence of US forces. During the first week of October, the enemy began preparation for an attack on the district headquarters of Thien Giao. Thien Giao was the northernmost point of government control in the triangle area. It was defended by a poorly led, poorly advised regional forces company.

While enemy preparation for the attack of Thien Giao went forward, the task force continued with its policy of battalion sized operations directed against suspected base areas. These operations continued to be successful in destroying rice caches and base camps, and restricting enemy movement within the area which the task force happened to be operating in, but accomplished little else.

Having exhausted the list of accessible base camp locations, task force objectives became reported enemy troop concentrations. Each day the province S2 received several reports of the location of the 482d battalion and other local force units. The task force had not as yet sufficient experience in dealing with these reports to have a reasonable feel for their reliability. By the second week of October, reports suggested an enemy

concentration of reinforced battalion size on the peninsula south of the airfield. No reports warned enemy activity near Thien Giao, the actual focus of enemy preparations. On 14 October a battalion sized operation was launched south of Phan Thiet airfield to search the area of the reported enemy build-up. The task force tactical CP was displaced south to the area of operations.

On the night of 15 October Thien Giao was attacked with the entire 482d Battalion, reinforced with one local force company. The task force was not in good posture to react. The attack succeed in penetrating the district headquarters compound and destroying three of four key bunkers but did not accomplish its objective of overrunning the compound. The enemy around the compound received withering fire from helicopter gunships. Flare ships provided illumination until an Air Force aircraft arrived. The task force reacted with its reserve air assaulting at first light to block suspected enemy routes of withdrawal. One more US company and one ARVN company were then committed in the same manner. No contact was made by the forces that attempted to trap the retreating enemy. We later learned that our reaction forces had landed along withdrawal routes used by the enemy but he had already withdrawn past those areas by the time friendly forces landed. Twenty-six enemy bodies were counted outside Thien Giao. Friendly casualties were slightly less. It was counted as a moral victory for government forces in view of past performance

against the unit; but the enemy had shown that he could strike hard within the triangle in spite of our presence.

Several important lessons were learned from the action at Thein Giao. The value of province intelligence was degraded. The task force could not afford to commit its entire combat power in one area of the province. It was responsible for too large an area to concentrate its force in a small portion of it. Operations no larger than company size were to be employed after this. Since communications were excellent from the main CP location at the airfield, displacement of a task force tactical CP forward served no useful purpose. Where necessary temporary radio relays could be established. It was necessary to position at least a portion of task force artillery so that it might fire in support of GVN installations within the triangle. A new fire support base was selected, one that would be mutually supporting with artillery located at the airfield and could support both Thein Giao and Muong Man. This position was named LZ Virginia and became a permanent installation. Finally, in view of the poor reliability of available intelligence, operations would be based on patrolling around the periphery of the triangle, taking advantage of numerous landing zones available. Patrols were of short duration. Usually a company would close into a defensive perimeter for the night and establish local ambushes. Sufficient reserves were held out to react to major contacts that might develop. The result of this type of operation was to effect a screen around the triangle area.

Captured documents later revealed that the enemy had not been satisfied with his performance at Thein Giao. He withdrew to the Le Hong Phong base area and was preparing to continue his offensive when on 25 October, one of the US pilots supporting the province advisory group made a sighting of what he believed to be one company.

The task force was notified and responded, first with gunships, and as the situation developed, a force of two platoons air assaulted into the area. This target turned out to be the assembly area of the entire 482d Battalion. The battle took place in the late afternoon and by the time the true size of the target was determined it was too late to take full advantage of the opportunity. The platoons were extracted just before darkness. Nonetheless, a severe blow had been delivered to the 482d. Body count from air and ground action was over 50 enemy at a cost of one friendly KIA and one helicopter destroyed. After this action, the 482d withdrew to the center of its Le Hong Phong base for a period of rest, retraining and indoctrination. The battalion did not resume offensive operations until the middle of December and it was never the same fighting organization it had been before the arrival of the task force.

#### OPERATIONS AGAINST THE INFRASTRUCTURE

A secondary focus of task force operations was the Viet Cong infrastructure. Early in the operation, the task force had to rely on "black lists" furnished by the national police. From time to time the task force conducted village searches.

For such operations, a platoon of national police would accompany one or more US companies in an air assault, on

multiple landing zones around the target village at first light. Sometimes a US company would infiltrate into position during the night. US forces would be used to seal off the village and the national police would search and interrogate.

The above method was successful in capturing low level guerrillas who were in the habit of returning to the village to spend the night. After a few such operations the enemy changed his schedule and returned to the villages late in the afternoon and left before dawn. Air guards were posted in Viet Cong villages to sound the alarm when aircraft approached. Later the task force conducted these operations in the afternoon and surprise was again achieved.

We learned that in this type of operation as in all others, the enemy was extremely sensitive to patterns in our way of doing things. He was quick to change his own habits in order to take advantage of ours.

The method of search described above, was not likely to net any leaders. Our best method against these was to get their names beforehand from agents and arrange for their apprehension through the village chief. A representative of the task force and a national policeman would make the arrest. Obviously, this method worked only in GVN controlled areas. When conditions for this type of action were present, it was certainly the most efficient and economical way to deal with the Viet Cong. We did not make sufficient use of available intelligence to operate in this way.

## OPERATIONS 13 DECEMBER THROUGH 25 FEBRUARY 1967

Command of the task force changed hands before 13 December, and our operations took on a new character with the change. At about the same time the enemy ended a period of inaction.

The enemy had used the month of November and the early part of December to reorganized his effort. He had witnessed a steady deterioration of his position in the province from its high point just before the arrival of the task force. His major forces had been kept off balance and out of the triangle by intensive patrolling. Such offensive efforts, as he had been able to mount in that area had been failures. A sense of security had begun to prevail within the populated area. RF and PF morale had begun to improve in the absence of any failures during the past months. ARVN and RF forces were aware that they could count on rapid assistance from helicopter gunships. These units had begun to show signs of aggressiveness. The command difficulties between the province chief and ARVN regimental commander were solved when the regimental commander was relieved.

On the other hand, from the enemy point of view, the military situation had just about stabilized. US operations had lapsed into familiar patterns. They started and ceased at about the same time every day. No more than two US companies would be conducting air assaults in one day because the Americans were tied down to secure their airfield and their fire support bases. He knew that by watching reconnaissance helicopters' activities late in the afternoon he could predict

the area of operations or even the exact landing zones for the next day. There was no danger of his units becoming unexpectedly engaged as had happened on 25 October. The task force presented no threat to the infrastructure. The Vietnamese were still inactive in attacking the infrastructure. The enemy's main problem was that the people were losing their fear and respect for him. Recruiting was becoming more difficult. Morale among his units was low because the men could no longer visit their families. They were now very much afraid of the US helicopters. He was forced to encourage his followers and frighten his oponents with promises of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese reinforcements that would soon arrive in the province. About the only effective way he could hurt the Americans was with his booby traps.

The enemy knew that he did not have the combat power to challenge the task force directly. It was not necessary that he do so. What was necessary was that he demonstrate to the people that he could still enter the triangle at will and inflict casualties on GVN forces. There were two reasonable means of accomplishing this. First, and most desirable, he could lure the task force out of the triangle and strike while it was away. Second, he could risk task force reaction by attacking directly.

The enemy was to try both approaches to the problem. On 15 December, a three company attack was made on one

medicore RF company near Thanh Luong at coordinates 390380.

An abortive attempt was made to ambush another RF company moving to assist the one under attack. Weapons captured in the fight and reports from the RF company gave every indication that a new unit had participated in the attack. The task force commander chose not to react by beginning operations in the area and kept the task force oriented on the triangle area.

From the viewpoint of the task force, <sup>the</sup> /situation in December was not entirely satisfactory. Intensive patrolling operations over the past two months had failed to lead to any major contact. The task force had failed to regain contact with the 482d. Body count had diminished to a rate of less than one per day. Intelligence reports indicated that the enemy was hurting and his propaganda tended to confirm this. Even so, it was felt that were were not getting our money's worth in terms of enemy KIA for effort expended.

The new task force commander changed our method of operations. A change to break our established pattern of behavior <sup>was</sup> warranted. The tempo of operations was slowed.

The typical pattern changed from an air assault and extraction in one day, to extended operations by a company for three to five days at a time, with emphasis on deliberate movement and rest during the day and maximum offensive ambushes at night, that followed by extraction and duty securing either of the two fixed

installations manned by the task force, Phan Thiet Airfield, or LZ Virginia. He attempted to introduce as much deception into our movements as possible. Fake air assaults and extractions were conducted. Often a company would be extracted from a pick-up zone and another one inserted at the same time.

By this time, better intelligence was available to the commander. We now had the experience in the area to better evaluate information received from the various local agencies, and the task force had begun to develop information sources of its own. Pilots had become quite sensitive to changes in the terrain that could be detected from the air. They were more intelligence conscious. The new commander was willing to react in force to the intelligence he received. A B-52 raid and ground follow-up operations were conducted on the L<sup>2</sup> Hong Phong base on 29 December.

All these changes met with results. The enemy was caught unaware and his casualties increased. Movement into the triangle, even in small groups, became more difficult. The enemy began to be restricted in his ability to get into the triangle to conduct routine administrative business. At the same time the task force was no longer bounded by the limits of its artillery. Units habitually relied on helicopters for fire support. The enemy had to withdraw his base areas further from the triangle to stay out of the way of our patrolling. Security of the airfield was improved by increasing the number and depth of ambush patrols. The airfield was not mortared after 17 November, although at least two attempts were made.

The change in task force operations did not produce improvement on all fronts however. The effort against the infrastructure was neglected. What little had been done in this area, now ceased almost completely. Relations between the new task force commander and the province chief were not as good as before. Although joint operations between US and ARVN or RF were increased by order of higher headquarters, they were not participated in wholeheartedly by either side. Command emphasis was lacking on both sides.

#### RENEWED ENEMY OFFENSIVE, JANUARY 1967

Having failed to draw the task force away from the triangle, the enemy decided to attack in the triangle in spite of the risk from helicopters. In order to best reduce the risk of helicopters, he decided to attempt to disperse them by attacking several targets at once. His attack took place on 17 January. It failed. From the action that took place on the 17th, prisoner interrogation and conjecture, what we believed to have been the enemy's plan of attack, was pieced together. The attack was to feature a mortar attack on the airfield. Simultaneous attacks were to be made on the ARVN APC company located at coordinates 740150 and the outpost of Phu Long, coordinates 890170 and another outpost at coordinates 550180. The major effort was to be an ambush of an expected relieved column coming from Thien Giao to aid the APC company. In this way everything possible

was to be done, to prevent our helicopters from being used, to deceive us as to the location of the main effort and to rely on close combat at the ambush location to shield him from the helicopter fires. The plan was ingenious, but too complex.

What actually happened was this. The company scheduled to mortar the airfield, was ambushed getting into position losing 9 KIA, 1 PW and a portion of its mortar ammunition. The company that was to attack Phu Long never made the attack and its XO and four others were captured the following day by ARVN sweeping the area. The APC company was attacked strongly but was able to take care of itself with gunship help. The attack on the outpost at coordinates 850180 was ineffective. No reaction force was needed, so the ambush was never sprung.

When the attack failed, the enemy leaders recognized that situation had gotten out of their control. The Viet Cong would have to reinforce Binh Thuan province if the situation was going to be stabilized. By 25 February, Military Region VI Headquarters and one main force battalion had been confirmed in the area. The enemy had made the decision to reinforce.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Study of the progress of operation BYRD can provide us with valuable insights into the situation in the war zone as a whole. From our point of view, Binh Thuan provided at this time as favorable a climate for US operations as we are likely to find in the war zone. Terrain and climate were favorable

to our type of operations. The enemy opposition while certainly significant was qualitatively inferior to that faced in more active war areas.

Into this area was committed the best equipped force of its size the army has today. Although in number of troops, the task force did not have overwhelming superiority it certainly was adequately provided for in numbers too, in view of the enemy threat. This unit organized from the elite division of today's Army was well commanded and ably staffed. We can expect that the results achieved by this task force should approximate the optimum we can expect in the war zone. What were the achievements, limitations and reasons?

#### ACHIEVEMENTS

Task Force achievements were considerable. In six months, it reversed a situation that was close to disaster in the province. Security to the triangle during daylight was enforced. Security in the same area at night was much improved. Three hundred Viet Cong were killed at a cost in lives of less than 10 Americans. More than 100 Viet Cong were captured. The Chieu Hoi rate was more than quadrupled over the previous year. Military Region VI was forced to move into province to assume control over operations and to reinforce with at least one main force battalion. Some progress had been made in upgrading Vietnamese forces in the province. The province was willingly and actively assuming again a greater voice in the defense of his territory.

### LIMITATIONS

The lack of achievements is also striking. The infrastructure, the organization that controls people in Viet Cong controlled areas and threatens them in government areas was intact and little affected. This means that the vast administrative beauracracy that is the political machine of the Viet Cong still functioned relatively unhindered. Daily business continued to get done right underneath the helicopters. How can people be convinced that they will be protected from the Viet Cong when their representatives continue to function right in the middle of the village under the nose of the government and the Americans? Was the ARVN then ready or would it have been ready on the foreseeable future to preserve the US made gains should the task force have been withdrawn from the province? My estimate is no. Finally, should the then current balance of forces not have changed, what further improvement in the situation could have been expected from continued operations or the task force. My answer is that no further improvement could be expected. The task force had accomplished all that it could have been expected to accomplish.

### REASONS

The clash of military units had been decided and the Viet Cong had been beaten but not destroyed. Even had the 482d been destroyed, as long as the infrastructure remained intact its reconstitution would have been a matter of time. Military units depend on the infrastructure not vice versa. The task force

went along with the standard assumption that the infrastructure was the government's job and its problem. The task force did not have the authority nor could it muster the persuasion to see to it that the Vietnamese handled the problem. When the task force did act against the infrastructure, it was partially successful. We were capable and to an extent, did develop the necessary intelligence to identify it. There are many Vietnamese who will cooperate with Americans but not their own government in this respect. The task force did not really attempt (but it would have failed if it did) to upgrade the Vietnamese military organization. That problem is so well known that it is a cliché. It is leadership and it begins at the top. Consequently, there was no prospect of the Vietnamese taking over the task force's responsibilities.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

1. It is desirable to have all units supporting a task force assigned to support revolutionary development, attached or under operational control of the task force.
2. Providing security for RD operations is not sufficient. US forces must be prepared to assume the mission of the Vietnamese if it is not being carried out.
3. When initialing operations against local forces that are not experienced in fighting US forces, air cavalry tactics should be used to the maximum until the enemy acquires experience.

4. Every effort must be made to develop independent sources of intelligence. In spite of that, the primary problem with using intelligence from Vietnamese sources is not that all the intelligence is all bad but that the intelligence officer requires the experience to be able to separate the good from the bad. A vast amount of good intelligence is available from the Vietnamese if they are cultivated.

5. When operating in one area for a long time it is essential to vary methods and tactics used.

6. Efforts spent on deception will be rewarded with much more contact.

7. When operating against an inferior enemy, tube artillery support imposes more restrictions on the force than its utility warrants. Its primary mission should be defensive. Its offensive role can be better handled by aerial rocket artillery and gunships.

8. The best security for a fixed installation against mortar and infantry attack is provided by many ambushes out to well past mortar maximum range. These ambushes need not be larger than one half platoon size.

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