

Infantry

In Action



Saturation Operations

COLONEL PHILIP D. GRIMM

EDITOR'S NOTE: In the late spring or early summer of 1970 in Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Philip D. Grimm, the commander of the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, Americal Division, was scheduled to present his concept of small unit operations to the staff of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile). When he was unable to do so, he sat in a tent for an hour and recorded his thoughts on tape. The chief of staff of the 101st at the time endorsed the narrative as "a feasible small unit tactic that every battalion commander should consider."

A verbatim transcript of that tape was forwarded to INFANTRY recently by Major Russell A. Grimm, a son of the author. The following is INFANTRY's edited version of the transcript.

As Lieutenant Colonel Grimm stressed in his narrative, the

concept was nothing new. But it did offer a look at how one battalion operated in the situation and circumstances in which it found itself. And it can still be instructive in forming a command estimate, displaying decentralized initiative and synchronized execution, and especially in taking the fight to the enemy and beating him at his own game.

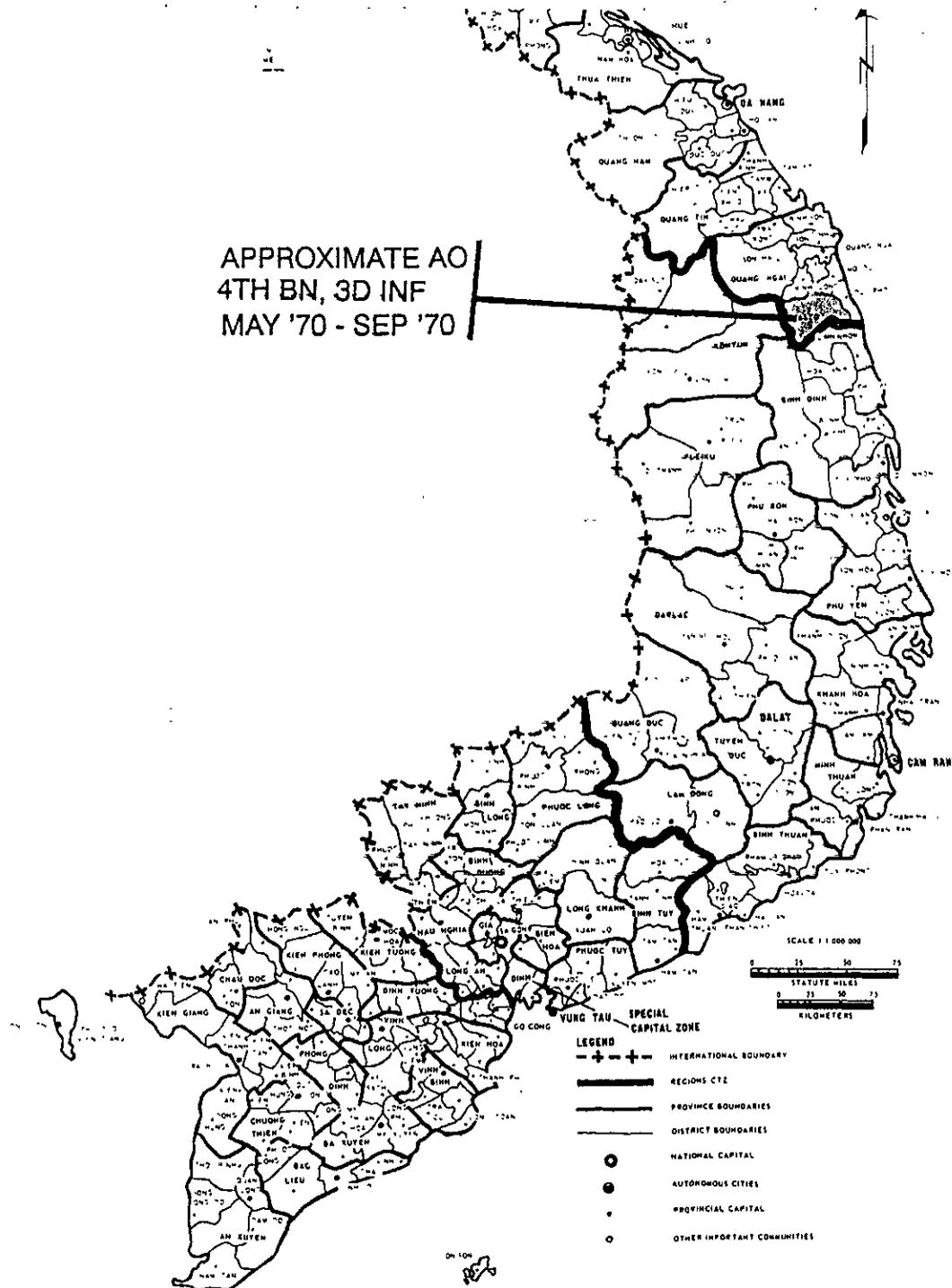
Colonel Grimm had been a battalion commander in Korea before serving two tours in Vietnam. Before assuming command of the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, he was a regimental advisor to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, G-2 for the 1st Infantry Division, and then G-4 of the Americal. He retired in 1974 as a colonel.

My battalion, the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, is located about 30 kilometers south-southwest of the city of Quang Ngai and some 25 kilometers due west of the village of Duc Pho, or LZ Bronco, which is the home of my parent brigade. The mission of the battalion is twofold: first, to interdict NVA/VC movement between the heavily populated coastal plains and their base camp areas some 30 to 40 kilometers to the interior, and secondly, to be prepared to conduct combat operations anywhere within the brigade or division area of operations (AO). In addition, as part of the division's contingency planning, the battalion is to be prepared to be placed under the operational control of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), should that become necessary.

In the strict sense of the word, we don't have any NVA or VC resident forces in my area. At the present time, we are carrying the 403d Sapper Battalion at a strength of about 300 effectives, and it is just to the southwest of my area of operations. In the past, it has moved to the east and staged in the southeast corner of my AO to conduct attacks against Duc Pho

in an area called the Rice Bowl, just to the south of Duc Pho between it and Sai Vinh. In the northern portion of my area of operations, from time to time, elements of the 21st NVA Regiment move into the Iron Mountain area to conduct attacks against the Nghia Hanh district in the lowlands between Nghia Hanh and Duc Pho. The average strength of these battalions of the 21st Regiment rarely exceeds 150 effectives each.

The battalion AO itself comprises an area approximately 15 kilometers wide and 19 kilometers north to south. On the eastern boundary, the elevation runs from 20 meters in the center of my AO to an elevation of between 500 and 700 meters, and on the western side again 500 to 600 to 700 meters. The battalion AO is bisected just north of the east-west center line by the Song Tra Chau river valley and Highway 515. The north-western portion of the area is cut from north to south by the Song Ba River, which is a favorite route for the VC and NVA to use to move supplies from the coastal area into the interior. I should say also that in the past, Highway 515 has been suspected of being a heavily used route, but our operations in



there have not substantiated this suspicion.

The vegetation in the area of operations varies from overgrown, untilled rice paddies with the usual hedgerows on the eastern boundary through secondary jungle growth, which predominates throughout the AO, and two-thirds or triple canopy in some areas of the Iron Mountains. But generally it would be characterized as secondary growth.

It is mountainous going from an elevation of about 20 meters up to 700 meters. While that is not particularly high, the slopes are quite precipitous. The mountains are heavily cut with intermittent streams and these result, of course, in deep washouts and gullies that eventually find their way into numerous streams, generally running from west to east.

My battalion is running at an assigned strength of around 110 to 115 for my rifle companies, right at TOE for my headquarters company, and at TOE for my support company. This means, in practical terms, that I have a foxhole strength for operations of about 65 to 75 men in each of my rifle companies. I keep my reconnaissance platoon at full strength with volunteers from throughout the battalion.

Because I am saddled with a battalion rear area, naturally, in the base camp location, and also because I have a permanent firebase, I have moved my entire Echo or support company to the firebase—they're really the resident forces there. About half of my headquarters company is also resident on the firebase. This means, then, that these people are respon-

sible for maintaining the firebase including its defense, and I'll touch on how that affects the rifle companies later.

By mid-May this year it was quite evident that a change in operational concepts was necessary. Casualties inflicted on our forces were abnormally high, and the battalion had not in any way succeeded in its mission of interdicting the movement of enemy forces through the AO.

The lack of resident NVA/VC forces in the AO indicated that we could probably go ahead and use a saturation concept of operations in the AO without any undue risk. Nevertheless, I decided it would be profitable to get as much empirical data as we could so as to get a good, factual look at what we had in the AO.

ENEMY LOCATIONS

We started off by making a simple relief and drainage diagram in hopes that it would show us some rather logical routes of movement that had been missed during our operations in the past. In addition to that, we went back into the S-3 journals for a period of four to six months and resurrected all the grid coordinate locations of contacts, both by the enemy against us and by us against the enemy, as well as the various types of enemy installations—that is, way stations, base camps, overnight locations, caches, and so forth. In addition, where we could, we resurrected whatever trail information we had. Basically, there wasn't a great deal other than on the contacts and fortifications, and it remained for our saturation concept to fill in the picture.

We did get one thing from it. As we suspected, some areas appeared to lend themselves to ease of movement both east to west and west to east. But interestingly enough, there had been no enemy fortifications and contacts either in the rain valleys or in the stream valleys, nor had there been any on the ridges. Basically, they were off on the secondary fringes running from the main ridges and generally some distance down from the top.

Based on this information, then, we formulated a plan to have three companies operate in the field at one time, each one being assigned an area of operations and with the areas abutting. There was no set size; the AOs were based predominately on the operational period, which we decided would be 12 days, and they were fitted to the particular terrain where we were going to operate.

Except for the two main river valleys, I cannot put any sizeable force in by helicopter at one time. Our landing zones (LZs) and pick-up zones are generally two-ship and one-ship areas; in a few isolated areas, I can get as many as four helicopters in at one time.

Having broken down the AOs, the idea was to prepare an LZ just as if a company were going in as it had in the past with good artillery and air support, if we could get it. These LZs were always well away from the company's actual or the intended area of operations, and we're willing to give up three days of the 12-day operational period for the unit to move by stealth into its intended AO.

The AO itself is generally broken down into three sub-areas

with one of them the intended target area. The other two areas are given to a company as "be prepared" missions. The company moves by platoons to its AO; the company commander, usually his first sergeant (for the first three days), and his radio operators are given security by his mortar platoon, which usually consists of 15 but not more than 20 men in each company. They carry along with them one 81mm tube and a number of rounds. This is the control element and the only one in the company that does any digging in. It sites itself on high ground for easy communications, both back to our firebase (which is generally some great distance from the company) and to its own sub-elements.

On entering the company area of operations, the platoons are broken down into squad-size elements, and they then conduct multiple squad patrols and ambushes within that AO. The ambushes include mechanical ambushes, as opposed to those manned by personnel. Our concept is to put mechanical ambushes into locations where we would put a manned ambush if we had the force. Until we could get training back at the firebase, we initially started out with at least one mechanical ambush per squad. We are now up to three mechanical ambushes per squad throughout the battalion.

The initial ambush locations are spotted on a map by a company commander. His squads move individually to the map locations, adjust as necessary to the actual conditions on the ground, move on through, select their sites for the mechanical ambushes, install them, and move back just about dusk to their manned ambush sites. The following morning, they go out and pick up their mechanical ambushes, move toward the next map location, hole up during the day, leaving security out so that they can sleep. Late in the afternoon they move through the map location, establish the mechanical ambushes, and move back into the manned ambush sites. This is repeated.

AMBUSHES

If the mechanical ambushes go off, we generally try and check them as soon as possible. Now our only criterion for the mechanical ambush is that it be placed within earshot of the particular squad that's putting it out. Sometimes it's possible for the squads to go down and check them if they go off during the night; otherwise, they are removed the next morning. In either case, they're within 81mm mortar range, and the mortar is fired throughout the night if the mechanical ambush goes off and the squad cannot check it. Of course, this requires good fire control and exact knowledge of where the squads are.

We resupply on a three-day basis. We use that third day as a resupply day or as a day for the companies to move into another subsector of their AOs (again moving by squads) as well as for the squads to come back to the company CP locations to pick up their rations.

We do not feed hot meals any time during the 12 days, but on the third day we do, if possible, send in cold milk, cereal, oranges, and this type of thing. We started out with C-rations and have since gone on to long range reconnaissance patrol type rations. We've had a little bit of experience with that,



U.S. Army soldiers keep under cover while watching for the enemy.

and, of course, have to have water available to enable the men to use those rations and get by. But this is generally no problem in our AO.

When it's time for us to rotate the companies (and this is done sequentially so that we don't have more than one coming out at any one time), and we're ready to insert the company that's been on the firebase, again we move it by helicopter to an LZ generally removed from its AO. In the past, we've sometimes varied this, following up one company in an area of operations with another company in that same AO. What we do is put the incoming company into the LZ and move it by stealth so that the two companies are actually in the AO the same day or the night before (but in a different sector of it) when the company that's been in that AO is lifted out. This has worked like a charm in every case in that the VC observe the helicopters coming in and lifting people out; they believe we have gone and moved back into the AO. And each time this has happened, we have made kills from that force.

Prepping the LZs, besides making good sense, surprises the enemy and helps to dispel the idea that he's so smart. We do put in a big prep, and because the battalion has operated for so long in company strength, he thinks we will do the same thing. He hears and sees the prep, and his first action then

is to send out his trailwatchers or his scouts to pinpoint the location of the company's night defensive position (NDP). Each time we have used this concept, his scouts have come out and invariably bumped into one squad, got knocked off by it, or backed off and bumped into another squad. In one case, in fact, the first company we put in, the enemy force bounced off four squads and was finally eliminated with seven people killed including an officer from the 403d Sapper Battalion. What it reminds me of is the drop at Normandy where the dispersion, although it wasn't planned, created a false impression of the size force we had put in. This apparently has happened within the NVA/VC; at least they keep doing the same thing.

By the same token, we find that the NVA/VC apparently are creatures of habit. This may stem from the fact that they do have routes of movement through our AO, and those routes are broken down into segments with guides and drop-off points and so forth. But I can recall one case last month where between 0700 and 1100, we killed 11 NVA in groups of two (and one of three) using the same trail, coming down it lightly as if nothing had happened there in the past.

When we get a second type of mission—that is, to operate elsewhere within the brigade area of operations—some prob-

lems on recovery of the force have been created. It has also been more time-consuming than it would have been if a unit had been operating as a company, but we can do it. Our reaction time is fairly good, and the limiting factor is usually the number of available helicopters. What it does do, though, is knock out our sequential schedule, which means then that we have had to double up on the firebase for a four-day period with the companies in order to get them lined out.

As I mentioned earlier, about half of my headquarters company and all of my support company are on the firebase. They provide security for it and for the artillery battery located there. These I consider permanent hill people, and they are permanently responsible for the defense of the firebase. As a practical matter, of course, they can't do that for 365 days; they are broken down so that they work a 24-hour day. That is, the soldiers work eight hours in their primary jobs (for instance, in the TOC or with communications or in the mess hall), then have eight hours for sleep and eight hours to perform guard duty.

SYSTEM

When we rotate a company in there, the soldiers are met on our helipad, which can take two helicopters at a time. We have a standard system of taking up all the hand grenades and all the old ammunition, examining and replacing what is necessary. And we have a system for issuing the ammunition, the hand grenades, the trip flares, and claymores the soldiers will need for each fighting position.

Basically, we take their ammunition and move the men in regardless of the time of day and feed them a hot meal. The only requirement placed upon them on the day they come in is to get rid of their ammunition, move down to a central weapon cleaning area where they can completely strip their weapons and get them cleaned as they can't do in an individual haul, go through their platoon leader's weapons inspection, and then turn in their clothes, get a good hot shower and a good night's sleep. (We have built primitive shower stalls but with heated water; they are taken care of by the permanent hill people.) For any one particular rifleman during the three days he is on the firebase, at the most he will have guard once, that is one night, and very often a man will get it only every other time he comes to the hill.

The second day that they're on the hill, and a very critical part of this concept of operations, is to have an S.L.A. Marshall-type critique, particularly when we have had contacts. We talk to the squad that's been involved, ask whether the men put out the mechanical ambush and whether a mechanical ambush or small arms fire accounted for the kills that were made. We digress as needed with each man to work out the story on exactly what happened, so that each gets a feel for what the situation was.

In addition, I put the company commander with my S-2, and he goes through a detailed debriefing, as do his platoon and squad leaders, in regard to the trails, installations, anything that they found in the AO. This is then put on a particular overlay for whatever type of information it is. As this

information comes in, we know better and better, or with more surety, where we should operate.

As a result of this, we have come up with the actual routes of movement the enemy uses. In just talking about my area of operations, it turns out that our southern boundary, which is on an east-west series of ridges, is a main artery of movement of supplies and troops both east and west through the AO. Branching off of that in the south are three other main trails that move to the northeast and then several other lesser ones. The place that's obviously suspected, the 515 valley, probably is used by commo-haizon people, but forces do not move through it in any great strength.

Based on these data, we have concentrated our operations on those trails, and the results have been most gratifying. We have not had one U.S. soldier killed since mid-May. We have killed 69 NVA/VC, we have captured seven, and we have three civilian detainees. In addition, we have not had one booby trap tripped (this is obvious because we haven't had any casualties). This is most gratifying because a great number of our casualties in the past have come from command-detonated and other types of mines. The men before were loath to go out and operate, probably because they had been out so long and because when they did get whacked by the enemy, they got whacked bad. They were sullen, unresponsive and, as a case in point, two companies had refused to move. But now they're reasonably aggressive, they're confident in the system, and that confidence has grown each day.

It requires the fundamentals and really puts responsibility on the squad leaders. And the squad leaders in my battalion are no different from those in any others. If you're lucky, they're instant NCO graduates; if you're not, it's just the senior man that happens to be there. It removes the company commander from direct control—there's no doubt about that—and, as a matter of fact, the platoon leader is also limited in the AO as to what control he can exert over the men. Where the commander and the platoon leader really come into play is in the training stage on the hill, checking the ammunition, checking the weapons, rezeroing the weapons (which we do each time), communications procedures, scouting and patrolling, immediate action drill for jumping a sniper on a trail, how to react if they bounce into a base camp, and this type of thing.

FUNDAMENTALS

Obviously, this system depends entirely on fundamentals, and I may have overdone it a little bit on the lack of control by the company commanders and platoon leaders. But in fact, they can't really exert a great deal of influence. The company commander, through his FO channels, can get artillery fire; he also has the 81mm in there, and he can keep me advised of the situation. It depends on good communications procedures, on radio operators who know how to connect their thoughts with the jobs. Each of our company CPs takes a long wire antenna with it—the reel type. They also have secure means of communication with them.

But I find that it's also partly education for the junior lead

ers back on the firebase, making them inspect their men for the proper equipment to see that they have first aid pouches and canteens, that they take their pills, and that they go through the techniques of setting up a mechanical ambush (which can be real dangerous). Rezeroing is vitally important; cleanliness of weapons, quick fire techniques, and all the basic things are also important and they have to be stressed, and stressed, and stressed again.

At least in the battalion, I have pretty well gone by the book, because it's common to think "Here in combat, we do it differently from the way we have been taught." These are the important things and just the usual jerking the troops back into the newly disciplined requirements of the Army.

Another thing that is vital, and I can't over-emphasize it, is that we give the men all the rest we can, take care of them with showers and good hot chow when they come back out of the field, and take care of their weapons. But more important than that is having permanent, hill-type people pull most of the guard duty so that these men, when they actually do come back, do nothing but go over the fundamentals and train and get plenty of rest.

I kind of slighted our critiques earlier when I said that the soldiers could get a feel for what happened. Well, we carry it beyond that, of course, because again it comes to fundamentals. I think we're no different from other units; our percentage of kills by small arms fire is not good enough; our percentage of kills by contacts other than mechanical ambushes is not good enough. So we resurrect these things during the critiques, and by bringing them out in that style, each man knows what he did, and the things that were done wrong become patently obvious. Then you say to a man, here's what could have been done, or here might have been something to think about.

Now I know this sounds like we have all the answers—we don't. This method just happens to fit the particular area of operations and the type of mission we have. It all goes back to the fundamentals, and they can't be stressed enough over here.

Also during the training periods, we go back to another fun-

damental, and that is troop leading procedures. This is primarily for the company commanders and the platoon leaders, but it's also for the squad leaders. And by that I mean that all my OPORDs are written for this particular concept; we give them all the intelligence and the overlays that we've gotten from the empirical data. I personally brief them; we go over what the area of operations is going to be; we go over all the data that we've had if we've operated in an area in the past. Then I make helicopter time available to them so they can fly adjacent to the area, take their platoon leaders out, check where they're going to put in their CPs, their planned movements, and this type of thing. When enough helicopter time is available, we even do this with the squad leaders.

We try to get this done two days before they are given the AO. This also gives them the time that they need to brief, and rebrief, and brief again through the squad leaders down to the men. I think, again, that it goes back to the fundamental that says to get the word on the essential things down to the men so they know where they're going, what they'll probably face, and characteristics of the area of operations, how they're going to operate, when their resupply will be, when they'll probably be pulled out, and, in general, place them just as we would paratroopers, for instance.

Basically, I don't have enough snipers yet; I have only eight, but I use them with the reconnaissance platoon, and they're broken down into teams of two snipers and either two or three reconnaissance men. When I send the reconnaissance men out on a mission (and it is generally in the opposite portion of the AO from where I have my three companies operating under this concept), they'll move out and drop the snipers for periods of three to six days. Then the snipers will either come back by themselves or the reconnaissance team will pick them up and bring them back.

There is certainly nothing new about this system. Other commanders, I am sure, have used the same concept and called it saturation patrolling. Still others have done the same thing and called it something else. All it is, is fundamentals, and it happens to fit my area of operations.

