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Counterinsurgency

LESSONS LEARNED 57

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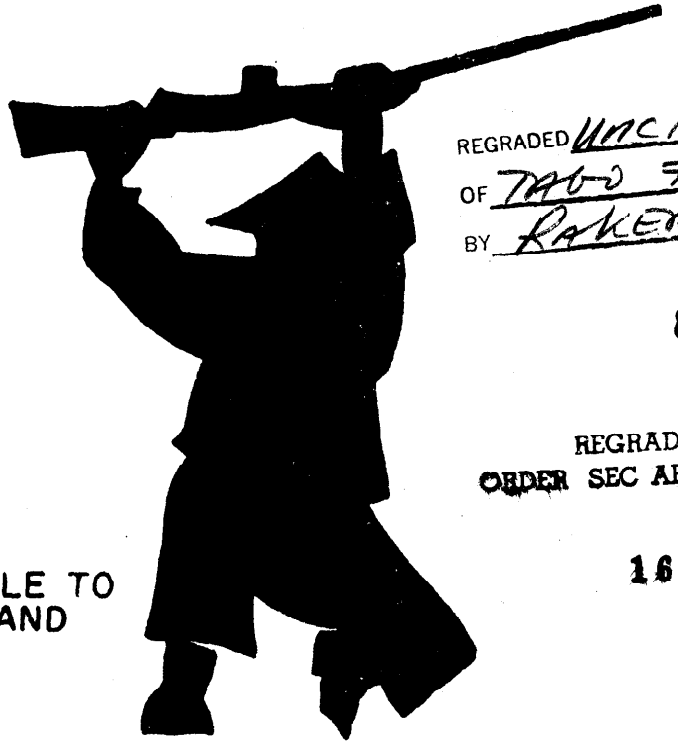

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HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM
APO San Francisco 96243

MACJ343 25 May 1966

SUBJECT: Counterinsurgency Lessons Learned No 57: Pursuit (U)

TO: SEE DISTRIBUTION

1. (CMHA) INTRODUCTION:

a. This issue of Lessons Learned deals with the concept of pursuit as it pertains to operations in RVN. Special emphasis is placed on aggressive reaction to VC initiated attacks on friendly forces, to the end that the VC forces are destroyed as effective military organizations and maximum kill is obtained.

b. To date, VC Main Force and North Vietnamese Army units have avoided combat with US and Free World units unless they have been able to engage isolated elements with superior force. Most of the operations which are scheduled have as their objectives finding and destroying VC forces. A number of these operations have not made significant contact with these forces, although other objectives have been attained. In short, the obtaining of hard, reliable and timely intelligence is one of the most difficult tasks facing all friendly forces in RVN.

c. The VC, however, continue to attack isolated or semi-isolated friendly units and installations, to include US and Free World units as well as Regional and Popular Forces and ARVN units. By attacking a friendly force, the VC have solved a major portion of the intelligence problem -- contact has been achieved! Engagement and pursuit of VC forces which reveal their presence by offensive action must therefore receive the highest priority at all levels.

d. This issue is related to Lessons Learned No 55, The Battle of Annihilation, which dealt with rapid reaction to good intelligence and the use of multiple forces to fix and destroy the enemy. Lessons Learned No 57 concerns itself with our ability to transform a VC initiated offensive action into a VC defeat.

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e. The purpose of this Lessons Learned is to demonstrate the conduct of pursuit following a VC initiated attack on a friendly force.

2. (U) THE DOCTRINE OF PURSUIT:

a. "Pursuit is the maintenance of contact with, and the continuation of offensive action against, a fleeing enemy." (para 85b, FM 31-16, Feb 63).

b. "The pursuit differs from the exploitation in that its primary purpose is the destruction of the enemy force which is in the process of disengagement, rather than the seizure of a terrain objective." (para 167, FM 7-20, Jan 62).

c. "A force conducting a pursuit is normally organized into two elements, the direct pressure force, and the encircling force(s)." (para 85c, FM 31-16, Feb 63).

3. (CMHA) PHASES OF THE ACTION:

a. In order to provide a better understanding of this application of pursuit, it is necessary to examine the various phases of the action being described in this document. These phases are generally as follows (and will be further explained in subsequent paragraphs):

(1) Enemy attack.

(2) Defense.

(3) Reaction.

(4) Enemy withdrawal.

(5) Pursuit.

It must be recognized, however, that these phases are not sequential, i.e., the reaction to enemy attack should start immediately upon notification of such attack and the "pursuit" may be initiated prior to, or during the withdrawal of enemy forces.

b. Enemy attack — The enemy attack described herein is directed against an isolated or semi-isolated friendly unit or installation. Every effort is made to ensure success through the use of superior force and

painstaking and detailed reconnaissance. In the case of a static installation, e.g. outpost, the planning and reconnaissance phase may last over several weeks. The attack itself is of relatively short duration i.e., 1-6 hours, and is characterized by an intense but normally well-disciplined application of infantry firepower.

c. Defense - The defense by friendly forces under attack is a key factor in the overall conduct of pursuit for the following reasons:

(1) The force being attacked in effect becomes a fixing or direct pressure force.

(2) Maximum casualties are inflicted in order to weaken the enemy force and its ability to withdraw successfully.

(3) The defensive position forms a base for the pursuit of the enemy force as the attack is blunted.

(4) The defense provides reaction time in connection with its fixing force mission. The defending force must be capable of independent sustained action for reasonable periods and ideally without resupply or reinforcement. Normal perimeter defense doctrine applies.

d. Reaction.

(1) Reaction is defined herein as the actions of friendly forces, other than the unit being attacked (para 3c, above). We have assumed that the VC have attacked a friendly unit inferior in strength to the attacking force, and that, using all available fire power, this friendly force is defending successfully -- thus becoming a fixing force. It is then evident that to insure that the VC initiated offensive action is converted into a VC defeat, additional forces must be introduced in a timely and effective manner

(2) It is not sufficient to state that reaction must be swift and powerful. The reaction forces must be introduced in a timely manner so as to (1), relieve pressure on the defending unit and (2), exploit the fixing action achieved by the defending unit. Time and space factors for mutual support by adjacent units and/or designated reaction forces must be computed continually. These factors apply to reaction forces designated during active operations as well as for those in support of the RF/PF outpost system or other fixed installations. Prior planning is essential, but must be constantly reviewed to insure that plans accurately reflect the status and location of the designated units. If the reaction time exceeds the "stay time" of the VC unit, effective pursuit becomes

extremely difficult or the defending force is placed in serious danger of being overrun, depending on the course of action chosen by the VC.

(3) Furthermore, the reaction force must be introduced in an effective manner, i.e., in such a way as to trap the VC force against the defending unit, or to engage him decisively as he withdraws. Selection of LZ's, routes and attack positions must be a continuous process in conjunction with the time factors previously discussed. A successful system for planning this type of action has been developed by the 173d Abn Bde and is outlined as follows:

(a) Three concentric circles are constructed with radii of 3 km, 7 km and 12 km to correspond in scale with the map utilized. The common center of the circles is the position, town or camp in question. The 3 km circle represents the limit inside which airlanded forces would mask local fires. The 7 km circle represents the approximate limit of effective fires from infantry supporting weapons. The 12 km circle is the line beyond which airlanded artillery cannot support the local forces.

1 The circles are divided into octants by constructing a North-South line and an East-West line through the common center, and then bisecting each quadrant thus formed.

2 The octants are lettered consecutively in a clockwise direction, starting with the innermost circle.

3 The LZ's are then numbered consecutively within each lettered grid segment.

4 Easy reference is made to LZ's by stating the section of grid by letter, and the specific LZ by number, for example: P-2, Q-3, etc. (see diagram next page).

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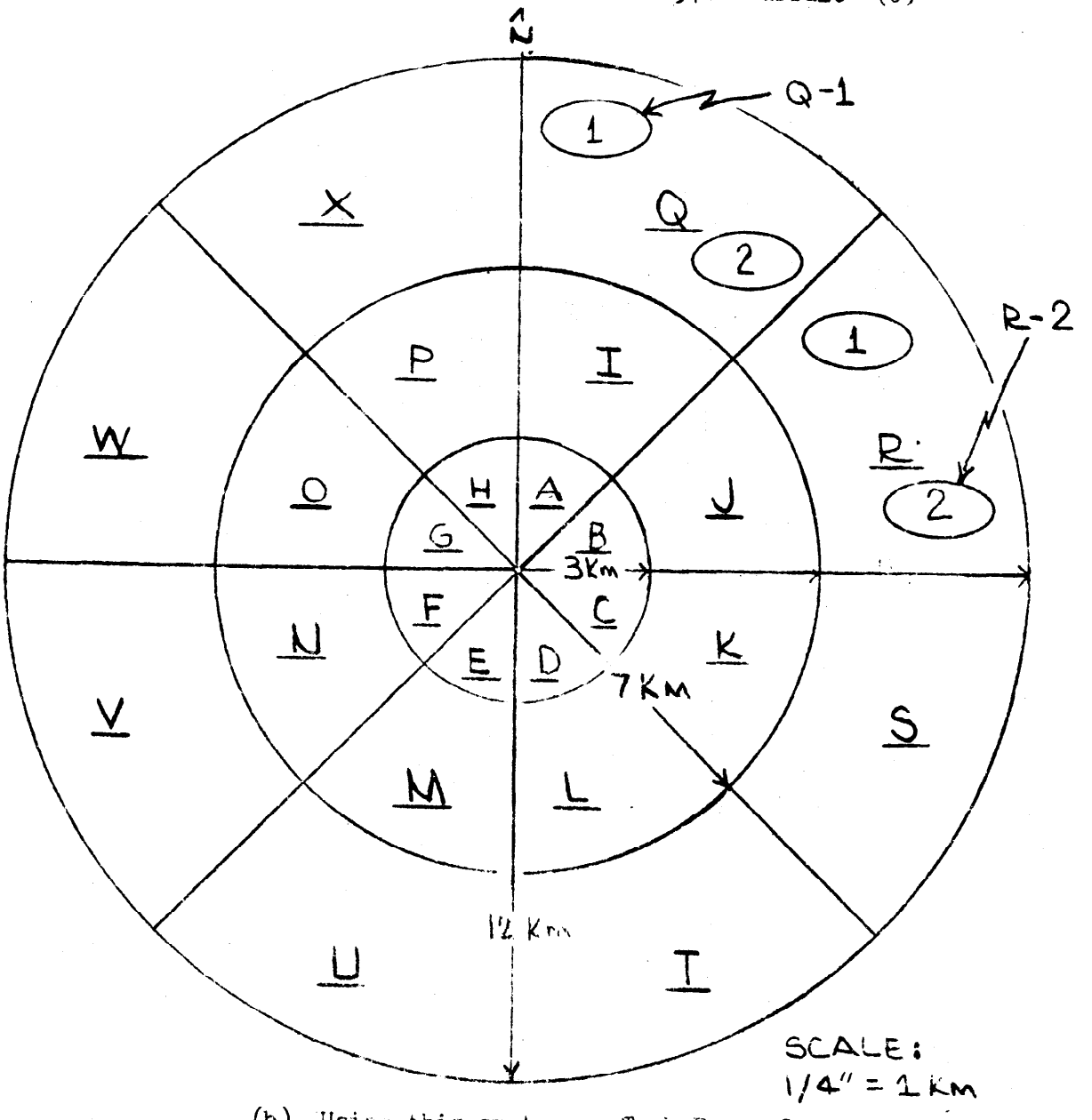

(b) Using this system, a Task Force Commander may be given a mission to land on a particular LZ within a section of the grid, and to block and destroy enemy forces withdrawing through his area. At the same time, the system allows sufficient flexibility to alter the plan by changing LZ's without changing the general mission.

(4) All means of increasing the mobility of reaction forces must be employed. Not only will such means reduce overall reaction time but will increase the ability of these forces to be introduced at the right place at the right time. In this connection, EAGLE FLIGHTS (Lesson Learned No 32) and SPARROW HAWK operations (squad size EAGLE FLIGHTS) should be considered as methods of increasing reaction capabilities.

d. Enemy withdrawal.

(1) The withdrawal phase is as much a part of VC planning as the approach march and the attack. Rally points for the platoon, company and battalion are established as are routes to and between these points. Instructions are provided in detail concerning the method of withdrawal, usually in the order: security elements, wounded, dead, captured materiel and rear guard elements.

(2) Viet Cong withdrawal is begun only on a prearranged signal. The route of advance may be used as the route of withdrawal, particularly when the operation is successful and there is little fear of enemy reinforcements, aircraft or artillery fire. In some instances, antipursuit defenses (mines, booby traps etc) are prepared during the approach march and armed during the withdrawal. VC support units, such as antiaircraft and artillery, not in close contact with the enemy, frequently use same routes for advance and withdrawal. A schematic of the withdrawal pattern, showing a withdrawal following an attack on a fortified position, is shown on following page.

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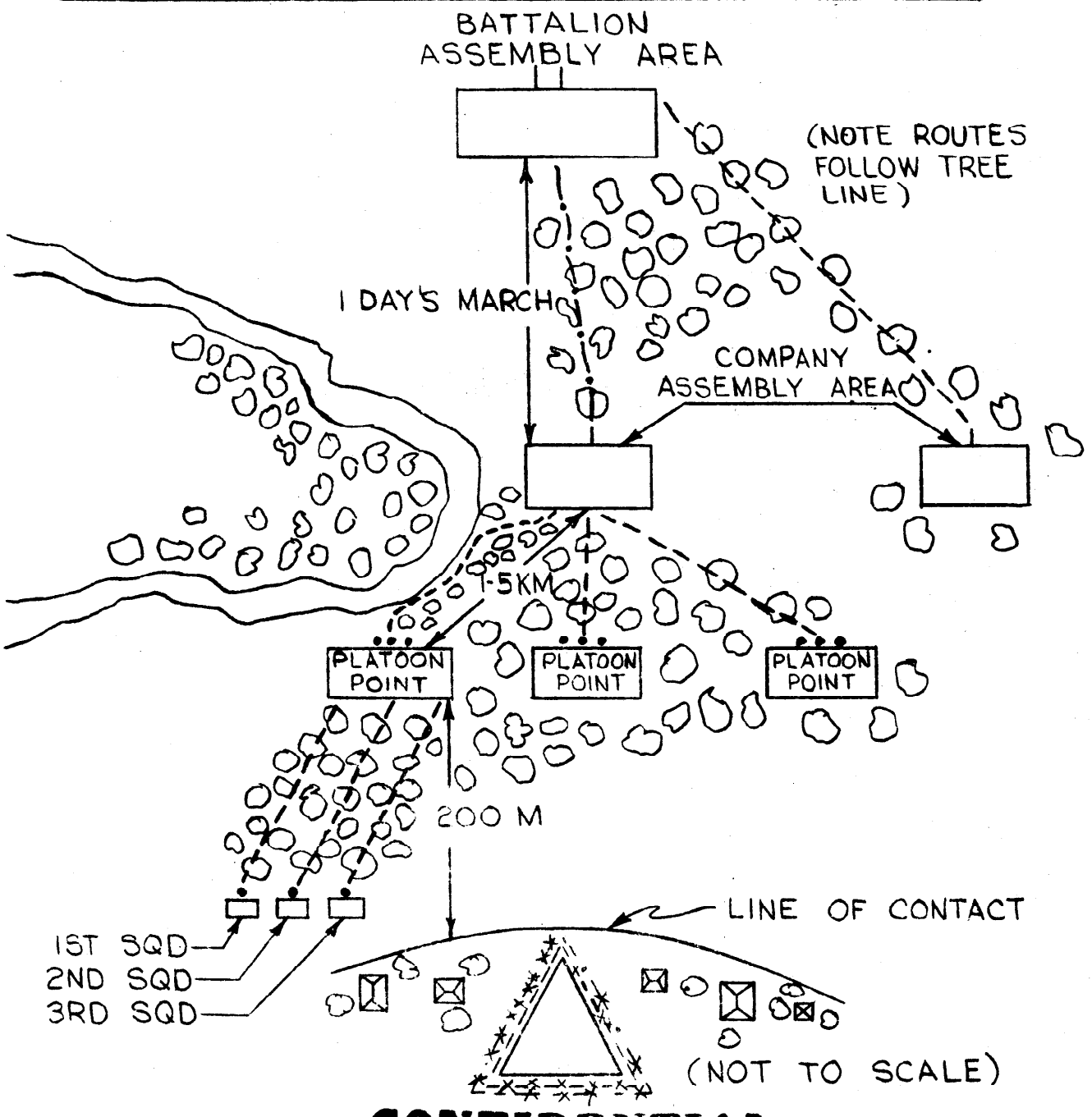
WITHDRAWAL FROM IMMEDIATE OPERATIONAL AREA



It should be noted that the VC have a negligible ability to support a withdrawal with indirect fire weapons. His chief defenses against pursuit are the use of rapid movement, ambushes, booby traps and snipers along his routes of withdrawal.

(3) Recognition of the VC doctrine of emergency dispersal is of vital importance to successful pursuit. The VC commander may exercise one of two options, both of which are based on prior planning. He may elect to withdraw his force as a unit(s) or order dispersal into small groups. If emergency dispersal should be required due to pursuit, blocking of the withdrawal route or intensive air effort, small unit leaders take over again, possibly ordering total dispersal on a man for man basis. If the unit commander is certain that the unit has been discovered from the air, he frequently sends a few men off in different directions to draw fire and mislead the aircraft. When dispersing as individuals and being pursued by ground forces, VC will seek concealment in the local area in preference to panic and purposeless flight. The individual's knowledge of fieldcraft, evasion techniques, and familiarity with the local area are decisive factors. If pursued to a settlement, he is taught to hide his weapon and other equipment and demand concealment from the villagers whose fear of possible reprisal from the VC may provide him temporary protection. His personal safety is the VC's only responsibility. If VC personnel have to hide out for weeks before returning to their unit, this is acceptable as they have no requirement to be back by reveille, and in their absence, they leave no vital installations unguarded or in danger of attack.

f. Pursuit.

(1) The pursuit phase essentially begins with the commitment of the reaction force and/or movement by adjacent units "to the sound of the guns." Contact, having been established by the defending force, must be aggressively maintained by that force throughout. As the enemy withdraws, the defending force, acting as the direct pressure force, goes over to the attack. Needless to say, policing of the battlefield is not a valid mission at this time. All available fires are brought to bear and all units close to destroy the enemy. Reaction forces block routes of withdrawal, orient on and engage the enemy in conjunction with the direct pressure force until he is destroyed or is so fragmented that worthwhile contact is irretrievably lost.

(2) During the pursuit following a defensive action, ambushes may be laid for pursuing forces resulting in the defensive phase

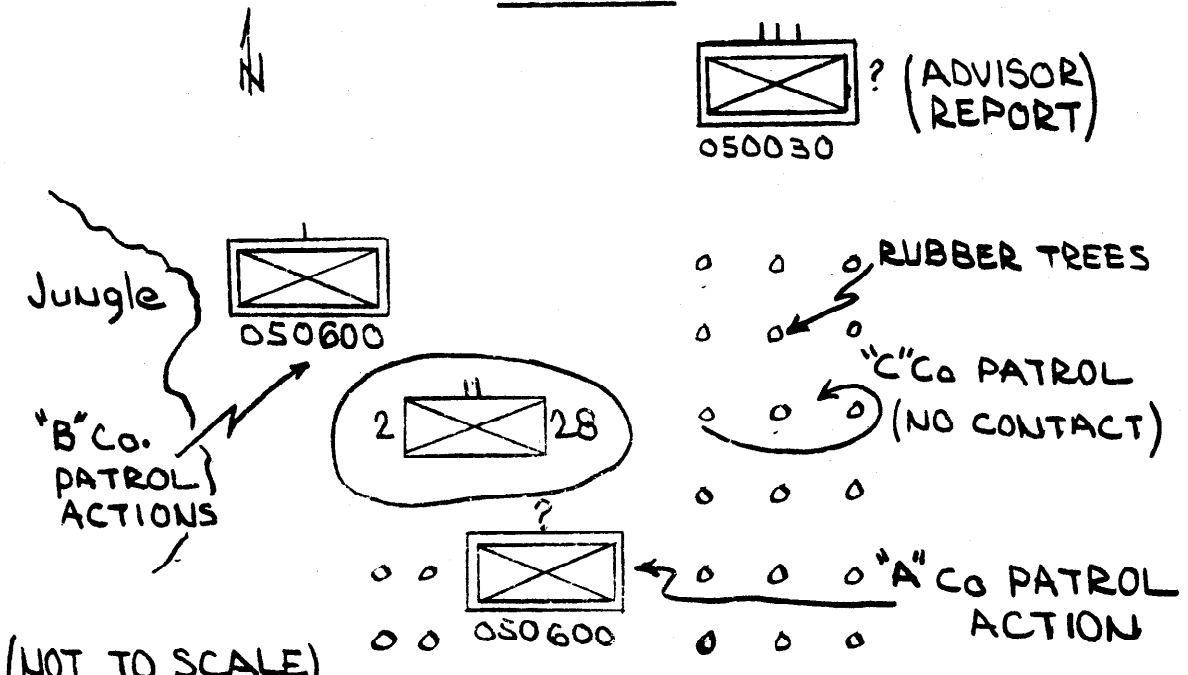
c. Execution.

(1) On 3 March the 2/28 Inf initiated Operation COCOA BEACH, moving to a battalion defensive position in their portion of the TAOR. Ambush patrols were sent out in the evening but no contact was established during the night.

(2) On 4 March, company operations in the area routed a VC ambush, destroyed a base camp and noted other indications of the presence of VC forces in the area. All companies returned to the perimeter that evening and again ambush patrols were sent out.

(3) At 050030 March an intelligence report was received from the BEN CAT Sub-sector advisor that an unidentified VC regiment was located about 4 km northeast of the 2/28. At 0600 hours a patrol from B Co engaged a VC company inflicting heavy casualties, and when moving back to the battalion perimeter was forced to fight through another VC company preparing to attack the battalion base. At about the same time, an A Co patrol detected VC "all around them" and also successfully fought their way back to the perimeter. (see Sketch No 1).

Sketch No 1



being repeated with unfavorable results. The principles of mutual support, security and reaction capability must not be abandoned in a headlong rush to pursue. In this connection artillery and/or air support must be integrated continuously into the developing scheme of maneuver both in the engagement of known forces and in blocking roles on suspected routes of withdrawal. In addition, it must be recognized that direct pursuit along routes of withdrawal encourages ambush and a growing attrition from sniping, mines and booby traps without decisive engagement of the enemy. A more effective method has been an intercept or flank attack, in conjunction with the direct pressure force which has maintained contact throughout. EAGLE FLIGHTS may again be employed to intercept small groups of fleeing VC.

4. (CMHA) A COMBAT EXAMPLE (Operation COCOA BEACH):

a. Situation.

(1) Friendly forces - On 3 March 1966, the 3d Bde, 1st Infantry Div (US) initiated a "Search and Destroy" operation in the BEN CAT District of BINH DUONG Province. Forces available consisted of three infantry battalions (2/28, 2/2 and 1/16 Infantry), 105mm, 8 inch and 175mm artillery and TAC air support. COCOA BEACH refers to the operation conducted by the 2/28 Infantry and other brigade elements as described herein.

(2) Enemy forces - Enemy forces encountered during the operation described were identified as elements of the 272d Regiment, supported by the Z41 Heavy Weapons Battalion. Intelligence estimates indicated that a large VC force would attack friendly units when committed to an operation rather than attacking a base camp area.

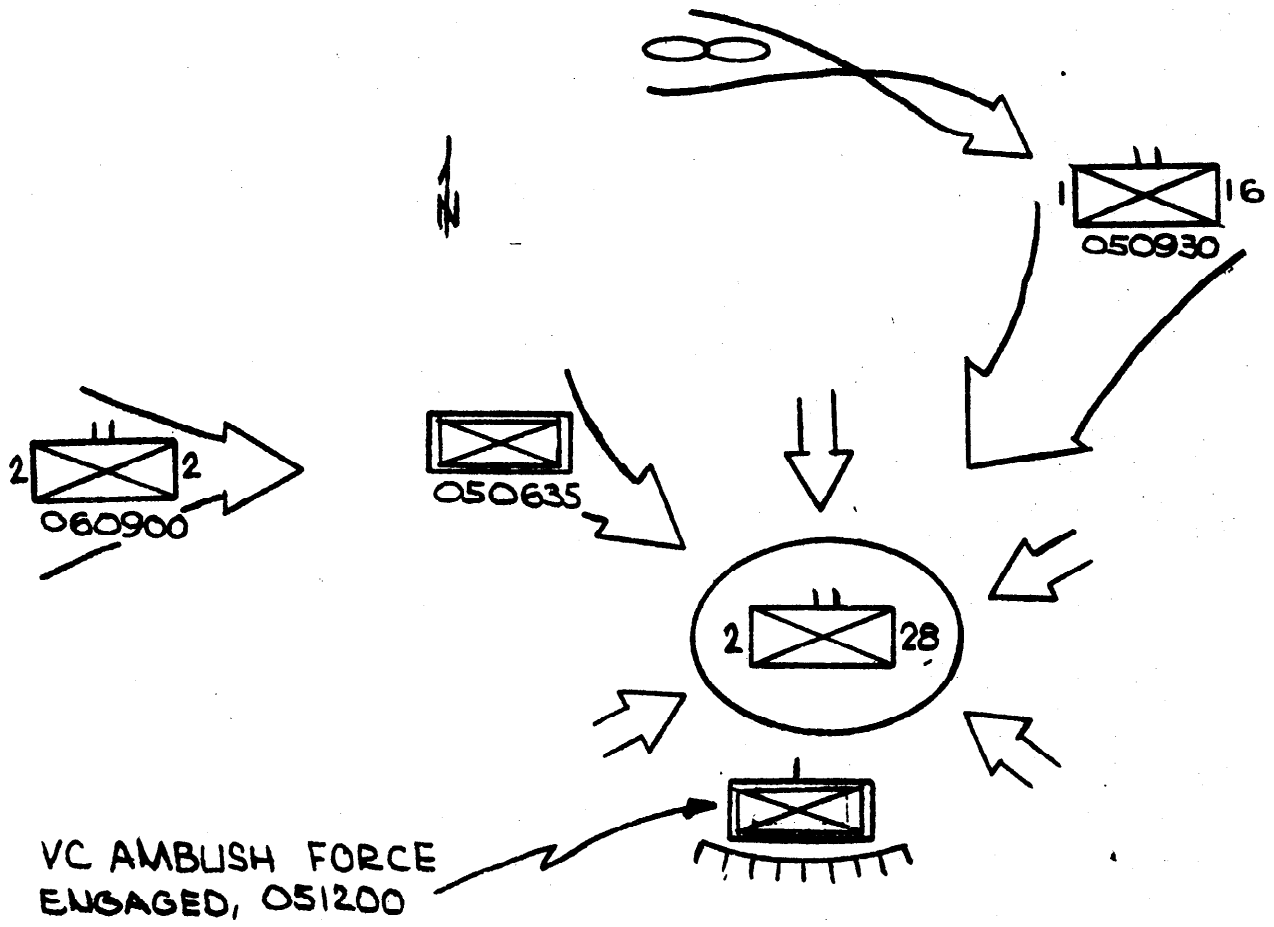
(3) Terrain - The terrain over which the action described was fought consisted of an abandoned rubber plantation area surrounded by jungle.

b. Concept of the Operation.

(1) The overall Brigade concept of operations for March was to conduct a series of battalion sized operations (of which COCOA BEACH was one) within the brigade TAOR. COCOA BEACH called for the 2/28 Infantry to conduct S&D operations in their portion of the brigade TAOR for a period of six days. After 4 days a second battalion was to initiate operations in another part of the TAOR, with the 2/28 Inf returning to the brigade base at the end of their sixth day out. The third battalion would then commence its part of the overall operation. All operations were planned to be within 105mm howitzer range of the brigade base at LAI KHE.

(4) At 0635 hours the VC launched their first attack on the battalion perimeter from the northwest. Attacks then developed around the entire perimeter but were successfully repulsed by organic fires, artillery and air strikes, resulting in heavy VC casualties. At 0745 hours the 1/16 Infantry was alerted for commitment and at 0930 this battalion executed a helicopter assault landing to the northeast of the 2/28 (see Sketch No 2) in order to cut off VC withdrawing to the north and east. Moving westwa . the 1/16 engaged numerous small groups of VC and inflicted heavy casualti . .

Sketch No 2



(NOT TO SCALE)

(5) By 1200 hours the heavy fighting around the 2/28 perimeter had subsided and a patrol was dispatched to the south in an attempt to regain contact. This patrol soon discovered a VC company (Sketch No 2) oriented to the south with an apparent mission of blocking or ambushing any foot relief forces moving in from that direction. After an exchange of small arms fire, artillery was called in on this company, inflicting heavy casualties. Other elements of the 2/28 pursued the withdrawing enemy, which had fragmented into small groups as they withdrew, to the edge of the thick jungle surrounding the battle area where significant contact was lost. Pursuit was continued by artillery and TAC air which successfully engaged small groups of VC as they continued their withdrawal from the area. At 1430 hours the 1/16 linked up with the 2/28 which ended the major engagement. During the remainder of the day the surrounding area was searched and a perimeter established for the night.

(6) At 0900 on the following day, based on intelligence reports of a probable VC escape route to the northwest, the 2/2 Infantry was committed by helicopter in an area approximately 15 km west of the two-battalion position. This battalion swept from west to east, closing into the original battle area that evening, but without making contact. On the same afternoon (6 March) the 2/28 returned to LAI KHE, thus reconstituting the brigade reaction force as the remaining two battalions continued operations in the area.

d. Results.

(1) Enemy: 460 KIA (estimated); 199 bodies were counted in the immediate battle area.

(2) Friendly: 10 KIA, 25 WIA (5 March).

5. (CMHA) ANALYSIS:

a. The following points are noteworthy in this action:

(1) A reaction force was immediately available (2 battalions, one of which was committed at the heighth of the action).

(2) The defense was superior, inflicting heavy casualties and effectively engaging the main VC force while the reaction/pursuit force was committed.

(3) The reaction force was committed on the probable route of withdrawal and successfully engaged fleeing groups of VC. This force drove

toward the 2/28 position to trap remaining VC in the area.

(4) The 2/28 moved out of their defensive positions, effectively engaging a VC company and continuing the pressure on other groups until significant contact was lost in the surrounding jungle.

(5) One battalion (2/2) was retained as a reaction force during the day, providing a unit to continue the action if significant contact was regained.

(6) TAC air and artillery were employed to pursue the fleeing enemy after significant ground contact was lost.

(7) A reaction force was reconstituted when the 2/28 returned to the brigade base, while two battalions continued operations in the TAOR.

b. In reviewing this action it can be noted that the analogy developed in para 3 held true. In the overall view although the VC initiated the major action, COCOA BEACH was essentially a US planned and executed operation wherein the VC played their assigned part. The defensive battle by the 2/28 provided the fixing action and direct pressure necessary to effectively introduce the reaction/enveloping force. Having suffered heavy casualties during their attacks, the VC upon withdrawing fragmented into small groups. A significant portion of these groups was engaged by the direct pressure and enveloping forces until ground pursuit was no longer remunerative. Long range pursuit was then carried on by tactical air support and artillery fire.

c. Of particular significance in this action was the source of the information received early on the morning of 5 March. In this case the local advisory detachment was able to provide notification of a major VC force in the immediate area. This information was timely and accurate, allowing a valid assessment of the situation by all commanders.

6. (C/HA) <u>LESSONS LEARNED</u>:

a. VC forces will attack what appear to be isolated units in an operational area.

b. This attack can be converted into a significant victory by proper planning and aggressive actions on the part of both the original defensive force and the reaction force. Planning must be continuous and provide adequate flexibility.

c. The objective is the destruction of the enemy force. To this end, contact once gained must not be lost while significant targets exist.

d. The characteristics and vulnerabilities of VC operations can and must be turned to our advantage and exploited to the utmost.

e. The principles of mutual support, security and reaction capability must never be abandoned. Only by adhering to these principles can we react effectively to VC initiated actions and convert them into significant victories.

f. Effective and continuous liaison must be established with ARVN forces and local area Vietnamese headquarters and their advisors. These sources can provide significant and timely information upon which to base operational plans and reaction operations.

g. A successful defense is merely the beginning of an action. Pursuit, of which reaction is a part, must be aggressively carried out at all levels. This pursuit must be oriented on the enemy and not on relief or reinforcement of the defending force.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

HOWARD D. SCHULZE
Major, AGC
Asst AG

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25 May 1966

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