

Defeating an Ambush - Vietnam

SECOND LIEUTENANT JAMES A. CAPOBIANCO

As America strove to maintain law and order in the streets of Iraq, our forces encountered hostile fire at the average rate of 35 attacks per day. Enemy guerilla forces used a myriad of tactics and techniques to overcome the superior fire capabilities and training of the American Soldier. Among the most effective and deadly was the ambush. This hit and run tactic is nothing new, and the enemy should not be given too much credit for its successful execution. The devastation wrought by a mass concentration of fires at a moment of surprise is felt both psychologically and physically. Despite its lethality and effectiveness, the ambush **CAN BE DEFEATED**.

Combatants throughout history have encountered ambushes. Lessons have been learned, forgotten, and relearned. Each lesson has come at the ultimate price; it is foolhardy not to revisit and reexamine the lessons gained by those who came before us. Of particular pertinence are the experiences of the American infantryman in Vietnam, and the lessons he learned while bravely facing the Viet Cong (VC) and their relentless implementation of the ambush.

The North Vietnamese fighting forces quickly realized that they could not defeat the Americans in a conventional manner. Instead the VC turned to guerilla type tactics, including the ambush. While the American infantryman had received training in ambush countermeasures, the mounting casualty lists illustrated that a thorough understanding was held by few. Efforts were increased to insure that all Army leaders were proficient in preventing and reacting to an ambush. Army leaders analyzed the after action reviews of units which had successfully defeated enemy ambushes. The common fundamentals which proved decisive in these encounters were proper tactical formations during element maneuver, preplanned and properly trained reaction forces, and the deliberate incorporation of immediate action drills at both the individual and unit level.

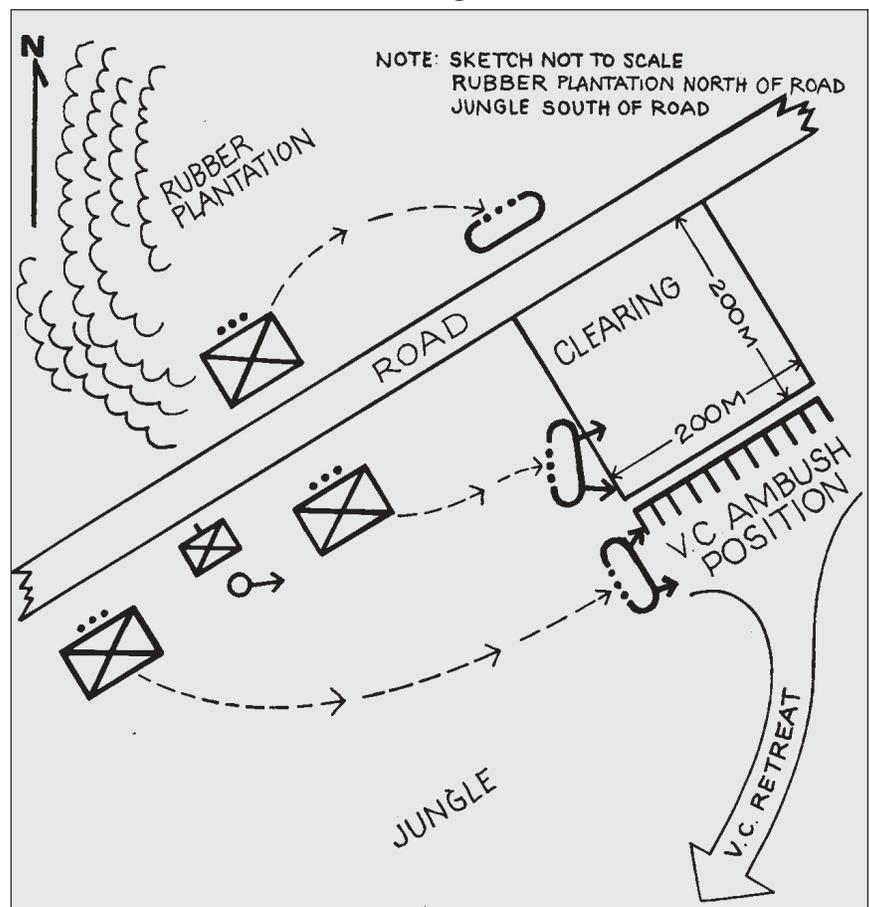
At the onset of the war, both American and South Vietnamese government troops were routinely caught blindly entering the kill zone of enemy ambush sites. They lacked adequate preplanned defensive measures while maneuvering through potential enemy positions. One of the first documented cases of a successful defeat of a VC ambush was executed by a South Vietnamese infantry company commanded by a Lieutenant Dong. The company had reached its objective and was returning to its base camp when it encountered an enemy ambush. (See Figure 1.) The VC, having observed the company on its route to the objective, were certain that it would return via the same route.

As such, the VC positioned two platoons with automatic weapons in dense foliage overlooking a clearing on the side of the road. From their vantage point, the VC had a clear line of sight to a distance of 200 meters. Lieutenant Dong, aware that his unit was maneuvering through a hostile area, organized his element with the following preplanned defensive measures in mind:

- Avoid the open road;
- Keep your unit dispersed into areas of cover and concealment;
- Post rear and flank security and ensure that a portion of your element is available as a reserve; and
- Have a pre-established response should you encounter enemy contact, and react quickly.

These sound tactics allowed Lieutenant Dong to gain contact with the enemy's flank rather than the intended kill zone and placed him in a position to launch a successful counterattack. The result of which yielded seven enemy dead, and captured enemy equipment and documents. There were no government casualties.

Figure 1



The growing effectiveness of VC ambushes also mandated that reacting forces alter the organization of their maneuver elements. Based on the successful experiences of American and government units, convoy formations were to be designed with the following seven principles:

- ① Wherever possible, units should elect to use a tactical column.
- ② The march interval should be large enough to permit each vehicle to maneuver, but not be so large as to prevent vehicles from being able to rapidly respond to the aid of an engaged friendly element.
- ③ Convoys with two or more vehicles require an advance guard or scout element; the advance guard should not precede the main element by more than three minutes.
- ④ All formations should have a rear guard.
- ⑤ All formations should have flank security.
- ⑥ Formations must ensure unit integrity with commanders well forward in the column, but not with the lead element.
- ⑦ One armed escort should be placed with the lead element one third of the way back from the lead vehicle; one armed escort should be located in the rear.

Additionally, patterns of movement or activities must not be allowed to develop. If at all possible, units must not return by the same route. Security elements must check out all suspected ambush areas prior to the advance of the main element. The proper use of scouts, security, and planning will minimize the surprise element of an enemy ambush and give units the ability to aggressively counterattack.

Another recommendation was the implementation of a reaction force. Every unit must train and prepare a reaction force whose mission is to engage and destroy ambush or attacking elements. This quick reaction force (QRF) should be designed with simplicity, be preplanned, and be thoroughly trained to:

- Locate and maintain contact with the attacking enemy;
- Block enemy withdrawal routes;
- Prevent the enemy from entering populated areas; and

Units must deliberately train to react to an ambush. Each individual must react automatically and aggressively. This is perhaps the most critical response to surviving an enemy ambush and must be stressed as such.

- Encircle, attack, and destroy the enemy.

An effective QRF is not only advantageous to unit security and the defeat of an enemy ambush, but also acts as an invaluable deterrent.

Units must deliberately train to react to an ambush. Each individual must react automatically and aggressively. This is perhaps the most critical response to surviving an enemy ambush and must be stressed as such. The immediate action drill should complement the preplanned actions of the QRF. The attacked unit must return fire with such ferocity and violence that the ambush

party itself becomes fixed. They must maintain contact once the enemy withdraws, allowing the QRF to locate and destroy the enemy. As Captain G. D. Livingston stated, "If these anti-ambush techniques are mastered, victory will be possible, without them disaster is certain."

As another conceptual tool for the combat Soldier in Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Christian F. Dubia recommended four basic tenets to survive and defeat an enemy ambush. He used the acronym ARMS as a method of recalling these fundamentals.

"Avoid the killing zone. Elements within the killing zone must move forward out of the area of fire; those behind it must stop short of it.

Return fire immediately. A large volume of fire should be started instinctively even before the exact locations of the ambushing forces are determined.

Move selected elements aggressively against the flanks or rear of the principle enemy position.

Secure flanks and rear against follow-up attacks from different directions than those of the initial fires."

U.S. forces are presently facing situations which are similar to those encountered decades ago in Vietnam. While the places, people, equipment, and technology have changed, the fundamental tactics have not. Enemy ambush remains an effective and deadly means of engaging American forces. However, as learned and demonstrated in Vietnam, by following the prescribed fundamentals and reacting with complete VIOLENCE OF ACTION, the ambush CAN BE DEFEATED.

"The infantry must move in order to close with the enemy. It must shoot in order to move. To halt under fire is folly. To halt under fire and not fire back is suicide."

— General George S. Patton, Jr.

Second Lieutenant James A. Capobianco is graduate of Fort Benning's Officer Candidate School. He has a master's degree in international studies and is currently serving as a research assistant with *Infantry Magazine*.

