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LITARY ASSISTANCE ADVISORY GROUP, VIETNAM

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MAGAR-OT (S&A)

11 19 October 1963

SUBJECT: Lessons Learned Number 32: Eagle Flight Operations (U) 8

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TO: See Distribution

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1. (U) INTRODUCTION: This issue of "Lessons Learned" is devoted to "Eagle Flight Operations", a method of employing heliborne forces in counterinsurgency operations in the Republic of Vietnam. As the basis for this paper specific operations which have been conducted by elements of the 21st Infantry Division, ARVN have been selected to illustrate the tactics and techniques employed. In general, coverage has been limited to those lessons which experience has shown are peculiar to the current situation and specific locale of South Vietnam. However, lessons can be derived which will be valuable in planning and conducting counterinsurgency operations anywhere similar conditions exist.

2. (U) BACKGROUND
a. Definition. An "Eagle Flight" is basically a type variation of the normal heliborne operation, developed in Vietnam to: (1) complement the operations of committed heliborne or ground forces; (2) extend the combat effectiveness of such forces; or (3) operate independently, either alone or reinforced, on a variety of missions. It is, as its name implies, a force capable of searching while soaring, pursuing its prey, attacking in force, and withdrawing to seek and attack more prey.

b. General. An Eagle Flight Operation is a tactical concept involving the employment of a small, self-contained, highly trained heliborne force. Tactical planning emphasizes the use of this force to locate and engage the enemy or to pursue and attack an enemy fleeing a larger friendly force. As an airmobile force "Eagle" is also prepared to engage an enemy force located or fixed by other friendly sources. The inherent flexibility of the Eagle Flight as a force ready for immediate commitment, either alone or in conjunction with other forces, is its most significant feature. A wealth of experience and opportunity to refine techniques have been derived from this type of operation over the past several months. While many Eagle Flights have not resulted in contacting the enemy the great potential of this technique is combating insurgent forces is apparent.

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(4) Helicopter No 4, "Eagle Trail"Squad Leader (AM/PRC 6 or 10 on ARVN frequency)
4th Squad

(Each person wears YELLOW scarf or piece of cloth)

b. Planning Considerations. Several of the following considerations result directly from local conditions and are peculiar only to operations in Vietnam; e.g., language difficulties encountered in supporting the Eagle Force with armed escort helicopters operated by U.S. personnel. Were the entire force, including support elements, manned by personnel of the same nationality several of these considerations would be unnecessary.

(1) Each squad should be armed with a preponderance of automatic weapons. Light machine guns may be used although they have proved somewhat unwieldy in past operations. M-79 grenade launchers are very effective and should be included if available; otherwise the M7A3 grenade launcher.

(2) It is highly desirable to provide for four additional troop carrying helicopters on standby, commencing approximately two hours after the initial operation starts. These helicopters should be dispatched to the operational area to replace the original helicopters when refueling becomes necessary, thus eliminating any delay in conduct of the operation.

(3) When operating independently from other air-mobile or ground forces an Eagle Force should be supported by fighter/bomber aircraft.

(4) Helicopter availability may dictate alternations in the loading plan. In accommodating to changes in helicopter availability the tactical integrity of squads is sought. Any loading plan must also provide for retention of the US Advisor-interpreter proximity.

(5) At least one O-1 type aircraft capable of operating on the US Advisor's radio net is essential for the purpose of spotting and marking, and to act as a radio relay as needed. A second O-1 operating on the ARVN radio net is desirable.

(6) Each armed escort helicopter is required to carry an ARVN observer. In past operations these observers usually have been ARVN officers.

(7) It is highly desirable that armed aircraft be capable of communicating on the infantry FM net in order that the US Advisor

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may coordinate air-ground operations while on the ground. Coordination between all ARVN forces and US units/personnel participating in the operations is the responsibility of the US Advisor. He has an AN/PRC 10 with him on the ground and wears the crew chief's headset while airborne in the lead helicopter.

c. Missions.

(1) Reconnaissance in Force.

(a) An Eagle Force, reinforced by fighter aircraft and supported by light fixed wing observation aircraft, can be assigned the mission of probing for Viet Cong in several 25-50 square kilometer areas, depending on the population densities in the areas. Sectors of search are assigned to the observation aircraft. Operating "on-the-deck" they report on fleeing groups, armed persons, camouflaged individuals and positions, concentrations of sampans, the general reactions of persons in the search areas, and recommend possible landing zones.

(b) The ARVN Eagle Force Commander and the US Advisor select the best targets while orbiting in the lead helicopter, perform closer inspection of the potential objectives and coordinate landing and/or assault plans with the armed escort helicopters and fighter aircraft. The armed helicopters normally make assault passes prior to landings by the troop carrying helicopters. The Eagle Force lands and contacts the enemy or screens the area and interrogates civilians.

(c) Reports are continuously made to higher headquarters by the Eagle Force Commander using the airborne observation aircraft for radio relay. The observation aircraft also scouts beyond the area attempting to detect enemy forces who have reacted to the Eagle Force landing, either by fleeing or preparing to attack.

(d) If negative contact results, or upon completion of the action, a pickup is arranged. The troop carrying helicopters, under the cover of armed escort, complete the pickup and Eagle Force is ready to continue its search or pursue any enemy reported by the observation aircraft.

(2) Reinforce an Airmobile Force.

(a) An Eagle Force can be committed to reinforce an airmobile force. By scheduling the arrival of the Eagle Force on-station to coincide with the arrival of the initial lift of a heliborne force at its objective, the Eagle Force is in position to engage immediately any guerrillas fleeing on foot or by sampans. Optimum results

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can be achieved by direct coordination between the US Advisor with each unit on the ground and the US Advisor in the Eagle Force lead helicopter, using AN/PRC 10 radios on the US Advisor radio net. Additional observation and reporting can be performed by an O-1 type aircraft and by the Eagle Force itself.

(b) If the Eagle Force is airborne no more than five minutes flying time is needed to reach the most distant sector of the ground operation. Within an additional three minutes, or less, the landing can be planned and coordinated within the Eagle Force and its armed escort and executed. Fighter-bombers can also join in the attack.

(3) Reinforce a Ground Force. An Eagle Force can reinforce a ground force by being placed on-station to operate in areas adjacent to the committed unit. The armed escorts can perform low level search and target marking missions. Coordination between the Eagle Force and the ground force can be accomplished as shown in subparagraph (2), above.

(4) Reinforce Itself. When heavy opposition is encountered by a committed Eagle Force, or a requirement arises to block an exit from the area of contact, the Eagle Force can reinforce itself quickly by using its four empty troop carrying helicopters to bring additional squads into action. Within a few minutes after receiving a request for assistance relayed from the Eagle Force US Advisor, four squads of soldiers from the nearest unengaged friendly unit can be ready for pickup. Smoke can be used to mark the landing zone for the pickup. Since the helicopters will be in radio contact with the requesting force's US Advisor, the reinforcements can be briefed on the situation, assigned objectives and given landing instructions while enroute.

(5) Reinforce Airstrikes. An Eagle Force can be landed immediately following completion of an airstrike to inflict additional casualties and damage or engage surviving elements of an enemy force.

(6) Vertical Blocking Force. In generally open areas an Eagle Force can assist ground troops whose movement has become halted or slowed by fire from snipers or small groups of enemy in covered or concealed positions. The threat posed by the hovering Eagle Force and the fires of the armed escort helicopters pin down the enemy while ground forces maneuver to destroy.

(7) Immediate Reaction Force. Of particular value in counter-insurgency operations is the ability of an Eagle Force to react immediately in support of isolated outposts. Upon request of the outpost commander, either that intelligence has reported enemy activity in the area or that the outpost is under enemy attack, an Eagle Force can be dispatched to assault the enemy force. The benefit to morale among personnel in

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such outposts, coupled with the resultant enhancement of prestige by the government forces in protecting its population from insurgents, is great.

(8) Covering Force. An Eagle Force can be given a mission to provide cover for surface movement in the protection of boat and road traffic. Since this is a costly mission in terms of forces and equipment it should be given only in cases involving extremely high priority movements.

4. (U) TECHNIQUES OF EMPLOYMENT: A detailed discussion of the techniques of planning and employment of Eagle Forces, based upon the experience gained through actual operations in South Vietnam, is attached as Inclosure 1. The discussion includes techniques of planning and execution, diagrams of flight and landing formations and an after-action operational summary.

5. (CMHA) LIMITATIONS OF EAGLE FORCE OPERATIONS: In certain respects the Eagle Force concept has inherent weaknesses. Some will remain; others, notably in the field of communications, will be minimized or eliminated through technological improvements. As stated earlier in discussing planning considerations, language difficulties arise from participation by personnel of different nationalities in operations in Vietnam. To overcome these problems additional communications equipment is employed and procedures adapted to the conditions. Thus a limitation develops that would be less apparent in a homogeneous force. The following are some identified limitations and weaknesses of an Eagle Force:

a. Reliance on Suitable Terrain. An Eagle Force can be employed successfully only in generally open terrain appropriate for helicopter operations. Extended areas without suitable landing zones, which would tend to "swallow" a small force, which would render the armed escort support useless, or which would limit landing zones to only a few that could be ambushed by the enemy prohibit successful employment of an Eagle Force.

b. Vulnerability of Helicopters. Helicopters, and the Eagle Force itself, are particularly vulnerable to enemy ground fires during assault landings. In some cases, to be effective and to preclude an exhausting and possibly unsuccessful pursuit on foot, the Eagle Force must be landed amid or immediately adjacent to the enemy. It has not been unusual to have the first enemy casualties caused by the crew chief's submachine gun fire during the final approach.

c. Limited Combat Power.

(1) An Eagle Force is, basically, a small force of four

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squads of soldiers. Upon landing its combat power is limited to the skill and fire power of the squads. The force itself usually carries no machine guns or mortars.

(2) Often the force is separated by a terrain feature; e.g., canal or tree line. If upon landing, these small forces are surprised by a large enemy force they cannot be extricated easily since the helicopters would be extremely vulnerable to loss if called in during a heavy fire fight.

(3) The Eagle Force cannot move by stealth since its mode of travel advertises its presence well in advance.

(4) The force is dependent upon considerable support; the more independent its mission the more support it requires. Coordination of the force and its supporting elements is of paramount importance.

6. (CMHA) LESSONS LEARNED:

a. In general, the lessons learned from the employment of Eagle Forces were derived from initial operations and have resulted in refinements to techniques employed in later operations. These refinements are found in the form of improvements in the fields of selected equipment, identification and command control procedures, communication procedures and coordination between the force and its supported and supporting elements.

b. The following significant lessons learned, although implied in the foregoing discussion, warrant restating:

(1) To prevent being ambushed or defeated in detail a massed landing should be sought whenever possible.

(2) Unless the commander is reasonably certain of the size, strength and disposition of the enemy force a landing zone should be selected that will place the force beyond effective small arms range of the enemy.

(3) In attacking an enemy force located near a canal a landing formation should be chosen that will place part of the Eagle Force on the opposite bank to block escape.

(4) Eagle Force limitations and weaknesses must be thoroughly understood by planners.

(5) The Eagle Force should not attempt to unload and assault

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in flooded areas greater than 3 feet in depth. In such cases troops should be landed on adjacent high ground and commandeered boats or sampans for use to complete their mission.

(6) There is a greater need for closer coordination between Eagle Force and friendly ground forces in the area of operations, to include the establishment of recognition signals.

(7) The commander should evaluate thoroughly the nature of the target prior to selecting a landing formation.

(8) Troops must receive a last minute orientation on the direction of the objective prior to unloading at the target area.

(9) The language barrier, coupled with the noise of the helicopters, makes the use of simple hand and whistle signals essential to the success of the operation.

1 Incl
Techniques of Planning and
Employment w/3 Inclosures

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Brigadier General, USA
Chief

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TECHNIQUES OF PLANNING AND EMPLOYMENT

1. Factors in Planning a Landing: Experience has shown that several factors must be considered in planning for a landing. This planning must be accomplished immediately upon arrival over the selected target area. It must be thorough, but done quickly, since the enemy already will have commenced to react to the presence of the attacking force. Thus, planning, reaching decisions, and communicating these decisions in the form of instructions to the force and its supporting elements must be virtually simultaneous. The following factors are considered by the Eagle Force commander.

a. Are the suspected personnel actually enemy forces? The possibility is great for mistaking friendly Self Defense Corps personnel, armed and dressed in black or nondescript uniforms, for Viet Cong. Generally, the Viet Cong will run, attempt to hide or fire at the helicopters; SDC or Civil Guard soldiers will usually wave for recognition. Lack of communication means and a positive means of identification compound this problem.

b. What is the proximity of the target to heavy vegetation? How many enemy are visible? In selecting the landing zone care must be exercised to minimize the possibility of landing in a preplanned ambush based on hidden enemy forces.

c. Is the enemy force massed or scattered, organized to fight or disorganized? Decision regarding use of a pre-assault airstrike, choice of landing formation and selection of landing zone are affected by the answers to this question.

d. Is the logical target bisected by a canal or similar terrain feature? Choice of landing formation, selection of landing zone(s), and decision regarding capability of split force against the enemy are affected.

e. Is the water in the rice paddies too deep for force to maneuver effectively? Selection of landing zone is affected.

2. Techniques of Target Designation.

a. Oral description. The use of compass and clock directions in orally describing a target and landing zone is mandatory since in an area dense with canals and groves the mere reference to a canal would be meaningless. A typical landing instruction to the helicopter leader might be: "The canal running from NE to SW about 500 meters out on our 2 o'clock position is the baseline. Do you see it?" "At 3 o'clock on the base line, a small clump of trees on the canal is the center of mass, can you identify it?" "Land numbers one and two on the NW side and numbers

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three and four on the S3. Keep both sections 300 meters out from the canal."

b. Marking by tracer ammunition or smoke grenades.

c. Vectoring helicopters over target by pilots of other aircraft who have observed it.

3. Landing Formations: There is a wide range of choices of landing formations. Selection must be based on nature and size of target and the terrain features in the target area. Inclosure 1 is a diagram showing examples of possible formations. Pictures of actual operations are attached as Inclosure 2. Experience in South Vietnam operations has shown that the following choices against specific targets are workable: (Refer to Inclosure 1 for diagram of named formations).

a. To assault against enemy forces in groups up to 50, disorganized and in the open, and depending upon how heavily they are armed, a landing formation known as the "half box" is chosen. It provides a "3 o'clock exit" for all troops thus eliminating the necessity for any troops to move around the helicopters before assaulting. The enemy is caught in crossfire between the two lines of assaulting forces.

b. To screen a large open area following an airstrike, or to search for Viet Cong hiding under water or in high grass, the Eagle Force troop carrying helicopters are landed in "line" formation, with about 100 meters separation between helicopters.

c. To attack a large enemy force reported to be in dense vegetation the helicopters are landed in "line" formation about 300 meters away. A closer landing may place the force in an enemy ambush. If the enemy force is reported to be small, the helicopters are landed in "line" much closer to prevent enemy from escaping before assault.

d. In order to trap an enemy force hiding in groves along the banks of a canal the "open box" landing formation is used. Two aircraft land on each side of the canal forming a box roughly 300 meters on a side. Squads assault and direct their fires at the inclosed target.

4. Execution of Assault:

a. Once the commander has selected his target and decided upon his landing formation and plan of assault he must communicate his decisions to the helicopter pilots and the armed escort helicopter flight leader. Time will not permit prior briefing of each squad in helicopters 2,3, and 4.

b. Since the forces are not thoroughly briefed on either

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the landing formation or the assault plan, unless ground winds absolutely prohibit the pilots attempt to land in a direction which provides the troops a "3 o'clock" exit toward the objective. If they cannot, crew chiefs, draw a directional arrow on a piece of paper indicating the direction of the objective as it will appear to the soldiers as they emerge from the helicopter.

c. Immediately upon landing, squads are assembled rapidly and control quickly gained by the commander and his squad leaders.

d. The U.S. Advisor immediately establishes radio contact with the orbiting empty helicopters and, through the O-1 type observation aircraft radio relay, reports to the division headquarters.

e. On the objective the troops must work rapidly to screen the area, kill or capture the enemy, apprehend suspects and prepare to reload. Since an Eagle Force is more effective when airborne and prepared to attack excessive time is not spent on the ground following the assault or capture of enemy. If a more lucrative target is reported to the empty orbiting helicopters by other units a red smoke signal is dropped as a signal to prepare for pick-up.

5. Execution of Pickup following Assault.

a. Reloading the Force.

(1) Upon completion of the ground action the commander studies the area and determines the center of mass of each squad. He insures that the area is secure before the helicopters land. If terrain permits, the troops are formed in a column of squads, approximately 30 meters between squads, with the 1st squad (RED) up-wind. However if a squad is widely separated from the force, possibly separated by a canal, it can be reloaded in place, provided a suitable landing zone is available.

(2) The U.S. Advisor contacts the helicopter flight leader by radio, informs him of the wind direction and identifies the landing zone(s). It is SOP that should radio communications fail, the formation of troops in line of squads in pickup formation is the signal that the area is secure and that the force is ready to reload.

(3) As shown earlier on the loading plan, each squad has a color code as indicated by the scarf or piece of cloth worn on their uniforms. (RED - 1st; GREEN - 2d; BLUE - 3d; YELLOW - 4th) Each helicopter is designated by a corresponding color code. Thus identification for pickup and reloading is simplified.

b. While awaiting return of the helicopters and during all loading operations each squad maintains close security of the area. The

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armed escort helicopters continue to orbit, protecting the helicopters and troops during reloading operations.

(1) Reloading is nearly always done while the helicopters maintain partial power since the open areas are generally swamps or water covered rice paddies much of the year. If the helicopter is carrying nearly full fuel load (early in the operation), or if prisoners aboard cause the load to exceed twelve men, it will require an obstacle-clear distance of about 900 meters in an up-wind direction for takeoff. Each helicopter should take off as soon as loaded in order to minimize time on the ground, a period of great vulnerability.

(2) Prior to all Eagle Flight operations all seats are removed from the cargo compartments of the troop carrying helicopters. During the operations no equipment is tied down.

6. Signals: The following are examples of signals employed during recent operations.

a. Hand and Arm Signals: Two basic signals given by the crew chiefs of the troop carrying helicopters to the assault troops upon landing for purposes other than assaulting enemy forces are:

(1) If landing on or near friendly troop positions the crew chief places his hand over the muzzle of a shoulder-fired weapon as a signal that troops are not to fire upon landing.

(2) If a landing is to be made for the purpose of changing to refueled helicopters, the crew chief make a signal similar to the penalty signal for "back field in motion" to indicate that troops are to dismount but not deploy for assault.

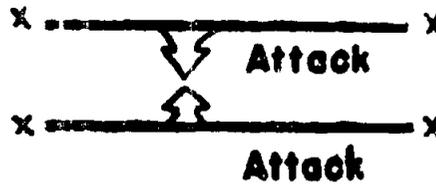
b. Thunderer Whistle Signals: (Given by commander and repeated by each squad leader)

(1) Two blasts to indicate "cease fire".

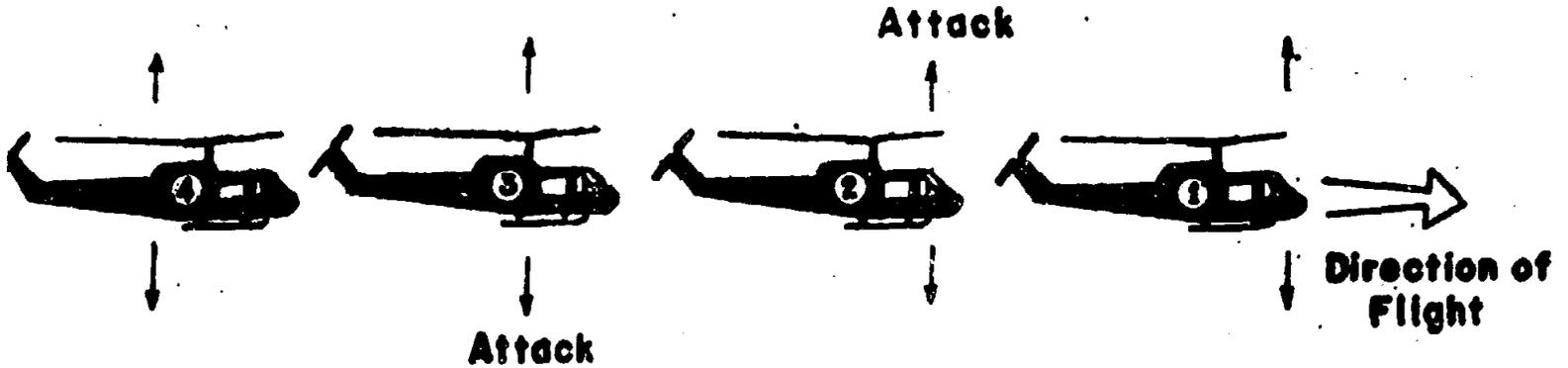
(2) Three blasts to indicate "action complete, assemble for reloading at position being shown".

7. An operational summary of an Eagle Force action of 22 May 1963 is attached as Inclosure 3 for information.

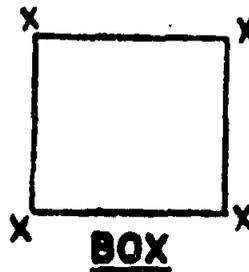
LANDING FORMATIONS



HALF BOX

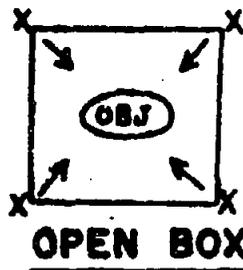


LINE



(Objective in any direction from center of box.)

Box used for maximum control and fluid situation.



Open box used for small targets and mop-up operations.

NOTE: 1. Trail formation may appear to make landing on one side of canal, lift off and strike VC fleeing on opposite side.

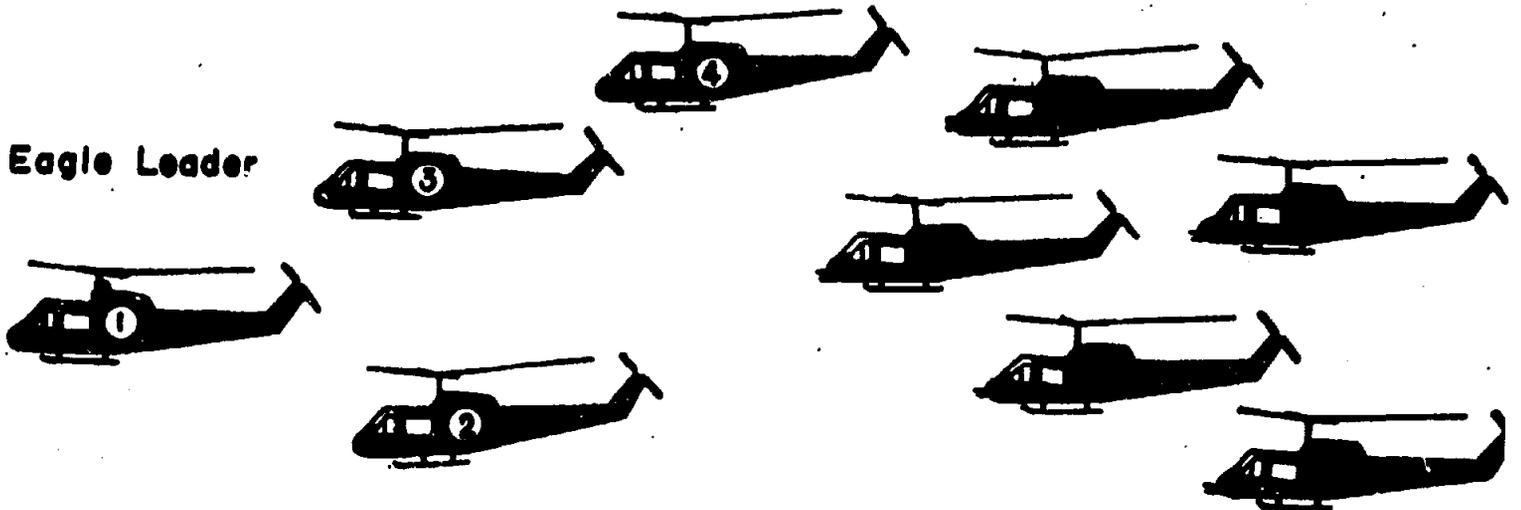
2. As troops attack the near side of tree line armed escort makes passes on far side.

3. Trail formation usually used for search missions.

FLIGHT FORMATIONS

Eagle Trail

Eagle Leader



TRAIL FORMATION

ARMED ESCORT



Eagle Leader

Eagle Trail



COLUMN FORMATION

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OPERATIONAL SUMMARY UTILIZING EAGLE FORCES

NAME: Duc Thang 17/42

DATE: 22 May 1963

PLACE: 21st Division Tactical Area, Vicinity Eac Lieu, Ba Xuyen Province

CONTROL HEADQUARTERS: 21st Infantry Division

MISSION: 21st Division (-) attacks at 220700 May, north from Xom Phuoc Thanh to kill or capture enemy forces in the area; heliborne strike force "Eagle" attacks targets of opportunity.

NARRATIVE: The plan envisioned one battalion attacking on two "axes of advance", a Ranger Company in a mobile blocking role; one M113 company with one Ranger Company in a screening role and the 21st Division Reconnaissance Company and one Ranger Company as "Eagle" forces. The plan was considered to be tightly controlled for ground troops but extremely flexible in regards to use of "Eagle". The 21st Recon Co and the 362d Ranger Co provided 40 selected personnel to be employed as an "Eagle" strike force hovering over the area of operation, prepared to strike targets of opportunity, block escape routes and reinforce units on the ground.

The "Eagle" force was divided into four 10 man squads, each squad wearing a distinctive colored scarf for identification and control purposes. Six (6) armed UH-1B's (escort) and four (4) unarmed UH-1B's (troop transport) were employed. "Eagles" mission were, blocking, searching, reconnaissance in force and attacking enemy troops flushed by foot troops.

The armed UH-1B's in addition to their normal mission of escort and close-in fire support, provided an excellent means of rapidly evacuating POW's from the area of operation. POW's were evacuated by the armed UH-1B's on their return trips from the area of operation for refueling. Evacuation thus relieved the ground units from having to sacrifice much needed troops for guard duty.

During this operation "Eagle" conducted seven landings, accounted for 32 enemy KIA and captured 21 prisoners. Ground units captured an additional 34 POW's. Armed UH-1B's of "Eagle" evacuated all of these prisoners.

Inclosure 3 to Incl 1

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