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

Ser No. 0125  
27 January 1966

MACJ343

SUBJECT: Lessons Learned No 54: The Battle of Ky Phu (U)

TO: See Distribution

1. (CMHA) INTRODUCTION: This issue of Lessons Learned deals with a highly successful counter-ambush action during operation "Harvest Moon", conducted by 2d Bn, 7th Marines of the 3d Marine Division, at Ky Phu, Province of Quang Tin, on 18 Dec 65.

2. (CMHA) GENERAL SITUATION:

a. The unit participating in this action was the 2d Bn 7th Marines, 3d Marine Division, consisting of H/S, F and G Companies, with H Company, 2d Bn, 9th Marines attached. Companies E and H of the 2/7 had been assigned other missions and were not present with their parent unit during this action.

b. On the date of this action, the battalion had been conducting a search and destroy mission along an axis Tu Cam - Ky Phu (BT 216226) - Thon Hai. Upon its completion the operation was to be terminated and the battalion returned to its base.

c. The concept of operation for the day was to continue the previous day's movement in battalion tactical column with the town of Thon - Hai as the march objective. An earlier intelligence estimate had reported one VC battalion in the vicinity of Ky Phu. Sporadic sniper fire had been directed against the Marines during the preceeding 3 days but no solid contact had been made by the 2/7.

d. Terrain and Weather:

(1) Terrain - The terrain in the vicinity of Ky Phu is generally open, consisting of rice paddies broken by hedgrows and hamlets. A road leads eastward from Tu Cam, through Ky Phu, to the larger town of Thon Hai, located some 3 km west of Highway 1 and 7 km northwest of the town of Tam Ky. Ky Phu itself is a small market town consisting of both semipermanent and permanent buildings. To the south and southwest of town a low ridge, covered by trees and light vegetation, rises to a height of only 30 meters, but commands both the town and its western approaches. To the east rice paddies extend for some 2000 meters.

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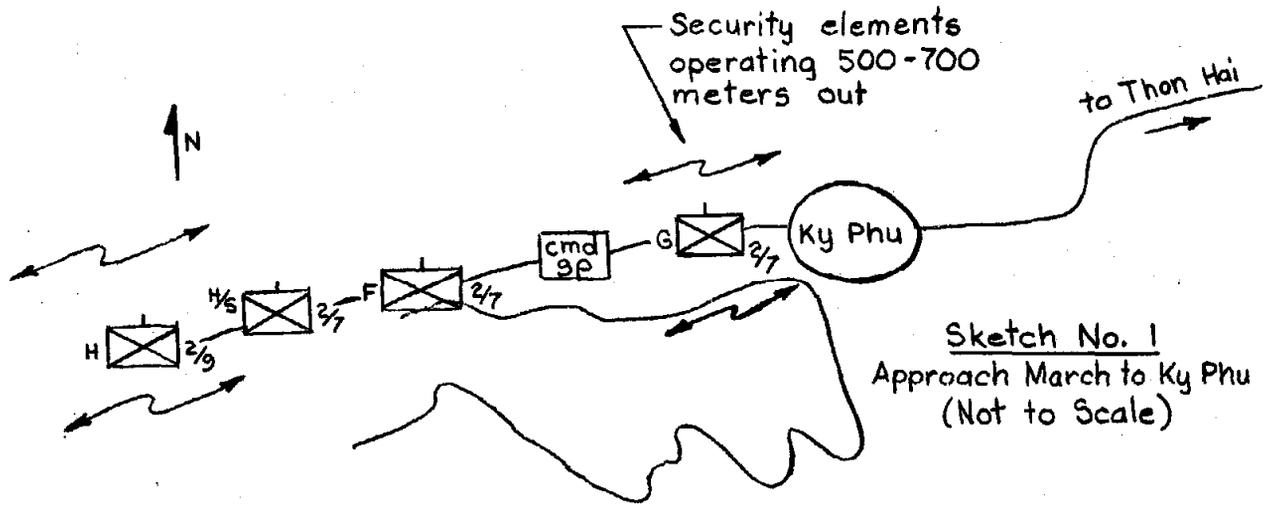
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(2) Weather: Rain had been falling continuously for the preceding three days and during the morning of 18 December. In the afternoon of the 18th the weather cleared sufficiently to allow helicopter but not fixed wing aircraft operations.

3. (CMHA) THE BATTLE OF KY PHU:

a. Essentially, this action can be termed a movement to contact culminated by a VC ambush designed to destroy the entire Marine march column.

b. The Marine battalion approached Ky Phu in tactical column with Co G as advance guard, a main body consisting of F and H/S Co's and a rear guard consisting of Co H (2/9). Security elements were operating along the flanks of the advance guard (Co G), some 500-700 meters from the route of march, about 100-150 meters to the flanks of the main body, and some 200 meters to the flanks of the rear guard (Co H) (See sketch No 1). The two available 81mm mortars were attached to Co G (advance guard).



Sketch No. 1  
Approach March to Ky Phu  
(Not to Scale)

c. Upon approaching Ky Phu, Co G's flankers passed through abandoned VC entrenchments to the southwest of the town. With no contact as yet, the company moved through the town into the rice paddies beyond. At this point the action was initiated by the VC, engaging Co G with sniper fire followed by progressively increasing small arms, automatic weapons and mortar fire from the southeast (See sketch No 2). Co G began to develop and eliminate this attack by aggressive action to include use of its attached 81mm mortars in the direct lay role.

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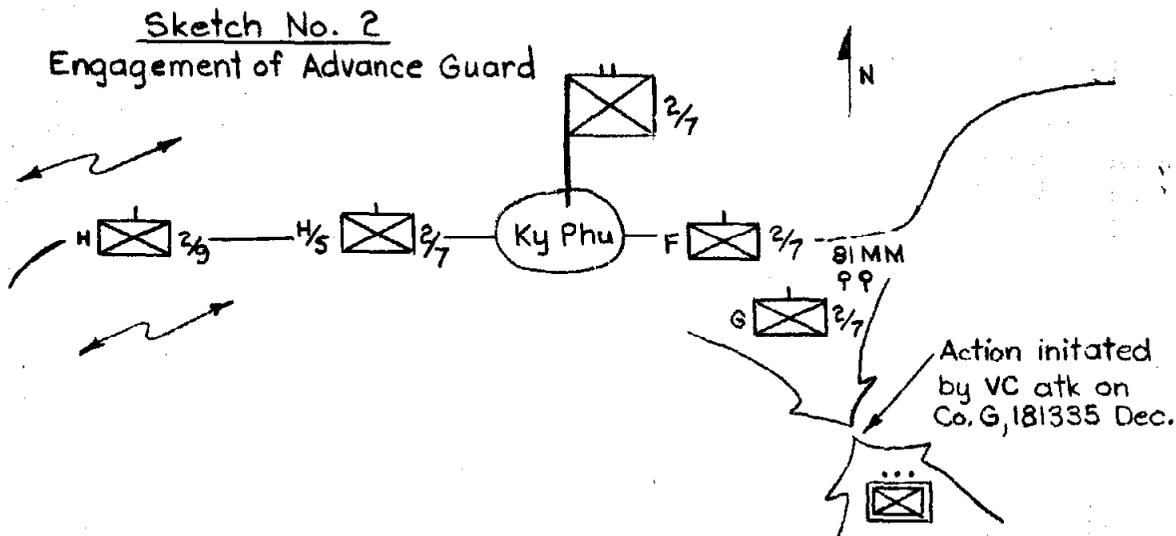
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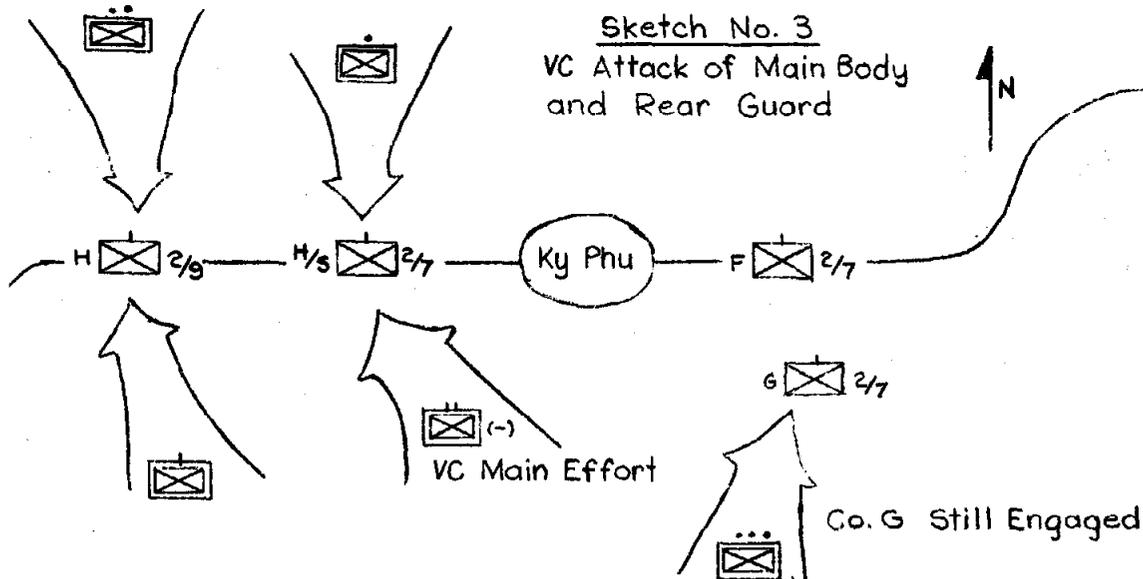
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d. The initial sniper contact of Co G was viewed as a harassing tactic by the battalion commander who ordered Co F to continue the march as the column advance guard, with Co G to eliminate the harassment and rejoin the column as the rear guard. Co F promptly moved forward, passing through Ky Phu and into the open area to the east.



At this time H/S Co was located in open ground just to the west of the town, with Co H some 500 meters to its rear, in the vicinity of the entrenchments previously cleared by Co G. As Co F passed through the eastern edge of Ky Phu, a heavy concentration of fire was received by elements west of the town and a major effort was made by the VC, from both north and south of the road, to encircle H/S Co and to destroy the rear guard (See sketch No 3).



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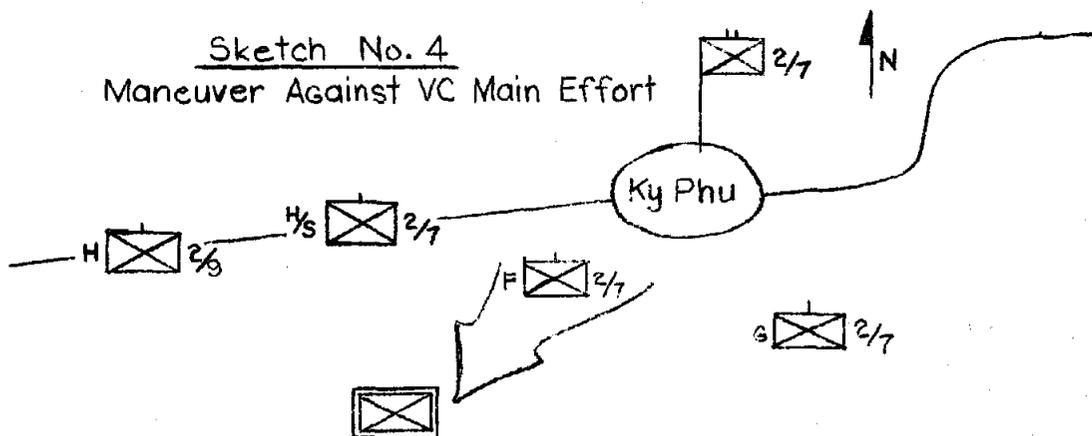
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This effort was initiated from areas previously traversed by the advance guard flankers by forces which moved into ambush positions after the flankers had passed. These forces were reinforced as the action progressed.

e. Reacting quickly, Co F was turned around by order of the battalion commander, and brought back through the town. With the assistance of H/S company and support from 155mm artillery located some 14km to the northwest, it succeeded in eliminating the serious threat to the center of the column (see sketch No 4). In Co H's area, the company commander was killed and command was immediately assumed by the artillery forward observer who, with the assistance of three armed helicopters, successfully repulsed the enemy's attack and evacuated his wounded by helicopter.



f. During this action three separate engagements can be noted: The initial attack on the advance guard; the attempt to encircle and destroy H/S Co; and the attack on the rear guard. All these attacks were effectively foiled by aggressive leadership, rapid and effective response to orders, fire power, and use of supporting arms, resulting in severe losses being inflicted on the attacking VC forces.

4. (CMHA) RESULTS:

a. Results of this engagement were as follows: 105 VC dead (body count), 2 VC wounded and captured, 8 crew served and 29 miscellaneous weapons.

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and 2 radios captured. The VC unit was indentified as the 80th Battalion, 1st VC Regiment, by POW interrogation.

b. Friendly losses were as follows: 11 KIA; 71 WIA; 2 DOW.

5. (U) LESSONS LEARNED:

a. This battle was won by aggressive application of techniques and principles commonly taught in service schools and contained in standard field manuals. Several are cited here only to confirm that a lesson to be learned is that these techniques and principles are basically sound and will result in the defeat of any enemy force if properly applied.

(1) Rapid and aggressive attainment of fire superiority by maneuver, coupled with employment of all organic and all available supporting arms (e.g. armed helicopters and 155mm artillery), will provide the margin of victory.

(2) Where effective centralized control of supporting weapons cannot be realized, supporting weapons (e.g. 81mm mortars attached to the advanced guard) should be attached to the unit most likely to experience contact.

(3) Radio discipline is essential. In this action, due to personnel casualties and destruction of radio equipment by initial enemy fire, only the battalion tactical command net was operating effectively. Outstanding net discipline was maintained, however, allowing effective control of the battalion by its commander, adjustment of artillery fire, and control of armed and MEDEVAC helicopters.

(4) Aggressive leadership was exhibited by all commanders, to include the immediate assumption of command of H Co by the artillery forward observer when the company commander was killed.

b. Of particular note as a result of this action are two techniques employed by the VC to increase the effectiveness of their ambush.

(1) VC units attacked the center of the column from positions previously traversed by the flank security elements of the advance guard, moving into these positions during the time and space interval between the flankers of the advance and rear guards (estimated as 30-45 minutes). Flank security for main body elements was limited to areas in close proximity to the route of march.

(2) Initial enemy fire was directed against commanders and radio operators, resulting in the loss of one company commander and nine radio operators (three killed and six wounded), and destruction of three radios.

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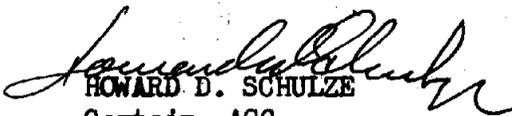
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Captain, AGC  
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