

MARINE MEDIUM HELICOPTER SQUADRON 163
USS PRINCETON (LPH-5)
c/o Fleet Post Office, San Francisco, California

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15 Feb 1963

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From: Commanding Officer
To: Commanding Officer, Marine Aircraft Group 16, 1st Marine
Aircraft Wing, AirFMFPac, c/o FPO, San Francisco, California

Subj: Summary of HMM-163 Operations during period 16Sep62 to 11Jan63

Encl: ✓(1) Captured document on Helicopter capabilities and limitations
✓(2) Helicopter Rescue Plan NIF

1. This letter is a follow up to my first letter on operations in Soc Trang and is intended to apprise Marine Helicopter squadrons, and in particular helicopter squadrons scheduled for deployment overseas, of our operations in South Vietnam. It appears to be a long struggle in SVN and I expect we will be represented on the scene for quite some time. Consequently, I have attempted to portray some of the highlights of our operations during the last four months in Danang. Some ex-Senior and Junior School students may remember Danang by its other name, Touraine.

2. By certain standards I expect we are now supposed to be experts. However, this is far from the fact. We still have a lot to learn and must be constantly alert and continually modify our tactics to keep the VC of balance. We must also be prepared to cope with any increased anti-helicopter capability they may develop or attempt to introduce.

3. Our departure from Soc Trang was delayed by two weeks at the request of the III Corps Commander. This was due to a three phase offensive operation that was being conducted at the time.

4. We departed Soc Trang on 16 September with twelve aircraft loaded with engineering personnel and equipment. Our plan required us to be immediately operational upon landing at Danang. We had sent a forward echelon up the day before.

5. The flight up took a little over seven hours, with three scheduled refueling stops. We arrived in Danang during a lull in a tropical storm that had been centered off Danang for two days. There was still a steady downpour as we were greeted by our thoroughly drenched forward echelon. We learned the storms had been rather severe during the day and that portions of buildings had been torn off due to high winds.

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ENCLOSURE (2)

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6. The Army Helicopter Company that we were relieving was unable to depart Danang as scheduled that day, so we were a little crowded in camp the first night.

7. The next day we were flying commitments, while the second twelve aircraft were inbound. Everybody was aboard by the evening of 17 September and we had our first 18 plane combat support troop lift on 18 September. We were welcomed by the VC with one aircraft hit on the first mission.

8. I will spare you the details of our unpacking and resettlement problems which were numerous and frustrating. Let me say here that Colonel WHITE's boys and his GV's did a magnificent job in effecting the two-way switch. Years ago we wondered what we did before the helicopter, now I wonder the same of the GV aircraft. Everything we owned was moved by GV from Soc Trang, including MABS-16, Sub-Unit #2 and gear.

9. We were to conduct numerous resupply, medical evacuation and troop displacement lifts during the next four months, with a big decline in our combat support assault type missions. This was quite logical since the I Corps area included many isolated outpost positions that could only be resupplied by air drop or helicopter. ARVN troop units available for helicopter employment were at a premium and most Province and Sector Units (Self Defense Corps and Civil Guard Units) seemed to be tied up in local actions and outposts. This combined with the unfavorable and unpredictable weather and the canalized nature of the terrain contributed to the reduced number of assault type missions.

10. I expect the tempo of helo operations in the I Corps area to increase sharply starting in March, with the coming of more favorable weather. Other factors include assignment of a new Corps Commander, reduction of certain outposts commitments, experience gained in helo employment and the fact that an additional ARVN Regiment has completed its training cycle and has been designated "Operational".

11. The basic tactic of flying enroute at 1500 feet above the terrain whenever possible, still proved valid. There have been no significant changes in the enemys capabilities, except reports that they have introduced three 12.7 MM (50 calibre) Russian heavy machine guns into the area, with an effective horizontal range of 6500 feet. We maintained the best plot we could from intelligence reports and avoided the areas. Up to now nobody has confirmed these positions by exposure. We were nicked several times when we had to fly low due to ridge lines or weather, and it was not uncommon to run into a fire fight at an outpost during resupply missions. Incidentally, outpost sites usually accommodated one to two helicopters and the surrounding real-estate is secure up to the range of their 4.2 mortars.

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12. Tactics used to approach and retire from landing zones were primarily dictated by the terrain. However, almost always we could approach the target behind masking terrain and drop into a zone with a reasonable amount of surprise. If we had a second run into the same zone, we could usually alter our approach route. We continually avoided any set or established patterns and would frequently approach from the back side and always from the least obvious avenue of approach. We have approached two nearby landing zones simultaneously from opposite directions. This complicates escort patterns, but can be worked out. At other times we would approach in a column of divisions (always three plane divisions) and break off alternate divisions into opposite landing zones. This technique also provided us with the desired separation between divisions landing in the same landing zone. We continue to advocate this separation, especially since landing zones are much easier to stake, or cover with fire from bunkered positions, than they were in the open Delta area.

13. We frequently used pre-artillery and pre-air strikes whenever the situation was suitable for their employment. The artillery would usually consist of a battery of 105 MM and a platoon of 155 MM guns. We didn't have any opportunity to observe it while we were inbound, so can't comment on its effectiveness. However, after one of their barrages, we almost had to abort the landing due to a large herd of water buffalo in the middle of the landing zone. No they weren't tied as an anti-helicopter obstacle! I am not convinced of the effectiveness of saturation patterns by artillery or air strikes in jungle or heavily wooded areas, however, future captured enemy documents or prisoners may clarify this point. We have planned very early landing hours when we wanted maximum surprise and did not use any kind of pre-strike. This was also done to avoid establishing a set pattern prior to helicopter landings.

14. For air strikes we used the T-28's, (usually two) and/or two AD-6's, and occasionally a single B-26 when we could get one. The AD's and B-26's carried a good load and could remain on station for subsequent runs by the helicopters. A typical AD load was eight (8) 500# GP and four (4) 100# GP with the four 50's up front. The T-28's had rockets and machine guns for close escort work and frags for pre-strike work. Needless to say we used the T-28 for escort and the AD for pre-strike work when we had both. I might mention on one occasion we were getting fire from the jungle during a run into the target and requested a firing run by the escort aircraft (T-28's). The run was requested at the 9 O'clock position close in abeam of the helicopters. In less than 30 seconds the first escort aircraft ran a string of 50's down the left side, followed by the number two aircraft laying down rockets. Neither the lead division, which was on the ground, nor the succeeding division took a hit. We were using "Farmgate" T-28's which are flown by Air Force pilots with Vietnamese in the back seat. You can't get this kind of response from Vietnamese piloted T-28's because of the language barrier.

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It takes more time to explain what you want! The reason we got the suppression fire so fast from the T-28's was due to the fact that we have them stay in an ecliptical or race track pattern on both sides of the inbound and landing helicopters. Occasionally we positioned both escort aircraft on the same side when the threat to the landing is obviously from one side. While in these patterns, the escort aircraft continually made low dry passes or firing runs (if requested) along side the helicopter flight path.

15. We did not get a chance to work with the HU-1B armed helicopters the Army has been using down South. They carry 16 rockets and two .30 calibre machine guns. We should see some in the I Corps area later this year, as 16 are programmed into Vietnam. I still advocate our faster fixed wing close support concept and think fixed wing aircraft are more dreaded by the VC.

16. The aircraft held up beautifully, 2800 rpm and 56" manifold pressure were the rule rather than the exception. The landing gear held up exceptionally well in rough terrain under heavy loads. The electronics and avionics components did well as long as we had a hot box to keep the components dried out. No more serious tail rotor problems occurred, as discussed in my last letter. Of course maintenance is never an accident and I'll never overlook an opportunity to give full credit to the marvelous group of professionals we have in the engineering section.

17. We now have ASC 229 installed, which is 150# of aluminum armor plate hung directly to the rear and beneath the clam shell engine compartment doors. This ASC is designed to provide protection to the oil cooling systems. (tank, cooler, etc.) This 150# represents one troop, or 20 troops in a normal flight of 20 aircraft. It's hard to say where the point of no return starts when you start installing armor to protect vulnerable components or systems.

18. I can't say much about the M-60 machine guns. We rarely saw the enemy when we are being fired upon and after the first division has dropped its troops in the landing zones, succeeding divisions cannot use their guns for suppressive fire while in the zone.

19. We are now using the ArmaLite for the co-pilot. It is conveniently carried butt down, in a pocket to the right of the co-pilot where he can readily employ it. Its advantages are light weight, short barrel for ease in handling in the cockpit, high muzzle velocity, and good shock power and rate of fire against fleeting targets.

20. It just occurred to me it might be well to train for a downed or crippled aircraft condition in the landing zone. I can recall three occasions when we had to leave the aircraft in the landing zone and evacuate the crews under fire. We advocate the wingman or division

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leader, as appropriate, using the downed aircraft as a shield against incoming fire while evacuating the crew. If the last plane in a division was hit, the succeeding division could make the pick-up. If tail end Charlie got it, the division leader would go back in. Of course no firm practice can be established. We used this technique against rifle fire and not automatic weapons. The use of this technique for crew rescue would depend upon the number of troops already in the landing zone that could be used to protect the crew and the type of fire being received. Under some circumstances of heavy fire it would be best to have the troops protect the crew and secure the area with air strikes etc., before attempting to evacuate the crew. However, during a withdrawal operation this would become increasingly difficult.

21. As you know our loss of a helicopter on 6 October 1962, was particularly tragic. Tragic in that we lost so many of our own people and that it occurred in the most inaccessible area possible as far as being able to effect rescue operations, even with the helicopter. We depended heavily on the endurance, skill and determination of the ARVN troops that were landed nearby to negotiate the terrain and bring out the survivors as well as assist the Medical Officer and Corpsman that we were able to drop in at the scene of the accident. However, we learned that we had over estimated all of their capabilities and as a result developed and equipped our own rescue teams with personnel organic to the squadron and MABS-16 Sub-Unit #2. I have enclosed the plan and it is self-explanatory. It was a lesson learned when working with allied troops.

22. We have not used the "Eagle" concept of an airborne reserve (which was designed to block fleeing troops) in this area because it is not practical in jungle terrain. We have used a "Tiger" concept, whereby we had four aircraft in an alert status along with troops which were pre-staged at pick-up sites where they could be employed fast and exploit an enemy attack while it was in progress, i.e. outpost being overrun or a train being attacked. It hasn't been practicable to tie up four aircraft for this purpose because outposts are usually attacked at night and word of a train attack too slow in coming.

23. I have mentioned staked landing zones which we continued to run into in this area. For this reason we usually desire an alternate plan or landing zone of possible. As I mentioned in my last letter the stakes are partially effective against helicopter landings if the pattern of the stakes precludes landing with your tail between them. Care must be taken not to swing the tail on landing or take off.

24. Some of our troop landings were made for the purpose of positioning troops in a blocking role in conjunction with other infantry or APC 113 thrusts. In these cases we would encourage and advocate the use of ridge lines. Although the landing areas were more precarious and usually

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small, we could approach the landing zone in a careful manner without the VC looking down our throats from surrounding hillsides.

25. Whenever possible reconnaissance was done visually. In most areas it was not uncommon to have aircraft overhead coming or going to outposts. We could make a dummy run to an outpost in the area and conduct the reconnaissance enroute. Again in order to avoid a pattern we have used HU-1A's, OE's, Otters, C-123's, T-28's, CA-1, and the HUS-1 for this purpose. When using the T-28, we would schedule an air strike in an adjacent area, and performed the reconnaissance during the air strike.

26. Although some of the VC tactics are rather primitive; like the sounding hole with 50° sides like a water glass  which they use to detect the direction of approaching helicopters, they are not ignorant or untrained in the employment and capabilities of helicopters. I have included a captured document to prove my point. Paragraph 7, of this document mentions we need 3 hours of maintenance for every flight hour, we were actually using 4-1 in Danang. We learned that they were not giants behind every tree, but they would show up where least expected and should never be underestimated.

27. The weather has been our nemesis during the past four months. It is very difficult to predict with patches of heavy ground fog in the mountain valleys and heavy rain. During one 6 day period we had 16 inches of rain. The amount of cloud cover would dictate how soon the ground fog would burn off, it would sometimes lay in pockets in the mountain areas for days and hamper resupply and troop lifts, although the coastal area would be clear. We learned we had to take off and try to get into the sites, even though it looked hopeless. However, the weather would frequently open up for short periods of time. Of course this rapidly changing weather could also trap you if you weren't careful. On one occasion our pilots had to climb out on top at one minute intervals to 7500 feet. They were brought down on a surveillance radar approach from 10,000 feet to Danang. This is no problem if your pilots are trained. Get them on actual instruments whenever possible, it can pay off! A specific weather analysis is included in CTE 79.3.3.6 report Ser 00163 on Helicopter tactics and techniques dated 10Jan63 which was distributed to all Helicopter Groups.

28. Altitude was no particular problem at this time of the year. The highest site we worked was 3800 feet. The RAL's at Santa Ana proved to be a good training area for anything we have run into out here.

29. Navigation continues to be as easy as your ability to read a map. Don't depend on radio aids or prominent terrain features. Generally the maps are good, although some areas show only ridge lines and rivers with no contour information.

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30. The three OE's provided by VM0-2 are doing a fine job and keeping busy. They are on continuous reconnaissance missions and have photographed the majority of the outposts sites for us. We use them on all troop lifts to report weather conditions in the landing zones. This frequently requires that they remain on station for extended periods during marginal weather and keep us advised on a "go", "no go", or delay in H-hour.

31. The weather pilots responsibility is very important because quite often we have had to delay H-hour due to weather. When in his judgment the weather was suitable for both helicopters and support aircraft, he would so advise the tactical command post for confirmation of a new H-hour and coordination of artillery and the ASOC (Air Support Operations Center) for coordination of the support aircraft. We could usually react to a new L-hour between 1 and 1½ hours depending on the distance to the target.

32. During troop lifts we also used the OE as a radio relay aircraft, which permitted us to remain in almost continuous radio communication with our home base.

33. Briefly, the statistics for our stay in RVN during the period 1 August 1962 to 11 January 1963 were as follows:

Total hours - 10,550

HUS - 9,023

OE - 1,092

R4D - 410

Sorties - 15,200

Total pass - 59,024

Admin - 33,808

Assault - 25,216

Cargo - 1,114 tons

Med Evacs - 535

A/C hits - 32

34. Our relief by HMM-162 was accomplished much the same as we relieved HMM-362 in August. Basically forward echelons layed the ground work followed by incremental relief of personnel over a period of a week by

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GV aircraft. A fully operational capability was maintained at both ends without interruption.

35. We are now located at Futema with 18 aircraft. We have 6 aircraft and crews aboard the USS ALAMO, an LSD operating out of Cubi Point in the Philippines. They are filling the gap until the arrival of the USS PRINCETON around 21 February when we will go aboard from here with 18 aircraft and assume the 7th Fleet commitment. The 6 aircraft and crews in Cubi Point will be returned to Futema and support the 3d Division requirements.

36. There is an excellent Special Report on SVN (now referred to as RVN, Republic of Vietnam) in the Pacific Command, Weekly Intelligence Digest, Number 4-63, dated 25 January 1963, that should be read by anyone scheduled for duty in RVN.

R. L. RATHBUN

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PARTY COMMISSARIATE

- 17 -

TO: All units and administrative Units

SUBJECT: Comments on Countering Heliborne Landings and Raids.

Profiting from the French experiences in Algiers and the English experiences in Malaya, the USA has made extensive use of surprise heliborne raids against our units and rear areas. A striking example of US employment of these tactics was seen recently in the Binh Tay Operation (Western South Vietnam).

It can be said that all the recent augmentations of forces that the USA has sent to the Diem government were primarily intended to strengthen the Diem rear area forces, increase their ability to pass information rapidly and the wide employment of helicopters in the movement of troops. Therefore if we can destroy or greatly reduce the enemy's heliborne capability we will, in essence, have destroyed the mobility necessary to the US raid tactics.

Although we have succeeded in inflicting some loss on the enemy in his heliborne operations the enemy has in some places caused us fairly heavy losses. We must therefore find means of coping with the enemy's helicopter tactics. Widespread efforts must be directed to combatting heliborne landings and shooting at helicopters. Following are the advantages which the enemy enjoys due to his employment of heliborne strike tactics:

1. Careful planning and preparations are possible together with complete mobility in an attack, support or relieving role.
2. Secrecy can be preserved and surprise strikes can be accomplished.
3. Landings can be effected deep into our rear areas with the capability to attack and withdraw rapidly.
4. An appropriate means of destroying our forces while they are still weak.

However these tactics suffer the following disadvantages:

1. The population in our rear areas is on our side and will resist the enemy in every way.
2. Small forces are usually employed by the enemy in their deep strikes and if counterattacked may find it difficult to withdraw.
3. Heliborne operations require the latest information (old info may have lost its timeliness and new info must be checked for accuracy. If the time is taken to acquire confirmatory info then the situation may have changed rendering the info inaccurate).
4. The enemy's strike elements are usually unfamiliar with the

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terrain and can easily be surrounded and rapidly defeated.

5. The present available helicopters prevent the enemy from employing large forces (although this is only a temporary disadvantage it will take the enemy some time before he will be able to overcome it.)

6. The effectiveness of heliborne tactics is greatly reduced in forested and jungle covered mountain areas where a clear knowledge of the nature of the terrain cannot be discerned from the air, where landings are difficult and ambushes easily employed against the landings..

7. The disadvantages inherent in helicopters are difficult to overcome. If they are flown slow or low they are vulnerable to ground fire; every flying hour must be complemented by 3 hours of ground maintenance; they cannot be flown for more than 70 hours in any 2 or 3 days (TN: Obvious typographical or technical error. 10 hours in 2 or 3 days seems appropriate); the helicopter consumes much fuel, carrying a full load of troops its fuel capacity is reduced and as a consequence its range is reduced, as a result the starting point for heliborne operations is usually near the objective and thus the enemy's element of surprise can be compromised. A landing right within our position is the most effective, but is also subject to coming under our firepower while a landing outside of our position, though avoiding our firepower poses the element of surprise.

SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM.

Based on the above listed advantages and disadvantages of heliborne strikes and from our experiences with enemy heliborne operations in the South, we propose the following principles to contend with this enemy capability:

1. Our rear areas are weak and small and they can through the use of heliborne tactics, become the enemy's front line at anytime so we must develop a widespread development of guerrilla forces in these areas and the deeper in our rear areas the stronger these forces must be. If we succeed in the widespread development of strong guerrilla forces in our rear areas, the enemy, despite his initiative in choosing the point of attack will, on landing find that he has landed in a hornet's nest of guerrillas ready to fight him and he may find himself in danger of being surrounded. Moreover (and this is sufficiently strong to prevent them from landing forces).

2. The enemy can make a heliborne landing at any time and anyplace in Southern South VN and particularly in cleared heavily populated areas at which time they can inflict heavy losses on US (particularly when they are landing they will fire at anything that moves to protect their landing parties). Therefore we must instruct the people that they must prepare positions in which they can safeguard their lives and property. These foxholes must be prepared at any place that they are likely to go.

Our armed and para-military forces as well as the masses must have

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self protective plans ready and the people must realize that though a heliborne operation can be launched in their very midst that helicopters have many inherent weaknesses.

3. Our district and higher units and installations are the main targets of enemy heliborne operations so they must be mobile, properly trained and equipped to oppose the enemy. Our installations and units must not become fixed to any specific location: For example units and installations in the lowlands must be moved once every week or ten days. Units or installations in the highlands must be moved frequently. Locations must be selected with an eye to defense, concealment, offense and routes of withdrawal. On arrival in a new area the unit or installation must deploy immediately and be prepared to resist an attack, prepare defensive positions and avoid unnecessary concentrations. Headquarters must establish overall defensive plans based on a perimeter defense or mutual supporting fire between separate positions to prevent enemy landings within our position and difficult for him to surround. Our dispositions should also be made so that a counter strike can be mounted by the attacked forces if the situation permits. Displacements must be made within the framework of an overall plan at specified times and to specified areas to insure that scattered forces can be concentrated rapidly.

4. Counter Intelligence Measures, strengthening our internal organization and the diligent elimination of local spies must be implemented. Enemy heliborne operations are dependent on the latest info, transmitted by the most rapid means, so we must exercise careful controls and particularly eliminate spies carrying communications equipment. Boats must be carefully inspected because the enemy may secrete radios in them. Passengers on common carriers and private conveyances must be carefully checked and we must avoid locating our forces in positions near communications axis where spies can easily maintain surveillance and rapidly transmit their info. Persons known to be in frequent proximity to GVN post must be carefully checked for communications equipment.

5. Camouflage must be stressed to mislead the enemy and positions must be selected in heavily wooded areas which are difficult for the enemy to approach or attack.

6. Armed and para-military and self defense forces must be trained in shooting at helicopters and other aircraft. Training must be given immediately in anti-heliborne tactics. Experiences gained from our defeats and victories against heliborne operations will be disseminated for instructional purposes.

7. When the enemy conducts an airborne strike against an area, the people must, without panicking rapidly secure their valuables and themselves and maintain surveillance over the enemy's actions and attitudes and determine when the moment is opportune to conduct political activities and troop propagandization among the enemy's troops. When the enemy lands he is expecting resistance from the local populace so if they resist at that moment they may suffer serious losses.

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Village guerrillas will instead, with their rudimentary armament, attempt to reduce the enemy's capability and harass them when they are eating or sleeping so that on the following day they will be unable to continue their attack and bring their operation to a rapid halt or provide proper conditions for a counterattack by our own main force units. If attacked, the district, province and main force units will resist to defend themselves. Will, if conditions permit, fire at the helicopters when they approach, engage his forces when they land, resist him as he advances and pursue him when he withdraws. Any unit can engage the enemy's airborne attacks but they must attack rapidly, achieve a rapid decision, withdraw rapidly, have adequate firepower and be trained in active anti-aircraft measures.

8. The withdrawal is an important phase of the resistance. Because the enemy can attack anywhere at anytime we must know how to withdraw. Do not withdraw across open areas and withdraw under supporting fire. If we succeed in drawing the battle out till the hours of darkness we must not think that our withdrawal can be made with impunity because the enemy has employed booby traps, mines, ambushing forces or interdiction fire to block our withdrawal.

9. Attacks must be organized against enemy helicopters by luring them into our prepared positions. Areas where forces and firepower can be effectively concentrated should be organized for anti-heliborne defense (based on the enemy's heliborne capabilities). A method which can be employed is to surround and attack an enemy installation and deploy the majority of our local forces to engage the heliborne reinforcements as they land. (The selected area should be one in which our deployment can be effectively made and in which the enemy can effect heliborne landings. In addition, because the enemy may not land their troops in cleared areas, but instead lower them by lines from helicopters to avoid our ambush. Our deployments must be mobile in nature to meet enemy landings by this means. In addition the deployment of our local forces in positions to attack the helicopters will provide support for the forces attacking the enemy's fixed position and support the withdrawal of those forces. This deployment will also serve to mislead the enemy's spies as to the true nature of our disposition. The target selected should be a small post far enough away from enemy supporting forces to require the use of heliborne forces to relieve it.

Prior reconnaissance must be made of helicopter landing fields in towns and cities in order to select positions to employ mortars and other weapons against them or to determine means of employing our special mission personnel to destroy the enemy's helicopters.

10. Following the enemy's withdrawal we must approach the battle area with caution. The enemy have been known to booby trap an area prior to withdrawing and have, as a consequence, caused us some losses. The police of the battle field must be carefully organized and employ all military, para-military and civilian manpower in order to search out and disarm the enemy's booby traps.

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Above are some opinions and principles which units and organizations can employ in preparing plans to safeguard our forces against enemy attacks.

COMMENT I CORPS G2 ADVISOR: Above document was seized during Operation NGO QUYEN V on 16 Nov Vicinity AT9310.

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