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OPERATIONS OF THE 9TH BATTALION, AIRBORNE DIVISION (ARVN), IN A SEARCH AND DESTROY OPERATION 27-28 MAY 1967 IN THUA THIEN PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. (Personal Experience of a Battalion Senior Advisor.)

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INTRODUCTION

During 1967 it was the policy of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff to have an Airborne Task Force operating in the I Corps Tactical Zone at all times. This task force was habitually under the operational control of one of the ARVN Divisions. (The vast majority of the time this was the 1st Division.) The task force was composed of from two to four battalions and one battery of 105-mm towed howitzers, in addition to the task force headquarters. At this particular period of time the 9th Battalion, which had been operating in I Corps since 23 March, was operating as a general reserve force in the vicinity of Hue under the control of the 1st Division Commanding General. The remainder of the task force was operating in Quang Tri Province. The primary mission of the 9th Battalion was to provide security for Hue by conducting search and destroy operations in the vicinity.

THE EXISTING SITUATION

During April and May the City of Hue had been subjected to periodic mortar and terrorist attacks. Intelligence reports indicated there were several VC main force battalions operating in the vicinity of Hue and there was a great chance that given the opportunity they would attack the city. To prevent this, the 1st Division Commander had employed an airborne battalion and one APC (armored personnel carrier) troop as a task force to react to intelligence reports in an attempt to fix and destroy

these battalions. On three occasions during this period contact had been made with one of the VC battalions resulting in the killing of over 200 VC and the capture of more than 75 weapons, to include numerous crew-served weapons.

This task force was committed only when the Commanding General felt that the intelligence information was accurate and warranted it. The fact that nearly every time this task force was committed it did make contact indicated that his judgment was valid.

From time to time joint operations with forces under control of the province chief and the task force were conducted. These also proved fruitful.

THE MISSION

At 1400 hours on 26 May 1967 a meeting was held at Thua Thien sector headquarters for the purpose of issuing an order to the forces to be involved in a search and destroy operation (Lam Son 60) commencing the following morning. The operation was to be controlled by one of the regimental headquarters of the 1st Division. As maneuver elements the regimental commander had one infantry battalion, one airborne battalion (9th), one armored personnel carrier (APC) troop, a special action force of the 1st Division and the local regional force/popular force (RF/PF) units.

The operational area was believed to contain one VC main force battalion which was reportedly well armed. The mission assigned the regimental commander was to find, fix, and eliminate this battalion.

THE REGIMENTAL PLAN

The VC battalion was believed to be in one of four village complexes. These villages were designated Objectives 11, 12, 13 and 14. (See Tab B)

The operational area was surrounded on three sided by unfordable streams and was characterized by large open paddy areas. In the vicinity of all stream lines and villages there were numerous trees and thick underbrush. At this time of the year many of the paddy areas were dry thus offering no significant obstacles. The small streams, however, were quite deep and still presented an obstacle to foot movement. One-man bamboo bridges enabled forces to cross all of these streams without undue delay. The problems being: (1) Initially moving the elements across these points increased their vulnerability to any action the VC may have taken. (2) Many of these crossing sites were also used by the VC and they had emplaced numerous punji stakes along approaches and at the actual site. This further impeded the actual crossing operations and increased the time the elements of the battalion were in this vulnerable position. Control while moving through the heavy underbrush was difficult at best. This was to be compensated for in part by moving in column formations on several axes.

The regimental commander planned to employ his forces in the following manner:

At dawn the infantry battalion would begin moving from the northwest of the operational area down through objectives 24 and 23 and eventually occupy blocking positions

positions in the vicinity of Objectives 22 and 21. (See Tab B)

At the same time the Special Reaction Force of the 1st Division would enter the operational area from the South, utilizing the ferry site southeast of Objective 16, and ultimately occupying a blocking position in the vicinity of Objective 15. (See Tab B) The major stream network surrounding the operational area on the east and south would be screened by local RF/PF elements to keep the regimental commander informed of any movement or unusual developments. The 9th Battalion, along with the attached APC troop, would arrive at the ferry site vicinity of YD 7328 where they would be met by an engineer squad (ARVN) with assault boats. Upon crossing the Song Bo river the battalion was to move through Objectives 11, 12, 13 and 14, clearing the entire operational area and eventually linking up with friendly elements in the vicinity of Objective 15. Upon completion of the operation all elements (with the exception of the RF/PF units) were to depart from the operational area.

THE 9TH BATTALION

A short background sketch of the 9th Battalion is essential at this point so that the true significance of this action can be appreciated.

The 9th Battalion was the newest of the airborne battalions having been organized in October of 1966. Until 18 May 1966 it had never been involved in a major contact, although it had been on numerous operations. On 18 May, as part of an ARVN task force, the 9th Battalion participated in the initial penetration of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)

by allied forces. During this particular operation the battalion made contact with elements of one NVA regiment and as a result suffered numerous casualties, to include the battalion commander. The battalion executive officer and two company commanders were seriously wounded as well as were a number of platoon leaders. Thus, even though the unit had participated in what eventually was a successful operation with a major contact, it was severely weakened due to the lack of a number of key personnel.

The battalion was relieved by another battalion during this operation and eventually ended up in the vicinity of Hue where it acted as the general reserve of the 1st Division. During this period a new battalion commander was assigned.

(NOTE: For purposes of clarity in the following discussion it should be understood that the advisory team to the 9th Battalion consisted of two captains and one staff sergeant E-6. Each of these advisors had one AN/PRC 25 radio which was carried by an ARVN radio operator. It was the policy of the senior battalion advisor to have the sergeant move with the lead company commander. The assistant battalion advisor would move with one of the flank companies or the trail company depending on the formation and situation. When the battalion was employed in two elements, the assistant battalion advisor would accompany the officer controlling this force (usually the executive officer or if he was not available the S-3). In this instance the sergeant would accompany the element designated by the senior battalion advisor.)

THE BATTALION PLAN

In conjunction with the plan of the regimental commander, the battalion commander planned to cross the Song Bo river and clear the objectives in the order 11, 12, 13 and 14. To accomplish this mission the battalion was to be divided into two teams. One team (Team 1) consisting of two rifle companies, headquarters company, and the battalion headquarters group would be under the command of the battalion commander. The second team (Team 2) would consist of the remaining two rifle companies and the attached APC troop. This would be commanded by the S-3. (The battalion senior advisor decided to accompany the battalion commander and that the assistant battalion advisor and the sergeant would accompany the second team. The APC troop also had two advisors, one captain and one staff sergeant.)

Once the battalion completed the crossing of the Song Bo river the engineers were to be released. The battalion would then move out in the direction of Objective 11 with Teams 1 and 2 moving generally parallel to one another. Team 2 would lead and would move to the north side of the road leading into Objective 11. Team 1 would follow Team 2 but keep to the south of the road into Objective 11. (See Tab B)

Upon the seizure and clearing of Objective 11, Team 2 would move south to Objective 12 but staying to the west of the stream running generally north to south through Objective 12. Upon reaching the stream running east-west through Objective 12, Team 2 was to halt and allow Team 1, moving along the east side of the north-south stream, to clear the remainder of Objective 12.

After Objective 12 was cleared, Team 2 was to move toward Objective 13. Once Objective 13 was cleared, Team 2 would move to Objective 14 and Team 1 was to move to Objective 13. Upon the clearing Objective 14 by Team 2, the entire battalion was to move on converging routes to link up with friendly forces on Objective 15 and then out of the operational area.

In addition to the ARVN artillery supporting this operation, one U.S. Army forward air controller (FAC) was to work in support of the 9th Battalion. Also, one light fire team of armed helicopters was to remain on "strip alert" at Hue Phu Bai airfield.

(NOTE: As was previously mentioned, the battalion senior advisor would move with Team 1 and the remaining advisors were to move with Team 2. All advisors were on the same radio frequency. In addition the FAC was also on this frequency. There was a common frequency for the regimental advisor and all battalion advisors, but the battalion advisors were to enter this net only if they required assistance from the regimental advisor. Each advisor had the operating frequencies of the other battalion advisors to be used when making close coordination. The radio nets were established this way due to the limited number of radios with the battalion advisory teams and also to avoid congestion of operational nets should contact be made by one of the battalions.)

NARRATION

1. Movement Into the Operational Area. (See Tab D)

At 0545 hours on 27 May the APC troop linked up with the battalion and the entire unit began moving to the crossing site. Although the crossing site had been secured

by RF/PF elements, the battalion commander elected to send one company across, utilizing the assault boats, to secure the opposite shore. Once this was accomplished the remainder of the battalion and the APC troop began crossing and this entire phase of the operation was completed at 0730 hours without incident.

2. Movement to Objection 11.

Upon completion of the crossing of the Song Bo, the battalion commenced to move toward Objective 11 as planned. The lead elements of Team 2 made contact with several snipers, but was unable to fix their exact position. The remainder of the battalion closed on Objective 11 by 0745 hours.

3. Movement to Objective 12.

The battalion commander elected not to spend a great deal of time clearing Objective 11 as he felt the snipers were outposts for a larger VC force located somewhere in the operational area. He therefore ordered Team 2 to move toward Objective 12 as soon as possible. Once Team 2 had entered the northern portion of Objective 12, Team 1 began its movement. Objective 12 was cleared as had been planned and Team 2 was ordered to immediately move toward Objective 13 in order to give the expected VC force as little time as possible to prepare for our advance.

4. Movement to Objective 13.

At 1200 hours heavy firing broke out in the vicinity of Objective 13 and I received a call from the assistant battalion advisor (hereafter to be referred to as 91) that the lead elements of Team 2 had come under heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire from the northeast portion of Objective 13. He informed me that the elements of Team 2

had deployed and were presently assaulting toward Objective 13. I immediately turned control of the FAC over to 91 and he began to bring in airstrikes.

At approximately 1300 hours the VC elements broke contact and moved westward. Team 2 was ordered to remain in place and be prepared to continue the advance onto Objective 13. In the meantime, Team 1 moved up to a position south and east of Team 2 and tied in with the left flank of Team 2. The entire battalion was thus spread out in line across roughly a 1,000 meter front with both flanks tied into the stream and canal to the north and south of the battalion. As soon as this was accomplished, U.S. medevac helicopters were called in to evacuate casualties.

During this time the ARVN infantry battalion had moved into Objectives 21 and 22 and reported receiving small arms and mortar fire from the vicinity of Objective 14. The FAC also reported that the supporting aircraft were receiving ground fire on each of their passes over Objectives 13 and 14.

(It should be noted that once I had been appraised of the contact by 91 I immediately called the regimental advisor asking for the gun ships I had on "strip alert." After much delay I was informed that these gun ships were no longer available. This was of course a surprise to me as I had called this same individual when contact had initially been made on Objective 11 and asked that he check to insure that the gun ships were in fact on "strip alert." He insured me that they were. These gun ships never did make an appearance.)

Upon completion of the medevac, the battalion again began to move forward and again immediately came under

heavy enemy fire. Friendly artillery (ARVN) was called in and more airstrikes were requested.

As the battalion began to move slowly forward, it was apparent that the VC had been in this area for some time. There was a very elaborate system of fighting and communications trenches with numerous fighting holes and one- and two-man bunkers. Communications wire in the area indicated that many of these positions had been "tied into" a wire net.

When the lead elements of Team 1 approached the vicinity of the schoolhouse on the western portion of Objective 13 they were stopped by an extremely heavy volume of enemy automatic weapons and mortar fire. Team 2 was experiencing a similar difficulty to the northeast. At this time I received a call from the advisor to the APC troop complaining that the battalion S-3 and the APC troop commander were having a heated argument and the situation in his area was becoming quite confused. I called 91 and he confirmed this and informed me that the S-3 was extremely excited and he was unable to reason with him. I discussed this problem with the battalion commander and stated that I felt unless immediate action was taken we could very well find ourselves in a very serious situation. He concurred and called the S-3 and was fairly successful in calming him down. In addition, he ordered the S-3 to send a portion of the APC troop to our location to assist in getting the attack moving again. This was cause for some confusion but the APC's eventually made it to our location. During this movement it was discovered that the battalion had bypassed some small pockets of VC and that we would have to pay attention to rear security.

At approximately 1800 hours a joint APC-infantry attack was launched by Team 1 toward the western portion of Objective 13. Although the attack was well organized and was pressed forward very aggressively by all personnel involved it was stopped by an extremely heavy volume of fire almost before it started. Friendly aircraft dropped napalm and bombs within 100 meters of friendly troops and friendly artillery (ARVN) was called in almost on top of friendly personnel. Several more attacks were launched but it was soon apparent that the well prepared positions in the heavy bamboo thickets were not going to be taken by the battalion without heavy casualties. (During this period of time a VNAF helicopter received over 30 hits from small arms fire in an attempt to get an ammunition resupply into the battalion. It did succeed in dropping the ammunition but we were unable to locate it due to tall grass and the isolated VC in the area. The ammunition was recovered the following day.)

At 2000 hours the battalion commander gave the order for the battalion to move back to the eastern portion of Objective 13 and prepare a defensive position for the night. Shortly after this I received a call from the flare ship I had requested advising me that it was in the area. I had it drop several flares to our north to facilitate our move back to the eastern portion of Objective 13 and also to give me a point to be able to adjust illumination from. By 2130 we had closed into our tentative night defensive position and I had called for medevac which I had been unable to get into our position earlier. With the aid of the flareship, the medevac was completed by 2200 and a resupply of ammunition effected.

5. Movement to Objective 14.

At 1015 on 28 May the battalion began to move eastward into Objective 13 again. Sniper fire was encountered and several VC were killed. As the elements of the battalion moved into the western portion of Objective 13 they were ordered to hold and prepare for an assault on Objective 14. As soon as all elements were prepared, a coordinated APC-infantry attack was launched on Objective 14. Sniper fire was encountered, but the battalion was easily able to attain its objective. Once Objective 14 had been cleared the battalion moved toward Objective 15 and effected a link up with friendly troops. At approximately 1600 hours the battalion moved out of the operational area.

6. Summary of Results:

Although the battalion suffered over 60 casualties during the action, the enemy suffered 156 killed (ARVN count - advisor count 50) and 6 captured. In addition 24 weapons to include a 57-mm recoilless rifle, 1-60-mm mortar, 2-B-40 rocket launchers, and 4 machineguns were captured. In summary it was felt the operation could generally be considered a success.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. Movement to and Crossing of Song Bo River.

This particular phase of the operation was well executed and no significant problem areas were noted. It is felt that one reason the actual crossing went so smoothly is that an abandoned ferry site was used. This enabled the APC's to enter and leave the water with relative ease. The current of the river was not strong enough to present an appreciable problem and the APC drivers were apparently

experienced and well trained. The use of the assault boats was extremely good considering that to this advisor's knowledge (9 months with the battalion) they had never been used by the battalion before this time. This can most probably be attributed to the large number of heliborne operations the battalion had conducted which required a similar type organization.

2. Movement to and Through Objectives 11 and 12.

Although no significant contact was made I feel that this phase of the operation also went extremely well. True, more time could have been spent in searching each of these objectives, but in the light of the battalion commander's appraisal of the purpose of the snipers in the area it was adequate. This is further reinforced by the actions later in the day on Objective 13. It might do well to mention at this point that had the regimental advisor checked a little more thoroughly into the status of the gun ships on "strip alert" it may well have prevented the situation which occurred later in the day from happening. Even though in this instance the only harm was an extremely agitated senior battalion advisor, had not alternate means of support been planned for disaster could have been the result.

The actual movement by both teams into and through these objectives was very good and had contact been made I feel the elements of the battalion were well placed to react with the utmost efficiency and effectiveness.

3. Movement Into Objective 13 (27 May).

This phase of the operation definitely had the most "problem areas," but I am certain this was due in part to the presence of a VC battalion within the objective.

(Confirmed by prisoner interrogation.)

I feel that when contact was initially made the battalion was very well disposed and reacted well. Although one might tend to criticize the battalion commander for not pressing forward "aggressively" once contact was made, I feel in the light of the battalion's recent losses and VC tactics he was wise. All to often commander's have pressed forward in pursuit of the "fleeing" VC only to find themselves surrounded on three sides by these same VC. Subsequent analysis of the enemy defensive positions tends to support this conclusion. We also found the VC had dug several one-man foxholes in the middle of the rice paddy areas. In each of these holes he placed a man with a B-40 rocket launcher. Although we lost no APC's to these "snipers" we did lose a number of personnel.

Probably the main point of criticism during this phase is the conduct of the S-3 and the resulting confusion. Had not all of the advisors involved been "experienced," I am certain the outcome could have been much different. As it turned out, the ability of these advisors to influence their counterparts at the critical time definitely had a positive and steadying effect.

It is fairly obvious that by pulling the battalion back to an overnight defensive position, the battalion commander allowed the VC several more avenues of escape. In light of the uncertain situation (almost 8 hours of continuous contact) and the casualties I feel he made a valid decision.

The artillery support was very accurate, but the number of rounds fired in support of each request could have been

larger. The air support on the other hand was some of the best I have experienced. The FAC remained airborne for the entire contact (with the exception of refueling stops) and as a result was able to very effectively direct the aircraft into the target area. This allowed us to drop ordnance much closer to friendly troops than would normally be advisable.

Finally, even though it may be questionable as to how effectively the other friendly units actually occupied their blocking positions, the mere fact they were there definitely delayed the VC's egress from the area.

4. Movement Through Objective 13 and Into Objective 14.

This phase of the operation was almost administrative in nature and definitely anticlimatical to the previous day's move. This was due primarily to the lack of VC in the area.

The only possible criticism is that initially the elements of the battalion moved at an extremely slow pace, but this was probably due primarily to their experiences of the previous day.

5. Movement Out of the Objective Area.

Conduct of this phase of the operation was made without incident.

TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

1. General.

It must be remembered that after every operation one will come up with a number of "things to do and things not to do." However, it should further be noted that many of these points are a direct result of the experience of the individuals involved (both ARVN and US) as well as the

particular situation. Thus, what may be a "new" training implication to one individual will be the reinforcement of the same training implication to another individual. In the light of these comments I shall attempt to draw a few conclusions reference training implications. Further, I shall not state whether these are new or relearned.

2. Coordination -- the Key Word.

Even though you may have been given a detailed list of all support available to you for an operation (both US and ARVN) to include locations, call signs and frequencies do not be satisfied. If a representative from each of these elements is not present at the briefing, get with the senior U.S. representative and request he reconfirm all of this support. You may encounter some perturbed senior U.S. officers, but you will be around at the termination of the operation to comment (e.g., my experiences with the gun ships). Also, if any question exists in your mind get it clarified. This coordination becomes easier and less time consuming with experience, but until then a little extra time beforehand can save you a lifetime!

3. Rapport -- Given Too Much ~~by~~ LIP Service -- This is a must!

It is a common (?) attitude among personnel assigned as advisors for the first time that the Vietnamese are incompetent and any effort to establish rapport should be initiated by the Vietnamese. In the majority of cases this is false. No matter what the capabilities and limitations of your counterpart are, your rapport with him, to include understanding how and why he does things, can definitely benefit you. When your unit is heavily engaged with a VC unit is no time to try and guess what your counterpart is going to do. A good common understanding of each other at

this time can save a great deal of time and could just mean the difference between success and failure.

4. Capabilities and Limitations -- Know Your Support.

Although it is fairly obvious that one should understand the capabilities and limitations of all supporting weapons and weapons systems, all too often this is ignored. This is another reason it is imperative to coordinate with representatives from all supporting units. These capabilities and limitations will differ from unit to unit and area to area.

5. Employment of Advisory Team.

This comment may be unique to the Airborne Division Advisory Team due to the limited availability of radios (AN/PR 25) in advisory channels and local ground rules. It is made, however, with the hope that eventually other teams will adopt the same policies. A battalion advisory team should have sufficient radios to enable a member of the team to be with at least two of the individual maneuver elements as well as with the battalion commander. In this way, the senior battalion advisor will be more readily able to assess the situation during a contact as well as more effectively employ U.S. support. This also enables the advisory team to more fully understand the capabilities and limitations of the battalion.

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