

UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL

Fort Benning, Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

MISSION

In late November 1967, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry, APO, U.S. Forces 96225 was directed by higher headquarters to prepare to conduct operations in north Tay Ninh Province, Republic of South Vietnam.

The operation, code named "Yellowstone" would be initiated by 1st Brigade, Consisting of two battalions: 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry and 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry.

The brigade's mission was: on 7 December 1967 move from its basecamp at Tay Ninh City, RSVN using organic and supporting transportation, to establish a fire support base vicinity of Katum, RSVN (XT33898) and commence search and destroy operations in assigned area of operation.

4th Battalion, 9th Infantry mission: conduct airmobile assault commencing 070930 December 1967 in assigned AO and conduct search and destroy operations.

The brigade planned to alternate its two battalions as the brigade reserve, which would remain at the Katum fire support base with the additional mission of manning the base's defensive perimeter. 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry received this mission for the initial two weeks of operation "Yellowstone".

BATTALION CONCEPT

The battalion commander decided that the four rifle companies and the Headquarters element would use the same LZ with two landing points located on the east and west. This would accommodate landing two companies simultaneously.

The LZ would be "prepped" with the brigade's direct support artillery battalion which would be "helilifted" from Tay Ninh basecamp to Katum immediately after it ^(Fire Support Base) was secured by 2nd Battalion,

14th Infantry early morning, 7 December.

The ground tactical plan was simple; the battalion would advance from the northward from the LZ, two (2) companies abreast (C & A) on parallel axis: Companies B and D were to follow the left (west) and right (east) lead units respectively.

The initial advance was planned to terminate 4 days at Phum Prey Sals (273963). The battalion would turn and move to the east parallel ^{to} Hwy T14 (see map, Ta Dath) until it arrived vicinity of coord XT305950. Night defensive positions were preplanned as much as practical.

EXECUTION

1st brigade's move to katum took place without ^a major incident; 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry airmobiled into its LZ which was "cold" and commenced operations as planned.

4th Battalion, 9th Infantry encountered more difficulty than originally visualized in negotiating the dense jungle. Consequently the planned 4 day advance took 5 days.

The battalion was then directed to return to the original LZ that the operation was initiated from: secure the LZ and prepare to receive its direct support artillery battery ^{at 1400 hours} 12 December ^{and} establish the LZ as a fire support base.

The battalion received further instructions that it was to conduct a local semi-deceptive airmobile assault into the area west of its fire support base and initiate search and destroy operations in the northwest part of the brigades AO on 13 December.

The battalion, now accustomed to the terrain, moved swiftly and arrived at the proposed fire support base (old LZ) at 121400 December.

At 1430 hours the first CH-46 helicopter airlifting the artillery battery landed. The airlift was complete by 1515 hours. Planning for the battalion's operation on the next day began.

NARRATION

Company C, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, the second unit assaulted into Landing Zone yellow, now moved quickly into its' attack position to the west (Sketch map A).

Company B, 4th battalion, 9th Infantry was in position 2,000 meters north. Both units would remain in position until the third and last unit arrived.

Company D, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry with the battalion's command and control group, reconnaissance platoon, and combat support elements landed 10 minutes later at 0815.

Intelligence of the enemy in this part of the area of operation was limited. Aircraft operating over the area had reported being fired upon by small caliber automatic weapons on numerous occasions. The pilots were unable to pinpoint locations due to the extremely dense jungle.

The Battalion commanders' decision for the operation was to advance two companies abreast to the west on axis' approximately 2,000 meters apart ^{to} 4 kilometers in search of the enemy. Company D, the battalion's reserve, would follow company C on the south axis. The command and control group, reconnaissance platoon and combat service element would be with Company D.

The concept was brief and limited to actions to be taken if contact was made with the enemy. The effectiveness of supporting artillery fires was limited by the triple canopy. Therefore the successful engagement of the enemy by the companies would depend on overwhelming firepower from organic weapons. Complete noise discipline was necessary in order to achieve a high order of surprise. Meeting engagements with even the smallest enemy force or sniper were to be executed under the assumption that a larger enemy force was maneuvering to outflank the unit.

The battalion commander gave the order to companies C and B to move out at 0820.

The units' movement through the jungle was not as difficult as it appeared it would be since the canopy prevented dense undergrowth. The trees were larger and close together; this would later prove to be an advantage to company C in operations the next day, 14 December.

By 1330, Company C had advanced 3,000 meters and discovered 6 freshly constructed and 10 other squad size bunkers--none of which were occupied. The battalion commander directed that company C secure the enemy basecamp and send out local security to the south, west and north. Company D was located 500 meters east and proceeding to company C's location. Company B had advanced to a clearing 2,000 meters northwest of company C. (Sketch map B).

INITIAL ENEMY CONTACT

At 1335, Company D received approximately 5 to 6 bursts of automatic weapon fire from the south. From the same direction 3 claymore type mines were detonated by ~~an~~ an unseen enemy. The enemy fires were ineffective and no friendly casualties were sustained.

The location of the enemy weapon could not be pinpointed due to the sound reflecting off the numerous large trees and their canopy. Company D conducted several unsuccessful platoon sweeps in the general direction that the weapon had fired from.

The battalion commander received a spot report from the forward air controller flying above the area in which companies D and C were located: An individual with a weapon was observed running in a southerly direction 2,000 meters south of company D's location. The decision not to pursue was made, because of distance and the unlikely chance of success.

At 1400 hours company D arrived at the bunker complex secured by company C. An ensuing search revealed no specifics other than a platoon size enemy element had occupied the base within the previous 24 hours.

It was 1500 hours when the search was completed; the pre-determined location of the battalions' night defensive position was 1,500 meters to the west. All units were directed to move to that location as rapidly as practical.

The companies arrived at the proposed night defensive position at approximately 1615 hours. The area chosen was an open clearing with excellent fields of fire. The perimeter was placed around an hour glass shaped clump of trees and undergrowth. The ground was very hard and difficult to dig in (sketch B).

Companies were defending in the following positions:

Company B on the east, Company D the south extending to the northwest and company C on the north extending to the southwest.

The company commander, company C, positioned his three rifle platoons on the perimeter with the 3rd platoon on the east, 1st platoon in the center and 2nd platoon on the west. Two 60 mm mortar squads and two 90 mm recoilless rifle teams were retained as company reserve in a blocking position to the immediate rear of the center (1st) platoon.

PLANNING THE 14 DECEMBER OPERATION

Company C's commander held a briefing for the platoon leaders at 1930 hours. He issued the fragmentary order for the next day's (14 December) operation.

Companies B and C were to depart at 0730 hours the next morning (14 December) and place company size ambushes along two trails running north--south. Company C would ambush the most eastern of the two.

Intelligence of enemy activity on the trails indicated that they were probably supply routes originating at the cambodian border 8,000 meters away. U.S. aircraft operating over the area were always fired upon with automatic small arms; the brigade forward air controller had reported receiving light anti-aircraft fire during reconnaissance missions conducted 7 December.

The battalion commander had instructed both units conducting the ambushes to insure that each was familiar with the others specific location, including platoon and squad leaders. It was reasoned that should either company engage an enemy force and require assistance, the other unit could maneuver much more rapidly in the jungle surrounding the ambush sites.

After issuing preliminary instructions, company C's commander briefed his platoon leaders on the concept of the ambush mission to be executed the next day (14 December).

The "L" would be the type ambush used with the open side facing north. The 3rd platoon was to form the top half of the leg (north), 1st platoon, the lower half (south), and the 2nd platoon, the base. Company headquarters was positioned between 1st and 3rd platoons. Once in position, each platoon was to employ one squad as rear security due to the vagueness of the enemy situation.

The ambush was to be initiated by the 1st platoon at the last possible moment with the detonation of claymore mines. The 3rd platoon forming the "L" base was not to fire unless surviving enemy attempted to exit the kill zone to the south or east.

The company commander, after insuring that the platoon leaders understood his concept, held a rehearsal using a ground mockup of the proposed ambush site. Each action was rehearsed until each platoon leader knew what each element in his platoon would do in case of varying situations.

The final part of the briefing pertained to movement instructions. The company would move to the ambush site in a column. The order of march was 3rd, 1st and 2nd platoons. Company headquarters elements would be near the front of the 1st platoon. This completed the briefing.

At 0230 hours approximately ⁴¹⁰⁰ 100 82 millimeter mortar rounds landed in and around that section of the battalion's perimeter occupied by company C.

Two men from the 1st platoon, though not seriously injured, required medical evacuation.

Units were placed on 100% alert for the remaining part of the night. The ground assault that could have followed the initial mortar attack failed to materialize.

MOVING OUT 14 DECEMBER

Company C, followed by company B, moved out of the night defensive position at 0800 hours.

By 0845 hours, the leading elements of company C's 3rd platoon reported entering the edge of the small enemy bunker complex discovered by company C the day before (13 December).

The company commander ordered the 1st and 2nd platoons to halt; the 3rd platoon conducted a quick search discovering a broad trail leading away from the complex to the north.

Company C's commander confirmed that it was obviously the trail that his unit would set its ambush on. He decided to place his unit in the enemy basecamp itself.

Company C started moving east to its destination again. The foliage became much denser as the company advanced. The unit's lead element reported encountering extreme difficulty traversing the undergrowth. The company's advance was also retarded to a large extent by its flank security having to maintain visual contact under the same terrain conditions as the lead element was experiencing.

At approximately 0945 hours the lead element and 1st squad of the 3rd platoon was taken under fire by several automatic weapons. The initial attack severely wounded the "point man" of the 3rd platoon's lead element and inflicted wounds of a lesser extent to one other individual. The company commander requested an immediate estimate of the enemy size and disposition from the 3rd platoon leader. The reply from the platoon leader was insufficient to formulate a decision from. It was also apparent that the platoon leader was severely shaken and ineffective for the moment.

The company commander called the 3rd platoon sergeant in an attempt to obtain a more informative report. The sergeant reported that the enemy appeared to be directly to his unit's front and numbered approximately ten (10). He was unable to observe anything further than 5 meters due to the vegetation.

The 3rd platoon sergeant was instructed to have his platoon lay down a base of fire while the 2nd platoon maneuvered around the company's left flank to hit the enemy force on the north.

Approximately 1 to 2 minutes after the initial contact, and during the company commander's transmissions to the 3rd platoon leader and sergeant, the enemy detonated several "claymore" type mines in the vicinity of the 3rd platoons lead element.

The 1st platoon leader reported that several enemy troops had been observed and taken under fire on the company's right flank.

The company commander after quickly assessing the situation concluded that a larger enemy force than originally indicated was engaging his unit.

The 2nd platoon leader was instructed to maneuver his platoon around the company's left flank and destroy the enemy presently engaging the 3rd platoon. He was also instructed to leave a machinegun team to the company's rear to maintain contact between the two rear elements of the 1st platoon and rear security.

The 1st platoon was directed to place fire on the company's right flank. The dense undergrowth prevented effective control of any additional unit maneuvering southward (right flank).

The 2nd platoon leader by this time had managed the difficult task of maneuvering his element approximately 100 meters around the company's left flank.

The 3rd platoon was still heavily engaged with the enemy. "Claymore" type mines were detonated continuously inflicting casualties, though none that prevented the individuals from continuing to bring fire upon the enemy position.

The company commander attempted to contact the 3rd platoon leader or platoon sergeant, but was unsuccessful. The 1st Platoon leader responded that he would have the element verbally notify the 3rd platoon leader to answer his radio. A few minutes later the 1st platoon "RTO" reported that the 3rd platoon leader, his radio operator, and one other individual had been severely wounded or killed by an enemy claymore mine detonated while hanging from a tree.

Contact was re-established with the 3rd platoon sergeant and he reported two additional casualties in his lead element. He also reported taking an enemy scavenge squad underfire and killing three(3). The others escaping, were probably wounded.

The 2nd platoon leader reported his element had outflanked the enemy force engaging 3rd platoon and that he was assaulting the enemy positions.

Simultaneously with the report from the 2nd platoon leader, three (3) mine explosions occurred directly to the company's rear. The enemy had managed to maneuver at least some of his forces around the right flank.

The rear attack composed of a North Vietnamese squad led by a senior lieutenant was quickly broken up by the machine-gun team left by the 2nd platoon. The NVA lieutenant and three (3) of his followers were killed.

BATTALION ACTIONS

The battalion commander, having received the report from the company C that it was engaging at least a reinforced platoon had directed company B to: move from its ambush position to the north 300 meters, to the east 600 meters and finally south in order to cut the escape route of the enemy force being engaged by company C (Sketch map C).

Company D, the battalion's reserve located back in the night defensive position was directed to send a reinforced platoon to the ambush location vacated by Company B. Its mission was to block any enemy attempt to occupy the complex. Consequently, disrupting

future evacuation of friendly wounded personnel through the area.

Company B reached the eastern limit of its' advance and turned south to approach the enemy's right rear (east). Two Viet Cong attempting to escape C Company's assaulting element (2nd platoon) ran directly in front of B company's lead unit. The two "VC" managed to get a few bursts off before they were literally "cut into"--by fires from B company's lead platoon. One friendly casualty was sustained by company B.

Company B, now in its' assault formation, paused long enough to linkup with C company's 2nd platoon. The company's planned advance was also coordinated with the company commander of C company.

The two company commanders realized that the dense jungle further complicated what would be a difficult manuever even in ideal terrain. However, with C company's 2nd platoon on B company's right flank, the manuever could be successful since the 2nd platoon knew the exact location of its' parent company's lead elements (3rd platoon).

After obtaining the recommendations of the two (2) company commanders, the battalion commander directed that company B continue its' advance across company C's' front and assault the enemy force.

C Company's manuevering platoon had been veru successful in outflanking the enemy. Although the enemy attempted to stall the advance through the use of claymore mines, the platoon leader had managed not only to continue to advance, but also suffered only two minor walking casualties in his platoon.

The enemy concluding that he was now out flanked and in an untendable position, began withdrawing to the east. Company B linked up with the main body of company C at 1345 hours and conducted "cloverleaf patterned" searches for remaining enemy forces.

The search revealed that company C's 3rd platoon lead element

had unknowingly penetrated the western edge of an enemy regimental size basecamp. The dimensions and configurations of the base was not immediately visible because of concealment of structures in the surrounding jungle, and it would take a considerable amount of effort to explore.

No further enemy presence or activity was discovered by companies B and C during the search. The units had found six (6) enemy bodies and numerous blood trails and dragmarks.

At 1500 hours, the battalion commander directed that company C evacuate its wounded personnel back along the same route it entered the area on that morning.

C Company sustained 10 walking wounded, 1 litter ^{Patient and} 6 killed. The 1st and 3rd platoon leaders with their radio operators were included in those killed. Both officers appeared to have been shot through the head at close range after being initially wounded by "claymore" mines.

At 1545 hours, companies C and B linked up with the reinforced platoon from company D at the small enemy bunker complex 1500 meters from the battalion's night defensive position. The units reached the medical evacuation "PZ" at 1605 and set up evacuation of their casualties.

ANALYSIS AND CRITISISM

- (1) The intelligence available to the U.S. units operating in the area was vague and generalized and no substantial indication of enemy activity of the magnitude later revealed by captured documents was made known. (Captured documents revealed the enemy encountered by company C, 4th Bn, 9th Infantry, were elements from one of the NVA/VC regiments responsible for securing COSVN headquarters)
- (2) The enemy unit engaging company C was initially caught off balance by the company's lead element and allowed a penetration of its base defensive system before discovery. The initial advantage of surprise gained by the 3rd platoon was negated by the enemy's extensive use of "claymore" type mines suspended from trees within the base itself.
- (3) The U.S. soldier considers the jungle as an alien environment; even though he may operate in it daily. He responds reluctantly to an enemy using it to his advantage. The enemy "Claymore" mines exploding every few seconds in different locations and the resulting undesirable psychological effect upon the individual soldier, adversely affected the influence of the small unit leaders.
- (4) The 2nd platoon, company C, clearly demonstrated that an aggressive and capable platoon leader can maintain complete control of his platoon while maneuvering through dense jungle. Also less friendly casualties may be sustained if a unit or individual can continue to advance into the enemy.
- (5) A company commander's decision as to maneuver one or all of his subordinate units must be based on a reasonably sound estimate of the enemy situation. In a situation such as that of company C, 4th Bn, 9th Infantry, that information should have come from the element initially in contact with the enemy^{The}-third platoon.

(6) Supporting artillery fires were ineffective against the enemy under triple canopied jungle.

TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

(1) The individual U.S. soldier should be familiarized with the NVA/VC employment of directional mines and required to negotiate an infiltration course that would subject him to the sounds made by the explosions.

(2) More individual action in a jungle environment must be emphasized. Units engaged in combat in the jungle frequently find that the inability of the individual to observe his fellow soldier stymies his initiative and in some cases is satisfied to conceal himself thinking of his safety only.

(3) Small unit leaders must be trained how to maintain effective control of their units in areas of dense vegetation. Means must be devised to use in place of radios and the normal verbal orders, these are wholly dependent upon the lack of noise.

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