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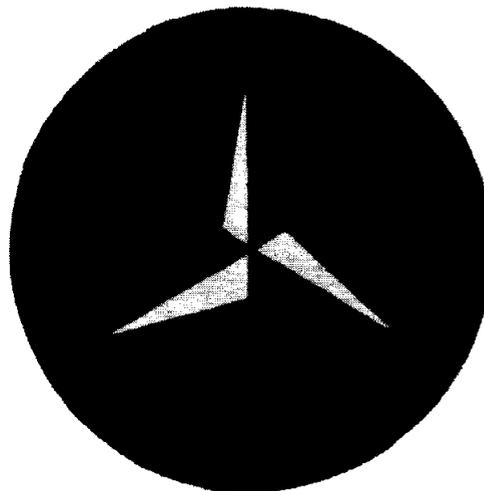
**Headquarters**  
**United States Military Assistance Command,**  
**Vietnam**

**APO San Francisco 96222**

**RF/PF OUTPOSTS**



**REGIONAL FORCE**



**POPULAR FORCE**

**LESSONS LEARNED NO. 81**

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HEADQUARTERS  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96222



MACJ3-052

9 July 1970

SUBJECT: Vietnam Lessons Learned No. 81: RF/PF Outposts

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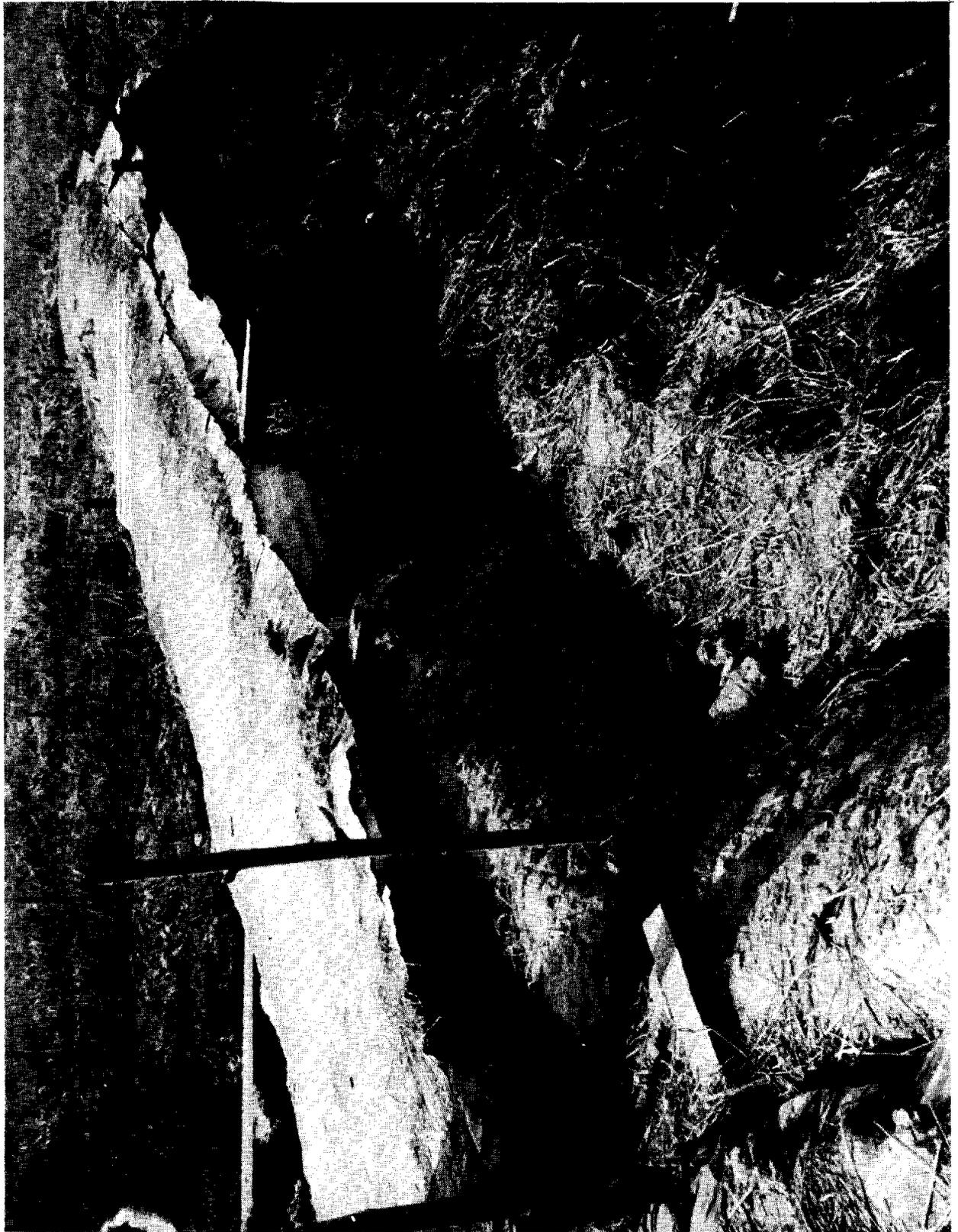
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Asst AG

## FOREWORD

1. The problem of small outposts being attacked by an enemy force is as old as war. In Vietnam the overrun of Regional Force/Popular Force (RF/PF) outposts is of considerable concern because of the frequency of these attacks, the number of friendly personnel killed and wounded, and the large number of weapons lost and damaged.

2. This Lessons Learned Summary sets forth documented case histories of Viet Cong/North Vietnam Army (VC/NVA) overrunning RF/PF outposts. The conclusions and lessons learned from these case histories can be useful in training Territorial Security Forces and US Advisors.



One leg of a Y-shaped bunker

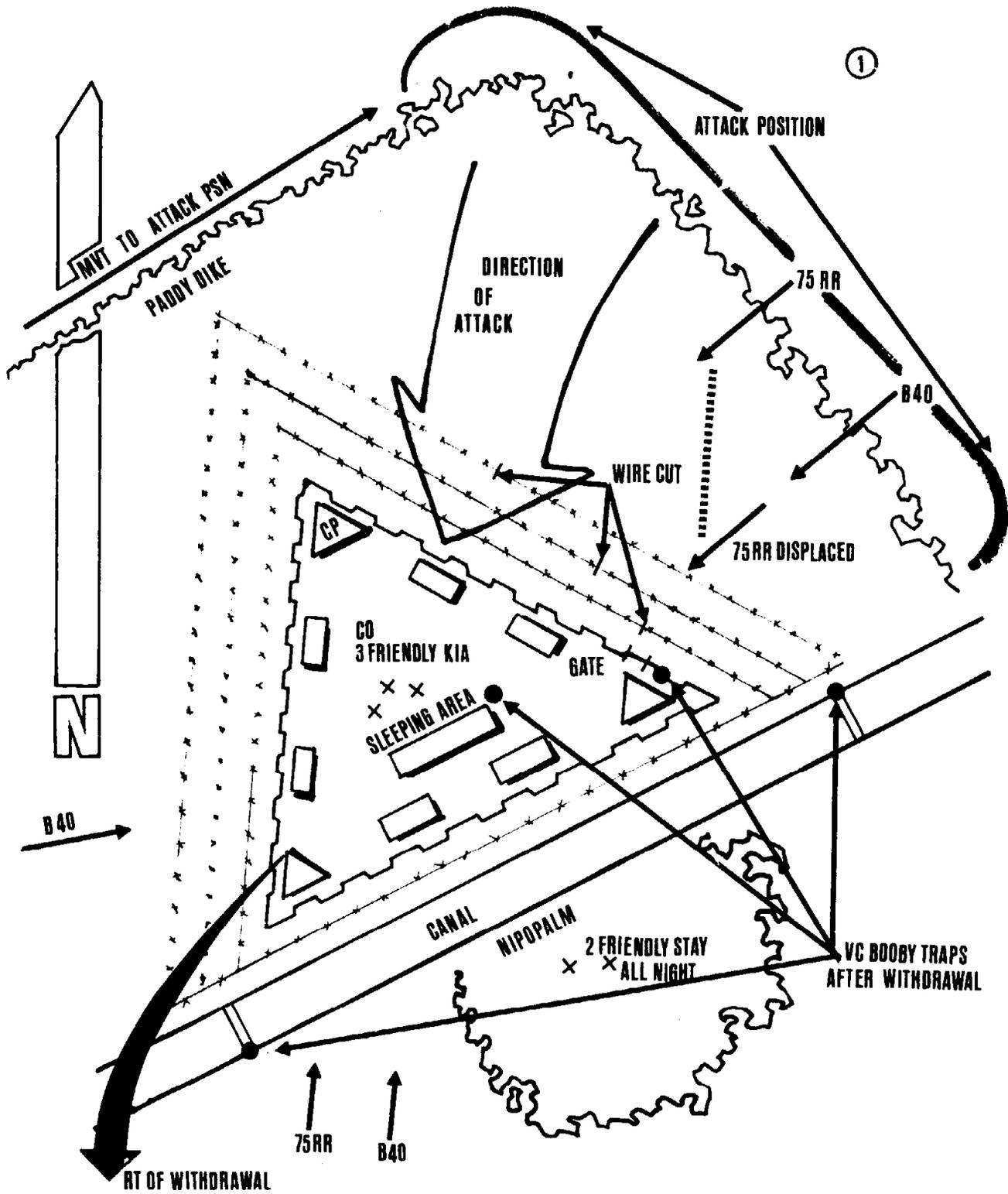


1. BACKGROUND.

- a. The primary forces tasked with responsibility for territorial security are the Regional Forces (RF) and the Popular Forces (PF). As a general rule Regional Forces are province oriented while Popular Forces are district oriented. Operating in the vicinity of their homes, the RF/PF have the advantage of knowing the area and the people. The primary role of the RF is to support the pacification program by providing territorial security through conduct of offensive operations against enemy local force units. The PF are primarily assigned as village or hamlet security forces, providing the local populace with 24-hour security against the VC local guerrilla elements. Over half of the total strength of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) are now in the RF and PF.
- b. The military outposts were established as one means of maintaining government control and providing security for economic, political and social development in rural areas. The concept of operations from an outpost is termed mobile defense, whereby two-thirds of the RF/PF unit's strength operate outside the hamlet or post conducting patrols during the day and ambushes at night. It is designed to prevent enemy infiltration, harassment and attack.
- c. Outposts are built in various shapes, some being triangular, some Y-shaped, while others will conform to the terrain. Bunkers are composed of a soil/cement combination, mortar, logs, corrugated metal, and other building materials depending on their availability. Berms are built up and communication trenches dug between fighting positions and bunkers. The fence around the outpost usually consists of two or three bands of fencing. Trip flares and claymore mines may be placed between the fences. Fields of fire are cleared so that effective fire can be brought on the enemy at the longest range possible.
- d. There is strong evidence to support the belief that guards are asleep or at least not alert, in many cases of outposts being overrun. There are reasons other than lack of night vigilance and the enemy is capable of detecting and exploiting these weaknesses in outpost defenses as indicated in the following case histories.

2. CASE HISTORY ONE.

- a. A platoon and the company headquarters of a Regional Forces

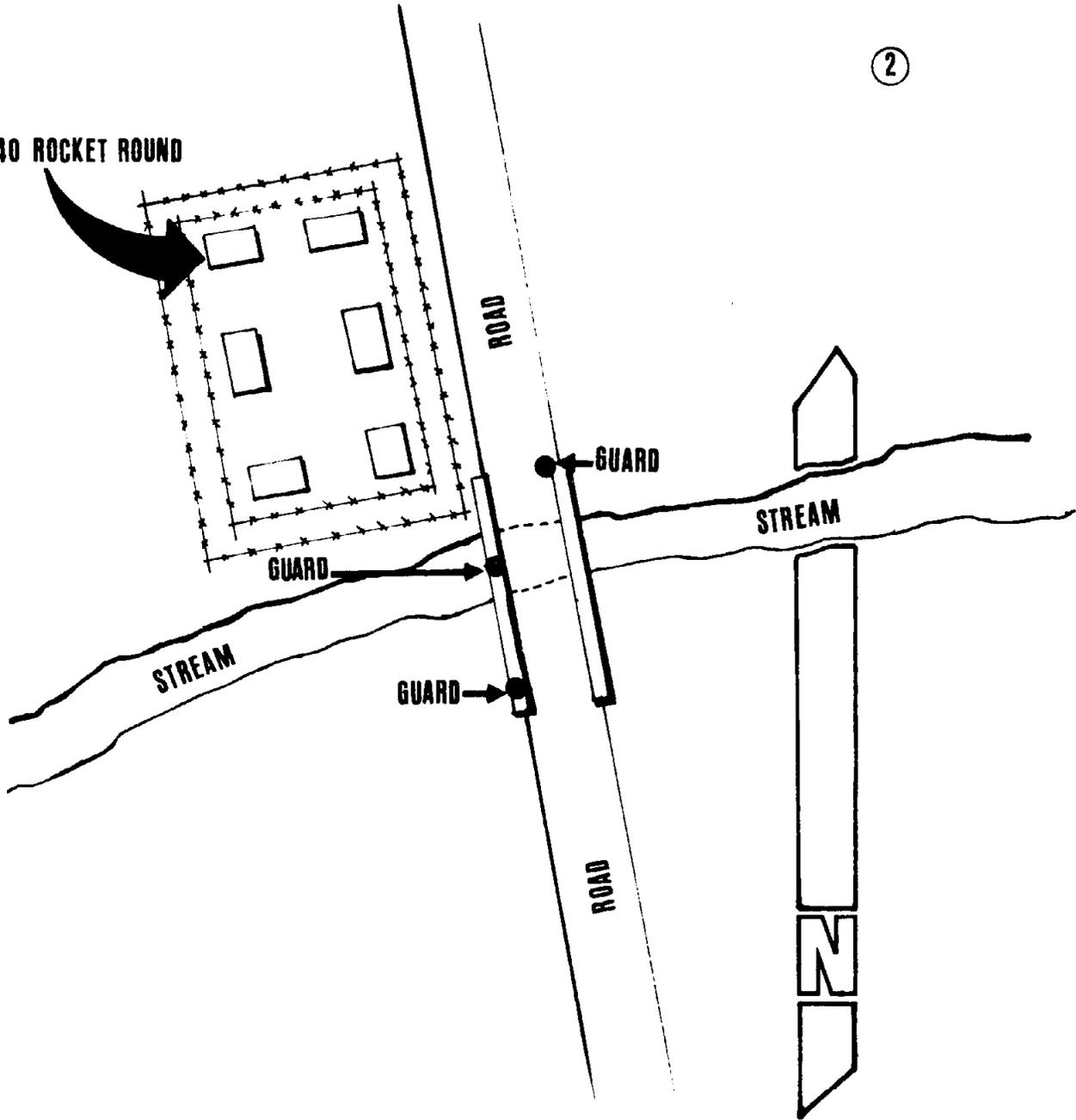


Company had occupied a new operational base (OB) for about six weeks. There were twenty-five men including the Company Commander in the compound. The company had been warned by Sector Intelligence of enemy intentions to initiate a variety of actions within the next week.

- b. A practice alert had been held and the ambush was in position in the early evening, but at approximately 2200 hours the ambush was pulled in. At midnight the OB reported to the sub-sector headquarters that it had contact with the enemy. This contact consisted of the VC shouting a name which was not understood by the personnel in the OB. In response the OB went on alert and fired seven rounds of 60mm mortar. The area around the position became quiet and the men were released to return to their sleeping quarters. Three men remained on watch, one in each of the corner bunkers of the triangle. At the time of the main attack twenty minutes later it is believed that all the men were asleep, including at least two of the guards. The shouting of the name may have been an alert to enemy personnel who had previously infiltrated the OB that the VC unit was in position and ready to attack.
- c. The enemy assault force approached the OB from the northwest, (Figure 1), moved along a paddy dike to the north and positioned themselves on the northeast side behind a continuation of the paddy dike. This position, although about 100 meters from the OB, was used as an assembly area where they stacked the equipment and clothing they would not use in the attack. They remained in this area for as long as two hours prior to the attack. This was evidenced by the remains of a meal consumed by the enemy forces and indications that they had covered themselves with cut branches and rice shaft for camouflage. Meanwhile, the heavy weapons platoons approached the OB from the southwest on both sides of the canal. Commencing at about twenty minutes after midnight the enemy attacked with a force consisting of two companies totaling 100 men, reinforced by two platoons of a heavy weapons company with about 40 men, and an estimated 50 village/hamlet guerrillas. The attack began with approximately 40 sappers with Chinese hand grenades attacking the northeast side of the OB, two 75mm recoilless rifles firing at the two southern corner bunkers, and B-40's directed against the central positions. The estimated number of explosions was one hundred. One guard was captured, taken out to the paddy dike and killed with his hands tied behind his back.
- d. The reaction of the RF personnel within the OB was one of complete chaos. The Company Commander was one of the first to be

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B-40 ROCKET ROUND



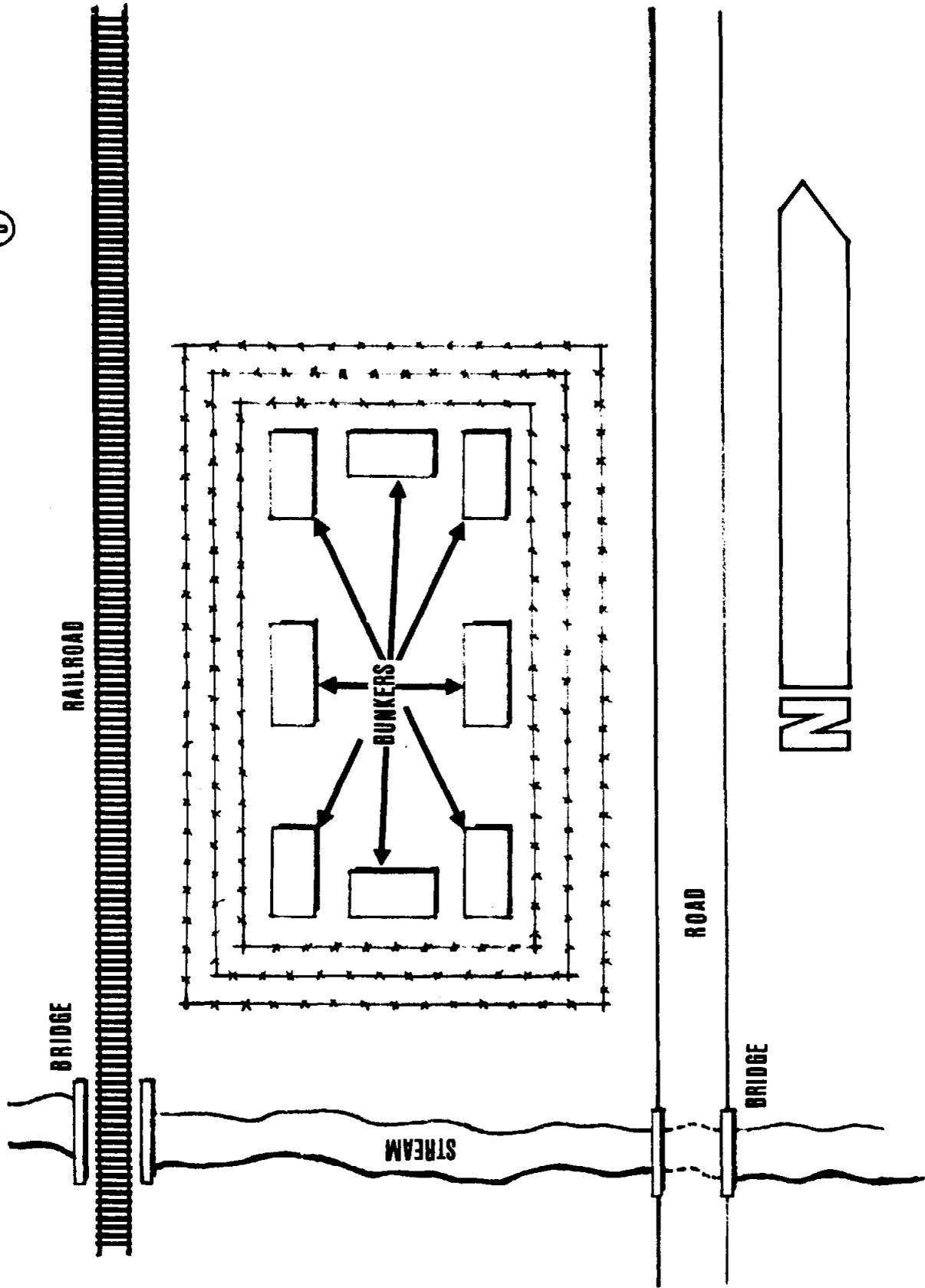
killed--either by small arms fire or a grenade which shattered his right arm. Awakening and seeing the enemy already past the third row of barbed wire, combined with the volume of fire being received, the men realized they could not defend the position. They put out a minimum amount of fire and ran from the OB into the canal or the water-filled trench, and then escaped. The chaos was not limited to the friendly forces. The enemy was confused by the lack of personnel in the OB and apparently fired upon their own personnel, causing casualties.

- e. Upon seizing the OB, the VC sapper force signalled the support weapons to cease fire. The estimated 100 VC remaining in position at the paddy dike were not needed or used in the assault. The enemy attempted to destroy the remaining positions by digging at the base of the bunkers to make them collapse. They then collected the RF weapons and equipment and placed them in a sampan for rapid movement away from the OB. After setting booby traps in the area they withdrew to southeast about 0330 hours.
- f. Results. Four RF KIA, one civilian KIA, three RF MIA, and six RF WIA. Lost equipment included 14 M16's, 1 60mm mortar, 1 M-60 MG, 2 M-79's, 2 cal. 38 pistols, and 1 AN/PRC 25. Two AN/PRC 25's and 70 percent of the OB were destroyed. Enemy losses are unknown.

### 3. CASE HISTORY TWO.

- a. A PF platoon had the mission of securing a highway bridge over a stream. At 1900 hours the platoon placed an ambush site approximately 250 meters west of the bunkered outpost, as was their practice. Three guard positions were manned on the northeast, southwest, and center west of the bridge. Normal alert conditions were supposedly in effect. Intelligence had indicated that bridges would be targeted and the enemy was on the move throughout the province. As was the practice with this platoon, the ambush patrol was withdrawn by 0100 hours and the platoon retired to the outposts for the night. At approximately 0230 hours an unknown size enemy element, estimated to be about 15 men, initiated the attack by firing one rocket round, probably B-40, and hitting a bunker on the northwest side of the outpost. (Figure 2) It is believed that the VC were already within the defenses of the PF unit when the rocket hit. The PF were either asleep or else they were not in an alert posture. Within seconds after the initial rocket strike the VC within the outpost began hurling grenades and satchel charges into

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each defensive bunker except the three guard posts, which were probably unmanned. Some small arms and automatic weapons were fired but there was not much evidence found of any friendly firing from the bunkers. The one and possibly two other enemy killed resulted from one PF soldier managing to throw one grenade. After they had completed their task, the VC reassembled under the bridge and withdrew down stream.

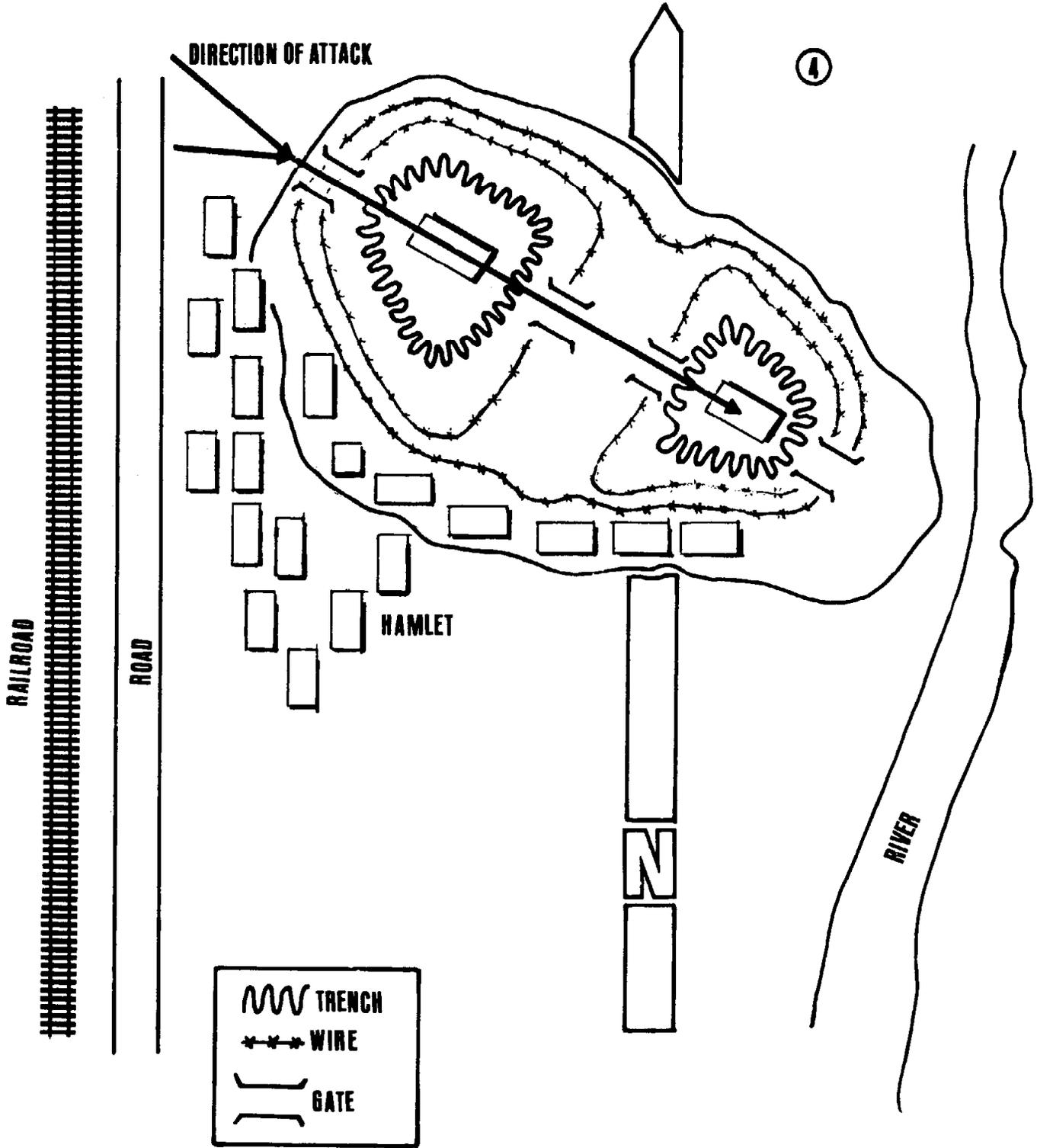
- b. Results. Friendly casualties were 100 percent, with 11 PF killed and 8 PF wounded in action. In addition, nine M16 rifles were lost, seven M16 rifles were damaged and 1 PRC 10 radio was damaged. The enemy lost one killed and two heavy blood trails indicating two possibly killed. One pistol belt with two empty pouches was also found.

4. CASE HISTORY THREE.

- a. A small outpost, (Figure 3), manned by one platoon of an RF company was located between a railroad and a road. The platoon had the mission of protecting the railroad bridge and the road bridge over a stream. The only enemy activity in the province for several months were incidents of mining and there was no intelligence to indicate an attack was forthcoming. Although the defensive position was poor, no better position existed in the immediate area of the bridge. The barrier materials for the position were quite inadequate, consisting of two barriers of barbed wire each having only three strands.
- b. At 2330 an NVA platoon size force initiated the attack by firing B-40 rockets into the position. Enemy sappers overran the outpost, throwing satchel charges into bunkers. The Platoon Leader, Platoon Sergeant, and six enlisted men were killed in their sleeping shelters. Having overrun the position and killed or disabled all the defenders, the enemy proceeded to destroy the road bridge and severely damage the railroad bridge. The enemy then withdrew.
- c. Results. Friendly losses, in addition to the two bridges, were 8 KIA, 2 WIA, with 5 M16's, 1 M-79, and 1 caliber .45 pistol, and 1 AN/PRC 25 radio destroyed. The enemy withdrew with unknown losses.

5. CASE HISTORY FOUR.

- a. An RF platoon, consisting of 33 personnel were in a hilltop position on hamlet security. The position consisted of two

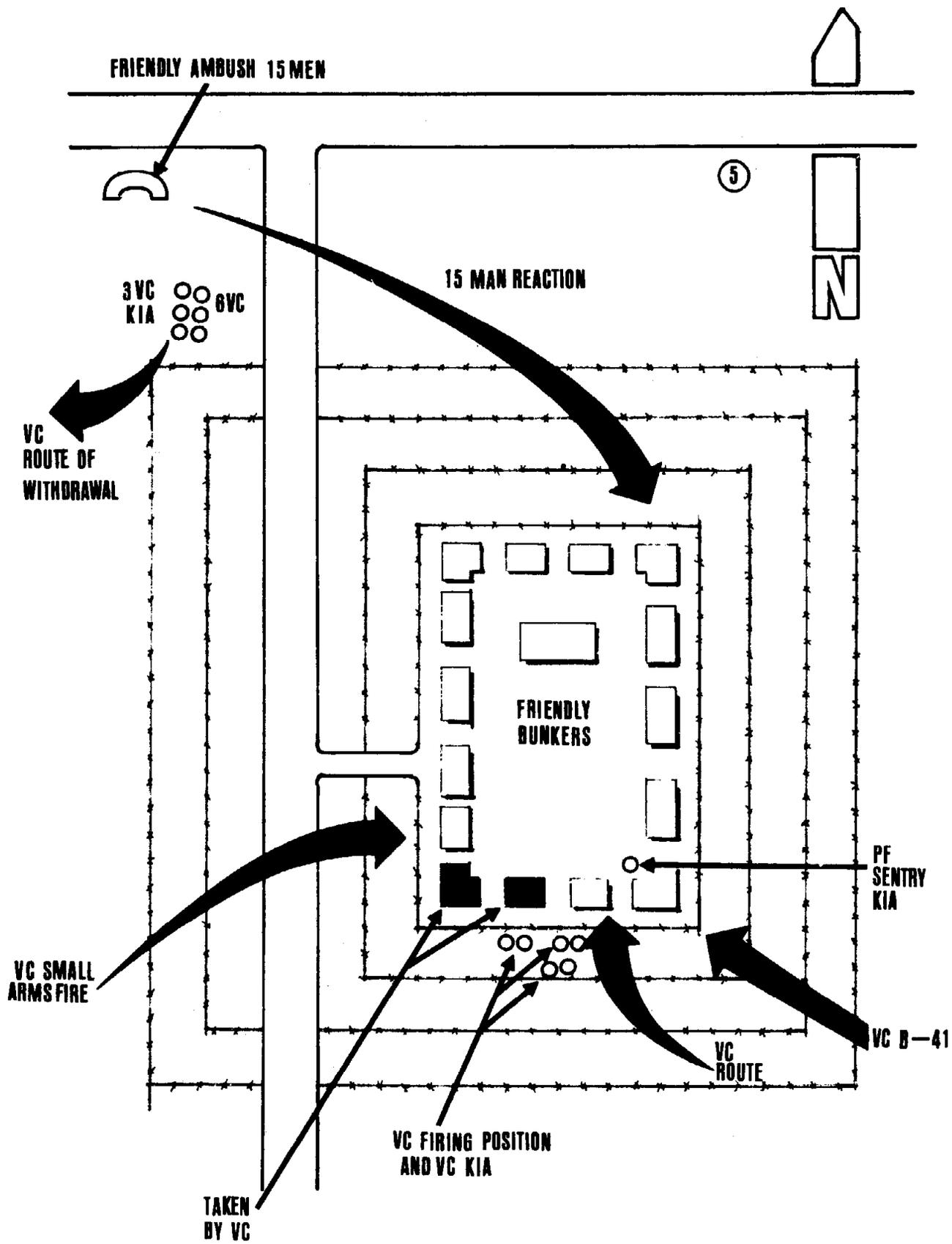


knolls on a hill with the hamlet around the bottom of the hill. (Figure 4) The platoon was separated from its parent company by a three hour walk, and thus too far to be effectively reinforced. The position also did not lend itself to artillery support. The obstacles around the position were good but they were unguarded by listening posts and other early warning devices. The positions were prepared for frontal assault with small arms but there was no overhead cover to protect them from indirect fire.

- b. At approximately 0220 hours an enemy force estimated to be a VC company attacked the position. The initial assault was a stand-off attack from the high ground to the southwest. From this ground, which dominated the platoon position, the VC placed B-40 and possibly 60mm mortar fire on the unit, killing the platoon leader and platoon sergeant along with eleven other men. Communications were lost with the district headquarters at this time, also. The VC then assaulted the position by a ground attack moving through the hamlet, using the gates in the wire barrier around the outpost to gain the top of the hill. The position was overrun by the enemy using grenades and satchel charges. The entire action lasted approximately thirty minutes. Very little small arms ammunition was expended by the friendly or the enemy forces.
- c. Results. Friendly losses were 13 KIA, 5 WIA, 4 MIA, 17 M16 rifles, 2 caliber .45 pistols, 2 M-79's and 2 AN/PRC 25 radios. Enemy losses were 30 grenades.

## 6. CASE HISTORY FIVE.

- a. A PF platoon, an RD team, and 15 members of a hamlet PSDF were in a base camp on hamlet security. (Figure 5) The base was defended by 5 PF, 15 PSDF, and 20 RD Cadre. The RD Cadre was tasked with manning the southern portion of the perimeter defenses. A 15 man ambush was in position about 1,000 meters to the north of the base. Captured documents had indicated a general enemy offensive was imminent and this information had been disseminated to all units. At 0120 hours a PF sentry on the southeast corner of the compound detected the enemy and opened fire at them. Although this action resulted in his being killed immediately by enemy small arms fire and a grenade, his action alerted the remainder of the base. The base camp was attacked from the south by an enemy sapper unit of approximately 20 men using B-41 rockets, AK-47 rifles, and grenades.



- b. The enemy forces penetrated the perimeter wire and occupied the southern bunker and trench line of the base. The PF platoon leader, although wounded during the initial attack reported the attack to the district headquarters and requested illumination. The District Chief directed the platoon leader to order the 15 man ambush to move to reinforce the base by entering on the north side. He also requested Night Hawk support and so informed the platoon leader. He ordered the platoon leader to use fire and grenades from bunkers and trenches which they still held to contain the enemy in the penetrated area until reinforced. Then they were to counter-attack by using existing communications trenches leading to the penetrated area to recapture the bunkers and trenches successively. The PF Platoon Leader initiated this plan immediately. The 15 man ambush began moving south to reinforce their platoon base. Enroute they encountered 6 VC and took them under fire, killing three and capturing an AK-47 rifle. After this contact they continued as planned and reinforced the base by entering through the wire from the north. At 0145 hours a Night Hawk arrived on station providing searchlight illumination and close supporting .50 caliber machinegun fire into the wire barrier and along enemy approaches to the south of the base area. At approximately 0200 hours the PF platoon and RD Cadre began to counterattack to the south along the east and west sides of the compound, supported by small arms fire from the remainder of the PF, RD, and PSDF force. These units proceeded to occupy the bunkers successively by grenade attacks until the perimeter was restored and all enemy troops inside the base were killed. Then, using small arms fire and grenades, the defenders eliminated a B-41 rocket supporting position and one other supporting position on the south side of the perimeter, killing four more enemy in the process. At 0230 hours the District Chief ordered a block and sweep operation to the south, southeast and southwest. This operation began at 0300 hours and resulted in the capture of a wounded VC on the south side of the base perimeter. Sporadic enemy small arms fire continued from the south and southwest and the Night Hawk remained on station providing supporting fires in these areas. All enemy action ceased at 0400 hours.
- c. Results. One PF and one PSDF KIA, one PF, one PSDF, and one RD cadre WIA. Enemy losses were 18 KIA, one captured (wounded), 7 AK-47 rifles, 1 B-41 rocket launcher, 2 B-41 rounds with booster charges, and 11 assorted grenades captured.

7. CONCLUSIONS.

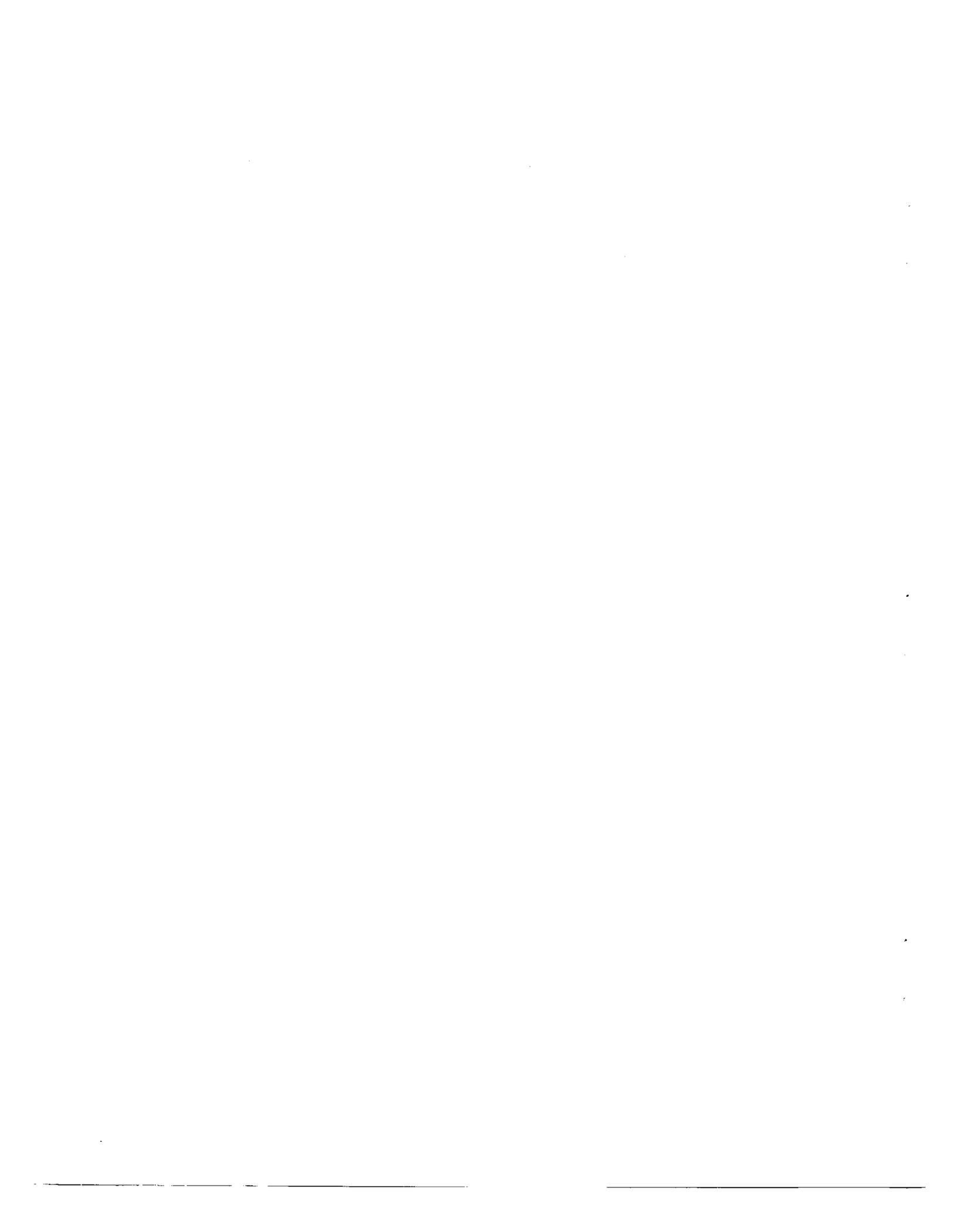
- a. A good VC only has to work about eight hours a week. A good RF/PF soldier must be combat ready 24 hours every day.
- b. The enemy is capable of detecting weaknesses in defensive positions and his exploitation of these through swift attack has inflicted heavy losses to personnel and equipment.
- c. Outposts in areas of little enemy activity become lax in their security and are ripe for attack.
- d. Intelligence, if properly evaluated and acted upon, can provide a first line of defense for an outpost.
- e. The following discrepancies are apparent in these case histories:
  - (1) A lack of night vigilance
  - (2) Inadequate barrier systems
  - (3) Ambushes, patrols and listening posts were either not established, not maintained long enough or easily recognizable fixed patterns were used in establishing them.

8. LESSONS LEARNED.

- a. Aggressive employment of daylight patrols, night ambushes, listening posts and proper vigilance by guards will hinder enemy movement and prevent him from getting inside the perimeter of an outpost without detection. Any deficiency in these defenses is an invitation for the enemy to attack and the enemy will surely exploit it.
- b. Regardless of the density of protective barriers they are not really barriers to a highly skilled and determined enemy unless they are covered by fire and with early warning devices, trip flares, anti-personnel mines or other explosive devices in place.
- c. The intelligence provided by the local populace can be a big factor in successful operations. Maximum effort should be made to gain the respect, cooperation and support of the local populace to the end that they willingly provide intelligence. The people must identify with and actively partic-

ipate in the government of South Vietnam. Failure to develop a mutually supporting empathy between the soldier and the local populace can deprive the government forces of valuable support and intelligence of this nature.

- d. When intelligence indicates that the probability of attack has increased then defenses must be increased accordingly and practice alerts must be held to ensure that all are aware of the increased readiness conditions. The higher state of alertness must be maintained until intelligence has indicated that the threat has decreased.
- e. Fire support and air support must be pre-planned, coordinated, and responsive to requirements. Quick reaction to situations as they develop, bringing maximum fire power on the enemy force will disrupt the attack and disorganize the enemy forces.
- f. The single most important reason for poor performance of RF/PF units is the lack of good forceful leadership to provide the proper motivation to the RF/PF soldier. This factor covers a multitude of sins, from not maintaining bunkers in good repair to not ensuring that each individual soldier is thoroughly trained and putting his training into practice. Where good leaders are present and when these leaders provide the proper motivation, RF/PF outposts are not caught unaware. This is just as true for any armed force, but the RF/PF have the problem today.
- g. The validity of the ingredients necessary to defeat enemy attacks on outposts has been proven many times. They are reiterated here because apparently the lesson has not been learned. These ingredients are: active daytime patrols; alert, all-night ambushes; listening posts along likely avenues of approach; well organized and maintained defenses; effective command and control; well-developed and secure communications; alert guards; and adequate and responsive fire support.



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2-69	29 Jul 69	Tactical Cover and Deception (C & D) in Counterinsurgency Operations.
3-69	7 Sep 69	Task Force Remagen; Experiences with Enemy B-40 and B-41 Rockets; Naval Forces Operations; Bridge Security Against Underwater Sapper Attack.
4-69	3 Nov 69	Bunker Busting/Land Clearing; Sapper Actions of North Vietnam Communists; FAC Operations; KBAR/VAMPIRE Concept; Anti-Rocket Program.
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