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ESSONS LEARNED 49



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HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM
APO San Francisco 96243

Serial No. 0511
13 April 1965

MACJ 323

SUBJECT: Lessons Learned Number 49: Operation Hoai An

TO: See Distribution

1. (U) Attached is the latest "Lessons Learned" from counterinsurgency operations in the Republic of Vietnam. The information contained therein is primarily intended for use by US Advisors in Vietnam. Lessons may be of value for direct application, or they may simply reinforce existing tactics, techniques or doctrine.

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3. (U) Comments, questions and requests for changes in distribution should be addressed to this Headquarters, ATTN: J323.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

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Thomas W. ...
for RICHARD G. STILWELL
Major General, USA
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MACJ 323

SUBJECT: Lessons Learned Number 49: Operation Hoai An (U)

1. (CMHA) INTRODUCTION: This issue of Lessons Learned concerns a highly successful GVN action which took place in response to a VC initiated operation in early March 1965. It is an excellent example how a large VC force can be out maneuvered by a quick thinking aggressive commander who adjusts plans to take advantage of opportunities in battle. In addition it indicates that Regional Force units are capable of highly creditable combat performances when adequately led. A unique aspect of this report is that the capture of VC documents subsequent to the action has provided detailed information on the original VC operational plan and we can examine both sides of the battle.

2. (CMHA) GENERAL SITUATION:

a. The operation took place in the Kim Son River Valley approximately 60 kilometers north of Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh Province. Formed by the Kim Son River flowing north through the mountains toward a junction with the An Lao River, the valley is characterized by flat paddy land broken by small hill masses rising sharply from the river floor. Main village and road networks are situated on the east side of the river and the Hoai An District Town is located in the northern part of the valley. (Inclosure 1).

b. VC forces involved were the 2d Regiment, consisting of the 93d, 95th, 97th and 20th Infantry Battalions, supported by the 300th Heavy Weapons Battalion. VC armament included 57 and 75mm recoilless rifles, 60 and 81mm mortars and .50 caliber machine guns.

c. Friendly forces initially in the area consisted of one Regional Force (RF) company and three Popular Force (PF) platoons at the district headquarters and a second RF company at Ha Tay, four kilometers south. Two 105mm howitzers were emplaced within the perimeter of the district town. Available reinforcements included the 40th ARVN Regiment at Phu My, 37 kilometers south.

3. (CMHA) THE VC PLAN: Documents captured after the action indicate that the VC had planned to force a major engagement with GVN forces in the area in order to gain propaganda value and take a heavy GVN toll by ambushing expected reaction forces. The scheme of maneuver provided for moving three battalions into the southern end of the valley on the west side of the river.

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A fourth battalion was already located in the mountains east of the valley. When in position, the eastern battalion was to encircle Hoai An and destroy its outposts while, simultaneously, a second battalion was to cross the river from the west and destroy the Ha Tay post. These two battalions would then attack and seize the district headquarters at Hoai An. Once this objective was secured, the remaining two battalions would cross the river and establish positions in depth across the main avenue of approach from Bong Son and Phu My. (Inclosure 2).

4. (CMHA) THE OPERATION:

a. The operation began according to plan. The 95th VC Battalion moved on Hoai An and by 090300 March had occupied the four small outposts on the high ground overlooking the district headquarters. (PF units manning these outposts had been ordered to withdraw because the district was unable to assist them.) Simultaneously, the 93d VC Battalion crossed the river to the south and attacked the 883d RF Company at Ha Tay.

b. After seizing the four outposts, the 95th Battalion fired on the district headquarters with .50 caliber, recoilless rifle and mortar fire but did not attack pending the arrival of the 93d Battalion which was to link-up after destroying the Ha Tay outpost. The VC fire was returned by the district artillery platoon, reinforced by 105mm fire from Bong Son, and one 60mm mortar.

c. Meanwhile, at Ha Tay, the RF company commander had displaced his company of 71 men to a narrow ridge overlooking the post and had dug in for defense (Inclosure 3). The terrain selected for defense was such that the VC were forced to attack on a narrow front and from 0300 to 1100 hours this company was able to hold their position against repeated enemy assaults supported by mortar and recoilless rifle fire. At 1100, with all ammunition and grenades expended, the company commander gave the order to hide the automatic weapons and break out of the perimeter. As a result of this action, a total of 221 VC were reported killed and two VC machine guns were captured. Although USAF A-1E aircraft were overhead during the day, a communications problem and lack of US Advisors with the RF unit prevented them from providing assistance.

d. To the north, the district town remained encircled as the VC awaited reinforcements before making a final attack. Four A-1E aircraft struck the VC positions three times during the day with fragmentation bombs, napalm and 20mm cannon resulting in an estimated 160 VC killed and a lessening of VC fire against the town.

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e. A final blow was dealt the VC the afternoon of 9 March when the 22d ARVN Division ordered a ready Marine Task Force to move from Bong Son to relieve the besieged district town. Consisting of the 1st Marine Battalion, the Task Force was to move on the east side of the river along the road. However, when local villagers warned the commander of VC ambushes on the road, he changed the plan of maneuver, moved cross country and forded the river to the west. (Inclosure 3). This placed a water barrier between himself and the VC as he maneuvered to their rear. By 1830 hours, the Marines had reached a position behind a VC occupied hill mass which commanded the northern approach to Hoai An. Using a small bridge to recross the river, the Marines, supported by A-1E 20mm cannon, assaulted the VC occupied hill in a double envelopment. The VC, caught by surprise with their weapons emplaced to cover the road, were unable to meet the attack from the rear and within 30 minutes, the Marines were in possession of the hill. This assault resulted in 32 VC killed and villagers reported another 20 VC casualties carried away. The Marines lost four KIA and 13 WIA including one advisor killed and one wounded.

f. By nightfall of the 9th the VC regimental commander decided to withdraw. Commencing at 100400 hours, the withdrawal was completed by 101300, and the two remaining VC battalions were never committed.

5. (CMHA) FINAL RESULTS:

a. Confirmed VC losses were 59 killed and one captured, one machine gun, two sub-machine guns and a large quantity of small arms, grenades, 57mm recoilless rounds and other ammunition. Reports of additional VC casualties carried away number more than 350.

b. Total friendly losses were 32 KIA, 27 WIA, 44 MIA, 20 weapons and three radios.

6. (U) LESSONS LEARNED:

a. This battle was won because GVN commanders used mobility and flexibility of maneuver. Operation plans, both defensive and offensive, should never be so inflexible that they prevent changes dictated by the situation.

b. The Marine Task Force was saved from ambush and enabled to surprise the VC ambush force because of pro-GVN villagers. One of the paramount

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objectives of all GVN units should be to cement good relations between the local population and GVN forces.

c. The RF company commander at Ha Tay was able to significantly upset the VC plan by his determined defense from well selected defensive terrain, even though he was unable to take advantage of air support due to communications difficulties. Outposts and similar defensive installations should select alternate positions for use when the attacking enemy cannot be contained from the primary position.

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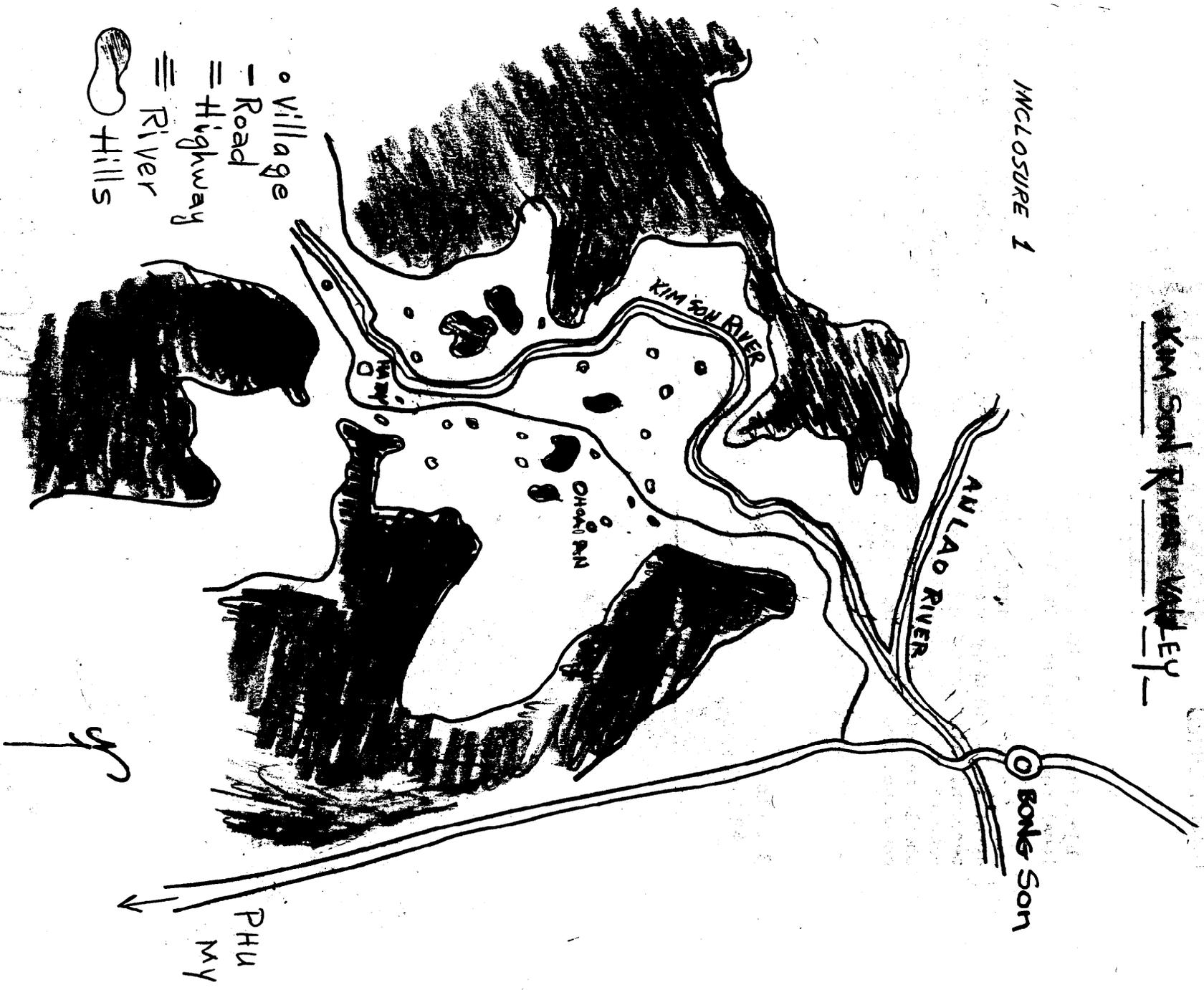
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KIM SON RIVER VALLEY

INCLOSURE 1



- Village
- Road
- = Highway
- ≡ River
- ☞ Hills

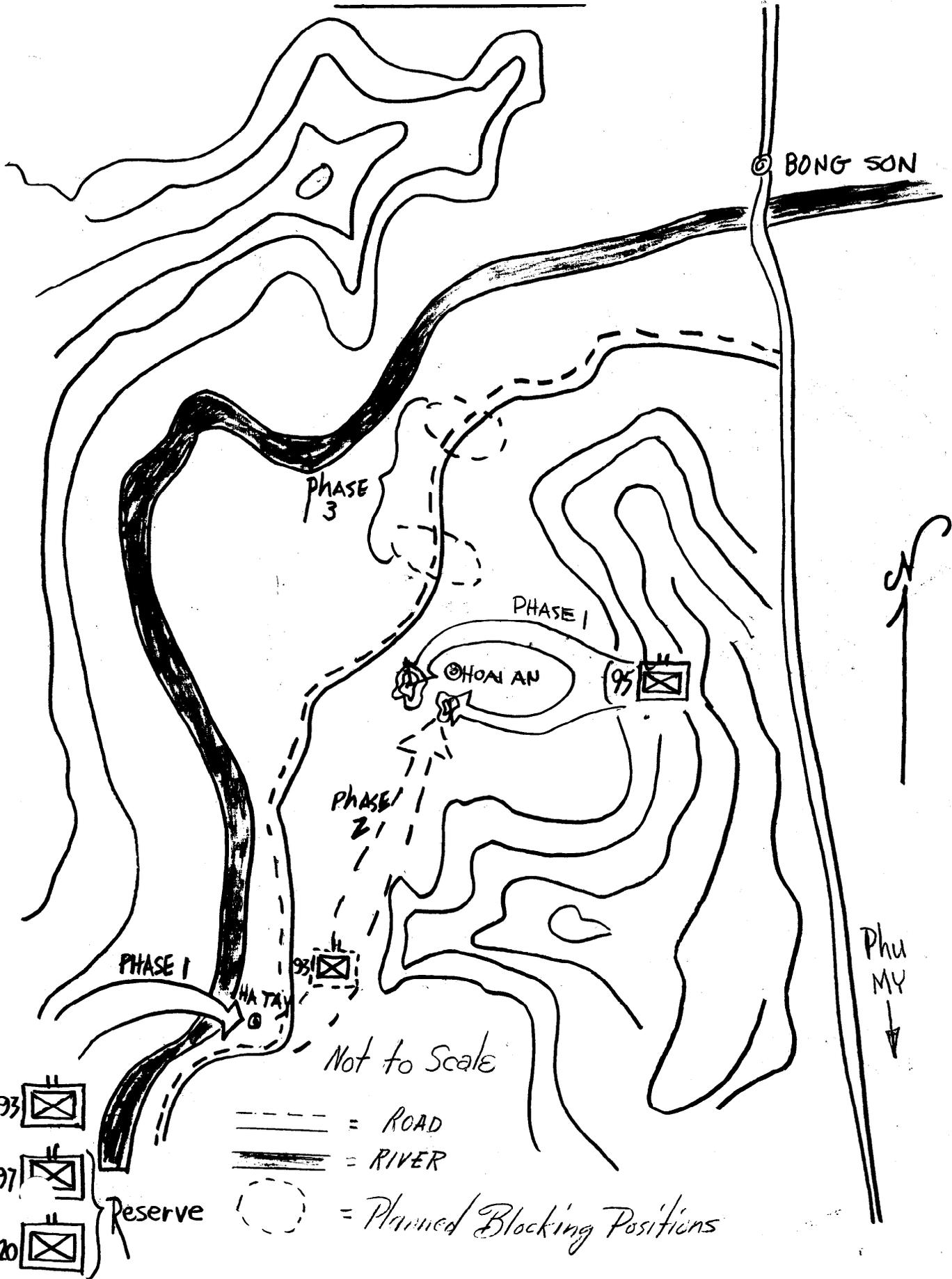
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INCLOSURE 2

VC Plan



Not to Scale

- 93 [X]
 - 97 [X]
 - 20 [X]
- Reserve

- = ROAD
- == = RIVER

○ = Planned Blocking Positions

INCLOSURE 3

FRIENDLY OPERATIONS

