

# VIETNAMESE RANGER OPERATIONS

IN WAR ZONE D, 1965-68

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### **PHUOC-BINH-THANH SPECIAL ZONE**

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War Zone D had been used for years by the Viet Cong and their forbearers, the Viet Minh, as a safe haven for training, resupplying and resting their combat units. As the American forces were later to find out, the area was thickly under-brushed with a dense growth of hardwood trees which made tactical unit movements slow and difficult to control and aerial observation all but impossible. The Viet Cong had what best could be described as an inner fortress deep within the forested sanctuary. The rest areas and the training camps of the VC combat units were located within this inner fortress, while the security forces operated around the outer perimeter of Zone D. Spotted throughout the zone was an extensive network of way stations that were used as stop-over points for units and supplies infiltrating from North Vietnam. The way stations were about 15 to 20 kilometers apart and served very much the same purposes as our stage coach stops of the old west. They were whimsically referred to as the VC's Howard Johnsons. During the ranger operations in PBTSZ most of the VC installations were found to be within 500 meters of the twisting MaDa River running through the middle of the war zone. This was simply an accommodation to be near water.

Normally the tactics adopted by the ranger companies were deep penetrations on foot through the outer perimeter of security forces into the inner fortress, with the operation lasting from 5 to 15 days. The rangers were lightly equipped and carried six days' of rations consisting of rice stuffed in a sock-like cloth hung around the neck and a bottle of Nuoc Mam carried in the pocket of the field pack. In many instances, rations were supplemented by captured rice and chickens.

Shortly after President Diem established PBTSZ, a US advisory effort was organized to assist in the planning, training and operations of the new ranger dominated force whose mission was to neutralize War Zone D. The new advisory organization consisted of a senior advisor and staff for PBTSZ and senior advisors with staff for each of the three included provinces. The total

number of advisors in November 1962 was approximately 15 and by July 1963 the ranks had swollen to 135. The advisory detachment headquarters was established at Phuoc Long Province headquarters in a town the French and Vietnamese called Phuoc Binh but the Americans began calling Song Be, after the river which flowed nearby. This was the same Song Be about which an article, "The Fight for Song Be," was published in the Premiere issue of Vietnam.

The first operation conducted under the new organization turned out to be a valuable learning experience for the US advisors as well as the Vietnamese rangers. It started early the morning of November 19, 1962 in what was described, at the time, by Richard Tregaskis in his book Vietnam Diary as the largest helicopter-borne operation of any war<sup>3</sup>. Forty-two helicopters, which included 10 H-34's from the Vietnamese Army, airlifted the equivalent of two stripped-down ranger battalions into the objective area. The entire operation had been planned as a joint effort between the airborne command and Colonel Dien with very little US input. The airborne brigade commander was named as the overall task commander. The operation, code named "Autumn Wind," was essentially an exercise in tactical coordination between the airborne and the rangers. The objective was a known VC food growing area, which occupied a series of clearings in the jungle, but had very little military significance. The operation became nothing more than a reconnaissance in force. One airborne battalion jumped in support of the ground maneuver. The plan was to seize four objectives and make a river crossing within a 12 day period. It was a carefully thought-out, phased operation that included a rigid time schedule fixed by a definite date to cross the Dong Nai River. A reinforced engineer company with security forces attached was helicoptered into the crossing site on D+3 with instructions to prepare a bridge for crossing

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<sup>3</sup>Richard Tregaskis, Vietnam Diary (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), pp 206-212.

on D+5. The crossing was to be conducted 20 kilometers and two objectives away from the initial LZ.

An air strike, 30 minutes prior to the ranger force landing, prepared the LZ. The plan called for the airborne battalion to jump about one mile from the objective after the helicopter landings and upon assembly to become the force reserve. Instead of following the plan, they jumped prior to the ranger landing, and on the objective. Needless to say, with prelanding air strikes, the early airborne assault and 42 helicopters in the air, what hopes there were for gaining surprise quickly faded. However, in spite of the blatant forewarnings, during three days of local operations in the vicinity of the first objective, three VC were captured and five small installations were uncovered. The four American advisors accompanying the rangers, as well as the Vietnamese commander on the ground, concluded that more damage could be done and more intelligence collected if more time were spent in the objective area. In spite of this judgment by the command group on the ground, Vietnamese Army higher headquarters ordered adherence to the original plan, thus before the area could be thoroughly searched the ranger force moved on to the next objective. After attacking another VC way station in the second objective area and just before the rangers arrived at the crossing site on the Dong Nai River, the operation was suddenly called off for reasons which were never fully explained or understood at the time.

The operation highlighted two valuable lessons. First, never again would the Commander PBTSZ telegraph the ranger force intentions to the VC by using large numbers of helicopters as flying transportation. On all subsequent operations, the ranger columns walked into the jungle and helicopter support was limited to resupply missions. Second, phased operations tied to a definite time schedule were avoided. Later operations were to prove that success could be obtained by staying in an area sufficiently long to obtain good intelligence and have time to act on it. The description of the following two typical ranger operations conducted in the heart of

War Zone D is written in the first person to highlight the author's personal experiences while he was Senior Advisor to the Commander of PBTSZ.

\* \* \*

The first deep penetration into War Zone D was a two column probe seeking to make contact with two VC battalions (D-14 and D-15), the suspected locations of which had been pointed out on a map by a former North Vietnamese first sergeant who had defected from D-15 several weeks earlier. The operation dubbed "Holiday" began on December 21, 1962 when two columns of rangers moved south into the jungles of Zone D after having been trucked from Song Be to the crossroads town of Dong Xai, which in May of 1965 was the scene of one of the fiercest battles of the war.

Both columns, consisting of three ranger companies and one Vietnamese special forces detachment, set out together before dawn on the morning of December 22. The early start was an attempt to avoid the VC security forces operating in the area. About midday the columns split. Column 1 commanded by Colonel Dien, and the one which I accompanied, continued due south to the suspected location of D-15; while column 2 commanded by Major Chinh (Colonel Dien's deputy) veered to the southwest to seek and attack D-14.

The column stayed in the jungle but guided on an improved laterite road which ran north and south through the middle of Zone D. The road had been constructed by Vietnamese engineers in 1959 and had been abandoned in 1960 because of the growing VC presence in the area. At approximately 1500, the lead elements of the column opened fire on several VC observed in a clearing, but in the confusion of the moment they escaped unharmed. The most important consideration at this point was not the fact that the enemy had made a clean break, but

that the fire fight had signaled our presence. If we were to maintain any semblance of surprise, the column would have to keep moving to reach the objective before D-15 could be alerted.

Colonel Dien moved the column to the laterite road where we ate dinner and planned our next move. Our concern over the necessity for speed caused us to adopt a course of action, which in more normal circumstances, no tactician in his right mind would have suggested. We decided to march all night down the road. The column moved in the jungle until dark and then moved onto the road. We traveled on the laterite surface from 2100 to 0300 the next morning. Every step of the way my heart was thumping wildly and every sound in the jungle triggered a vision of the enemy setting up machine guns to ambush us. When we reached the MaDa River at 0300 we were all relieved to be unburdened from the pressures of the last six hours. We had covered ten kilometers and it had worked. If the VC had turned two machine guns on us, it would have been a massacre and the unprofessional aspects of this risky decision would have dominated an unfortunate legacy.

We set up a small base camp and the remainder of the day was spent in waiting for a reconnaissance patrol to find the paths leading into the D-15 area. The defector, who had accompanied us, was the key man in the reconnaissance patrol. It was sometime after dark when Colonel Dien came over to me to say that the patrol had found the trail to D-15. He told me that he had given the order for the column to move out at 2300 for an all-night march to the objective. He wanted to attack the camp before daybreak. I had a premonition before we began to move that this was going to be a night of action never to be forgotten.

It was a moonless night. The jungle in the daytime is tough to cope with, but at night with no moon--it's almost impossible. I kept continuous check on the direction of the column by constantly glancing at my wrist compass. I had found on previous occasions that Colonel Dien relied too much on instinct and not enough on compass readings. Directional instinct in the

jungle has no meaning. That night I learned a unique technique of control that I was to use again during my second tour in Vietnam. Following someone through the thick underbrush at night places a heavy and constant strain on all senses. To help lessen the strain, the jungle floor in Zone D yielded a priceless natural commodity in the form of certain twigs that contained sufficient phosphorescent material to cause them to glow in the dark.

Before we began our long march, every ranger stuck a phosphorescent twig in the pack of the man to his front. This way each ranger could keep track of the man ahead of him by keeping the luminescent twig in sight. Without this assistance from nature, the only thing that would have brought us through that long night march would have been flashlights.

One incident, which was terrifying at the moment, highlights the tensions and anxiety associated with night movement through the jungle. I happened to be in the middle of the column, with no English speaking Vietnamese rangers anywhere near me. When one's eyes are constantly fixed and the mind concentrates so continuously on the phosphorescent twig, there is a tendency to become mesmerized. I was in one of those pseudo-hypnotic trances, when I stood waiting for the ranger to my front to move out. To reassure myself, I stuck out my hand to check on the ranger to my front. I discovered with a shock that I was standing in front of--and waiting for--a twig that was stuck in a branch of a tree. My ranger contact had left me behind. The column was broken and I was leading the second half. In the next few minutes, feelings of apprehension and panic raced through my mind, until the Vietnamese ranger, with whom I had lost contact, came stumbling back through the underbrush to pick up the rest of the column and relieve my momentary panic.

We picked up the pace once again. The rest of the night was spent half stumbling, constantly grabbing at vines, but always concentrating on keeping contact with the man in front and the man in back. We suddenly stopped at 0430. We were in a cleared area, so it was

relatively easy for Colonel Dien to find me. He walked up and told me that they had found the path leading to D-15 and that we would stay where we were for another 30 minutes, then we would move out, hoping to hit D-15 at daylight (0630).

At approximately 0730 the lead elements of the ranger column fired on and killed a VC outguard. The surprise gained by the overnight march through the jungle had evaporated in on unexpected instant. The firing, of course, warned the VC of our presence and served as a signal for all rangers to double-time up to the front for an assault on what certainly must be the objective. The rangers, with their forward momentum already started, did find the camp within five minutes of the initial contact.

The camp was abandoned, but evidence showed that it had been occupied only a few minutes before. Evidently our firefight some 40 hours earlier had not alerted this particular VC unit. The next five hours were spent in searching the area and digging up caches of ammo and supplies. The net haul was seven 77mm RR rounds, several hundred grenades, battalion medical supplies, and thousands of rounds of small arms ammunition. From the material collected it was determined that the base camp belonged to Headquarters Company, D-15 Battalion. The other company base camps of the battalion were not uncovered. Because we had no air or artillery support and considering our extremely vulnerable position in the middle of VC-controlled territory, we left the D-15 base camp after destroying everything we could and began the long march out of the jungle. It was then Christmas Eve.

We spent the night in the jungle about five kilometers from the site of our early morning attack. The following day we spent on the long march back to Dong Xai the small crossroads town on the northwest edge of Zone D from whence we had started. That noon the rangers stopped to eat and killed several water buffalo which were found grazing in one of the few open areas scattered around War Zone D and presumably belonged to the VC. Buffalo steak and a can

of Dinty Moore Stew were the US advisor's two course Christmas dinner. About 2000 hours that night the column emerged from the jungle at Dong Xai and was reunited with the other column which had been unsuccessful in finding D-14.

The operation showed that daring forays into VC-controlled War Zone D could be mounted, if the friendly force practiced constant movement and used night marches to confuse the enemy. It also pointed out that movement at night in the jungle is possible, but slow. Had there been proper air and artillery support, the operation could have been extended and probably would have been far more profitable. The limited success of the operation was attributable to the use of the defector to guide the column and the initiative displayed under the aggressive leadership of Colonel Dien.

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The longest and most successful penetration of War Zone D by the PBTSZ rangers was conducted between February 2 and 16, 1963. The operation was planned around intelligence collected from another VC defector, who claimed he knew the location of War Zone D headquarters. This time Colonel Dien directed his deputy to command the ranger column. (Colonel Dien had been under strong pressure from President Diem not to expose himself so much during these operations.) The first attempt to get by the security forces and into the inner fortress ended in a disaster. Colonel Dien's deputy halted his ranger force at approximately 1530 to allow the soldiers time to cook their daily hot meal of rice. Out of laziness or sheer stupidity, the deputy chose to spend the night in the same location, and to compound the error in judgment, the column did not move out until 0800 the next morning. The rangers had moved only 500 meters from their camp site when the inevitable happened--the lead platoon was hit by a well-planned VC ambush. The result was nine rangers killed and five wounded, with no known VC

casualties. This tragic incident reinforced what we already knew--to prevent ambushes in the jungle, it is necessary to move on after supper and keep moving for a half hour after before stopping for the night. Darkness in the jungle will protect any force. Moving the next morning before first light is also an essential element of avoiding ambush.

Colonel Dien took immediate action by relieving his deputy and taking personal command on the ground. He started the column marching the next day from a point five kilometers away. By taking this new route, the ranger force had to negotiate far denser jungle and more rugged terrain than if the original plan had been followed. Even by using elephant paths through the thickest portion of the jungle, it took the column four days to travel the same distance it would have taken only a day and a half if we had followed the route planned by Colonel Dien's deputy.

Our first encounter with the VC, and the first major decision that had to be made, came at the end of the fourth day's march. About 1730 the lead element of the column ran into a small VC way station that looked like it might accommodate a squad. Colonel Dien halted the column and drew everyone back, but left a few rangers to keep constant surveillance over the enemy camp. Luckily the VC had not been alerted to our presence. The alternatives with which we were faced were, to attack the way station with almost certain success, or, to continue with our original mission and bypass it in order not to alert Zone D headquarters. To complicate the decision, we were not certain of our exact location, nor, and more importantly, of our position in relation to the objective. We had a feeling we were close, but we had no idea how close. As in almost every tough decision, Colonel Dien was not reluctant to ask my advice. (In the uncomplicated, clear-cut actions he always told me what he was going to do, giving me no time for recommendations.) This was one time when I think he would have done better not to listen to me. After consulting with my deputy, one of the other two US advisors on the operation, I recommended that we attack the way station just before dawn the next morning. My rationale

was simple, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." If we could not find Zone D headquarters, we at least could claim a minor victory.

The rangers started to get into an attack position around 0400. This was a difficult maneuver to control in the jungle at night but Colonel Dien and his ranger company commanders did a magnificent job of getting all the units in position before daylight. At 0600 the attack began, and by 0615 it was over. The way station was completely overrun and the net gain was the dubious distinction of watching a young VC nurse die of AR 15 bullet wounds. The other members of the small unit had fled. To prevent the escaped VC from having too much of a lead time to warn Zone D headquarters, the column was hastily reconstituted and ordered underway in the direction of the primary objective.

About 1000, after traveling three to four kilometers, the lead rangers began receiving fire. This set the rest of the column in action. All of the rangers immediately began double-timing toward the front of the column in support of the lead elements. During the confusion of the next 30 to 45 minutes it was difficult to piece together exactly what was happening. During the action, firing was constant and heavy. It was not clear who was doing the most firing. However, it was obvious by the cracking in the surrounding trees that plenty of lead was incoming. After the momentum of the ranger attack carried us through a large base area complex, it was evident that we had hit something big. The rangers picked up one wounded VC and brought in another who had voluntarily surrendered.

Through interrogation of these two prisoners, we discovered that we had found Zone D headquarters and that the VC, who had escaped earlier that morning, had in fact alerted the headquarters several hours before the attack. The two hour lead time had been sufficient for them to evacuate most of the important documents and all of their weapons. The fighting had been done by a security platoon whose mission was to fight a delaying action. The wounded VC

who had been a sergeant in the security platoon, died several hours later. The VC who had surrendered was, as luck would have it, the political officer of Zone D headquarters. He indicated that for some time he had been looking for an excuse to give himself up. This particular defector was to stay with Colonel Dien for many months and provided the best intelligence we have received to date of VC operations in Zone D. After a thorough search of the camp, many documents were uncovered, one of which was a complete roster and all VC unit designations in War Zone D.

The ex-political officer indicated that he knew the location of other installations. At about 1400 we set out to find these camps. An hour later we entered an area that was honeycombed with bunkers and cleared fire lanes. They were the most elaborate defensive positions that I had seen in the jungle, but they were not occupied. Apparently the VC had decided not to stand and defend but to move out and try to catch us off guard. We found several small camps and many bunkers, but these had been more thoroughly evacuated than the headquarters camp. Nothing was left. By this time darkness was closing in fast. A decision was made to leave the area rather than stay and defend against an almost certain return of the VC. We had no air or artillery support and our communications with base camp had been lost. We moved that night, with Colonel Dien and myself acting as compass and pointman, until an hour after dark to be certain that we would shake any VC that might be following us. At 2100 we simply halted, sank to the ground, and went to sleep after establishing a 50 percent alert.

We arose before dawn the next morning and continued the march. By 1000 we had reached the MaDa River and a familiar crossing site. We took our bearing on the same road running through Zone D that we had followed during our operations against D-15. At 1500 that afternoon we reached the road and after placing an antenna high in a tree, reestablished communication. We then radioed back to base camp, and requested helicopter resupply. Once

the helicopters arrived, we established a perimeter defense and decided to rest in the area for two days before continuing operations. We had occupied Zone D headquarters on February 8 and this was the 9th of February. The operation lasted until the 16th of February. Subsequent VC base camps that were discovered included a 200-man hospital, a basic training center, an ordnance depot, and a battalion base camp. All installations were destroyed with no ranger casualties. The VC had evidently decided not to stand and fight, but "to fade away to fight another day." By the 15th of February all of the rangers were fairly well exhausted and we walked out of Zone D to Dong Xai without incident. We happened to walk into Dong Xai at 0200 the morning of February 16. Colonel Dien woke the local cafe owner and we sat down to a marvelous meal of Chinese soup and Vietnamese chicken. That dinner, consumed with a couple of cold beers, was one of my most satisfying and unforgettable meals I had experienced during my two tours in Vietnam.

That operation, the longest sustained operation in War Zone D ever conducted by the Vietnamese, was a great psychological victory for the rangers. They had gone into the heart of War Zone D, fought their way into VC headquarters and remained long enough to destroy several key VC installations. The operation clearly demonstrated how small units of rangers could move through the jungle, find base camps, destroy them, and keep moving without being defeated by the enemy in his own backyard. Continuing to move after dark and moving out at first light was the rule learned at tragic expense. Additionally, we discovered during this operation, as well as preceding operations, that control in the jungle is more important than seeking an advantage from complicated enveloping maneuvers. Although maximum effort was spent to gain surprise, it eluded us every time. We found that we could operate from five to six days without resupply and do it effectively. At the same time, if we had had continuous artillery, air and helicopter support, the operations could have been more successful. Finding the VC installations was due,

in large measure, to the intelligence given by the defected political officer and that it was used immediately by Colonel Dien, who kept his plans as flexible as the changing situation, was another mark of his outstanding leadership. Exploiting opportunities, rather than sticking to a predetermined plan, stands out as one of the key lessons learned in this operation.

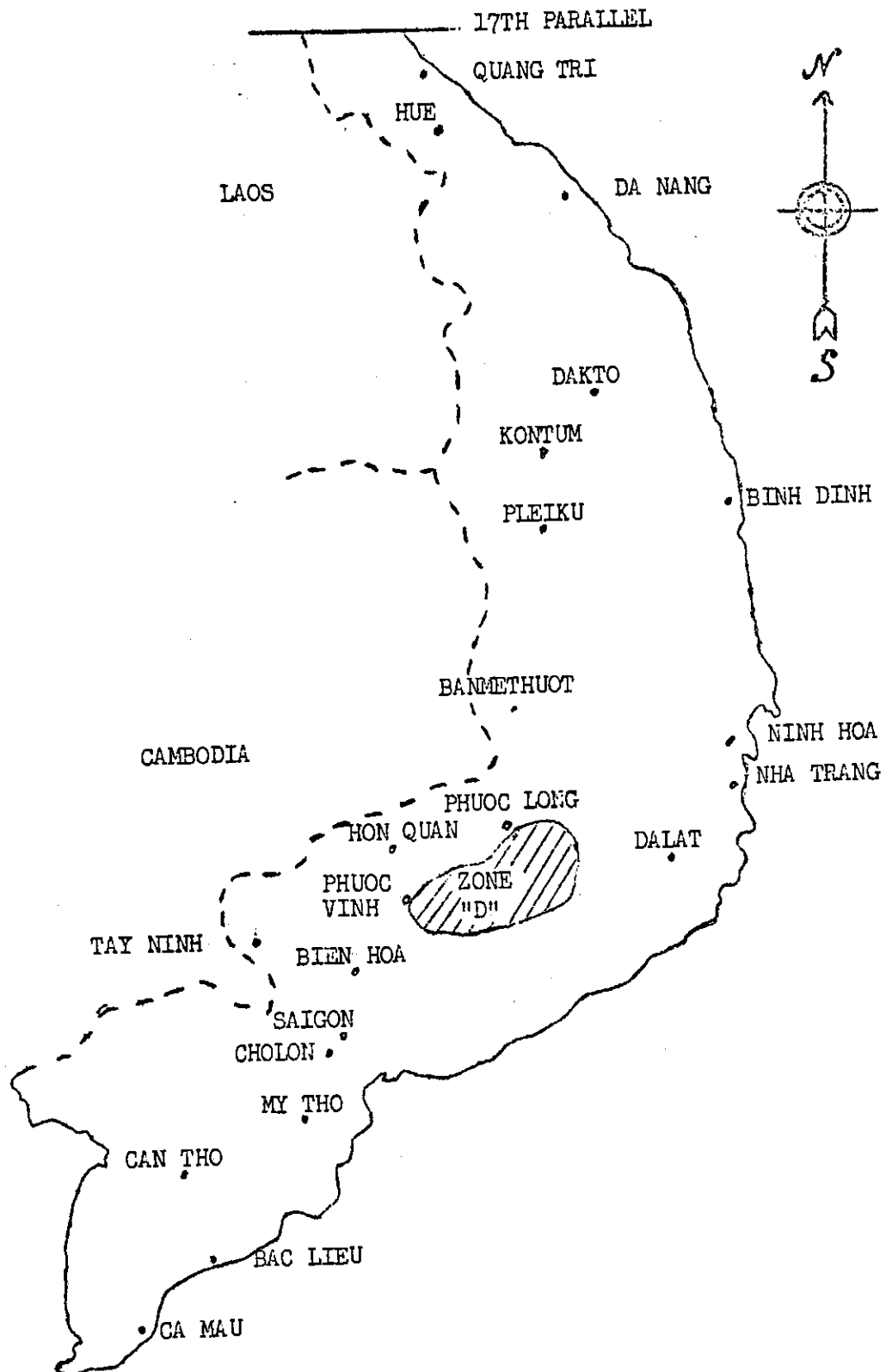
The operations continued through July of 1963 following similar patterns. The individual ranger companies assigned to Phuoc Binh Thanh Special Zone were later used to form ranger battalions and retrained at the ranger training center at Trung Lap. The aggregate experience of the operations confirmed my belief that initiative; willingness to keep flexible enough to follow through on reliable intelligence; respect for, but not fear of the VC; good security, maintained through constant movement; and faith in the individual soldier can be a winning combination in the jungle.

The operations also confirmed the superb fighting qualities of the Vietnamese ranger units, particularly when inspired by the outstanding leadership of their senior officer. These were the lessons upon which I based my tactical judgments when I returned to Vietnam in August 1966 as a battalion commander in Tay Ninh Province, the center of War Zone C.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

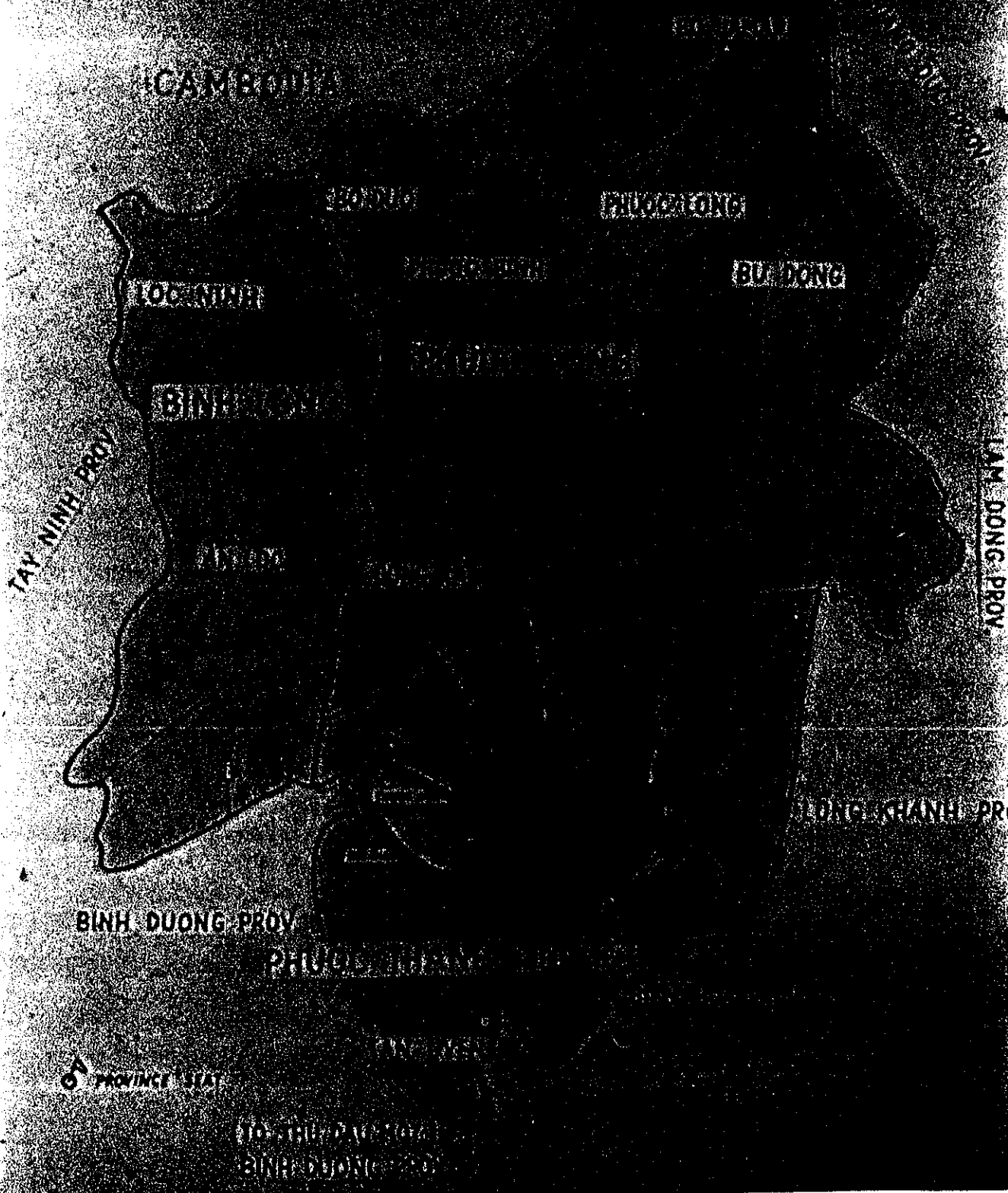
1. Sketch map of South Vietnam showing the location of War Zone D.
2. Illustration of PBTSZ showing major overland routes taken by Vietnamese ranger units during Zone D penetration operations, 1962-63.
3. Map showing VC installations uncovered by ranger operations in Zone D.
4. Major Nulsen, Senior Advisor to the Commander PBTSZ, and LTC Do Van Dien, Vietnamese Commander of PBTSZ.
5. An AP report of ranger penetration operations in Zone D, dated late November 1962.
6. H-21s unloading Vietnamese rangers onto an LZ in Zone D during "Operation Holiday", November 1962.
7. Colonel Dien, Commander PBTSZ ranger forces, planning the move to and attack upon VC battalion D-15, just before dark on December 22, 1962. L to R, Captain Langford, PBTSZ Intelligence Advisor; Colonel Dien; Major Nulsen (author) PBTSZ Senior Advisor.
8. Schematic depicting VC positions and site orientation of D-15 as described by the VC defector accompanying the ranger force and Colonel Dien's plan of attack.
9. Schematic of actual D-15 dispositions and how the ranger attack occurred at 0730 December 24, 1962.
10. Three ranger company commanders receiving instructions from Colonel Dien during the movement to Zone D Headquarters February 5, 1962.
11. The elaborate bamboo entrance to Zone D Headquarters fortified position in the jungle.
12. The thatched roof main building within the Zone D Headquarters compound.
13. Material captured from the successful ranger assault on Zone D Headquarters. L to R Sgt. Delmont (Medic), Major Nulsen and Captain Langford.
14. Stopping in the middle of the Ma Da River the morning after the successful assault on Zone D Headquarters. Approximately 1000 February 9, 1963. L to R Colonel Dien, Major Nulsen, Major Bill Miller (Deputy Senior Advisor PBTSZ).

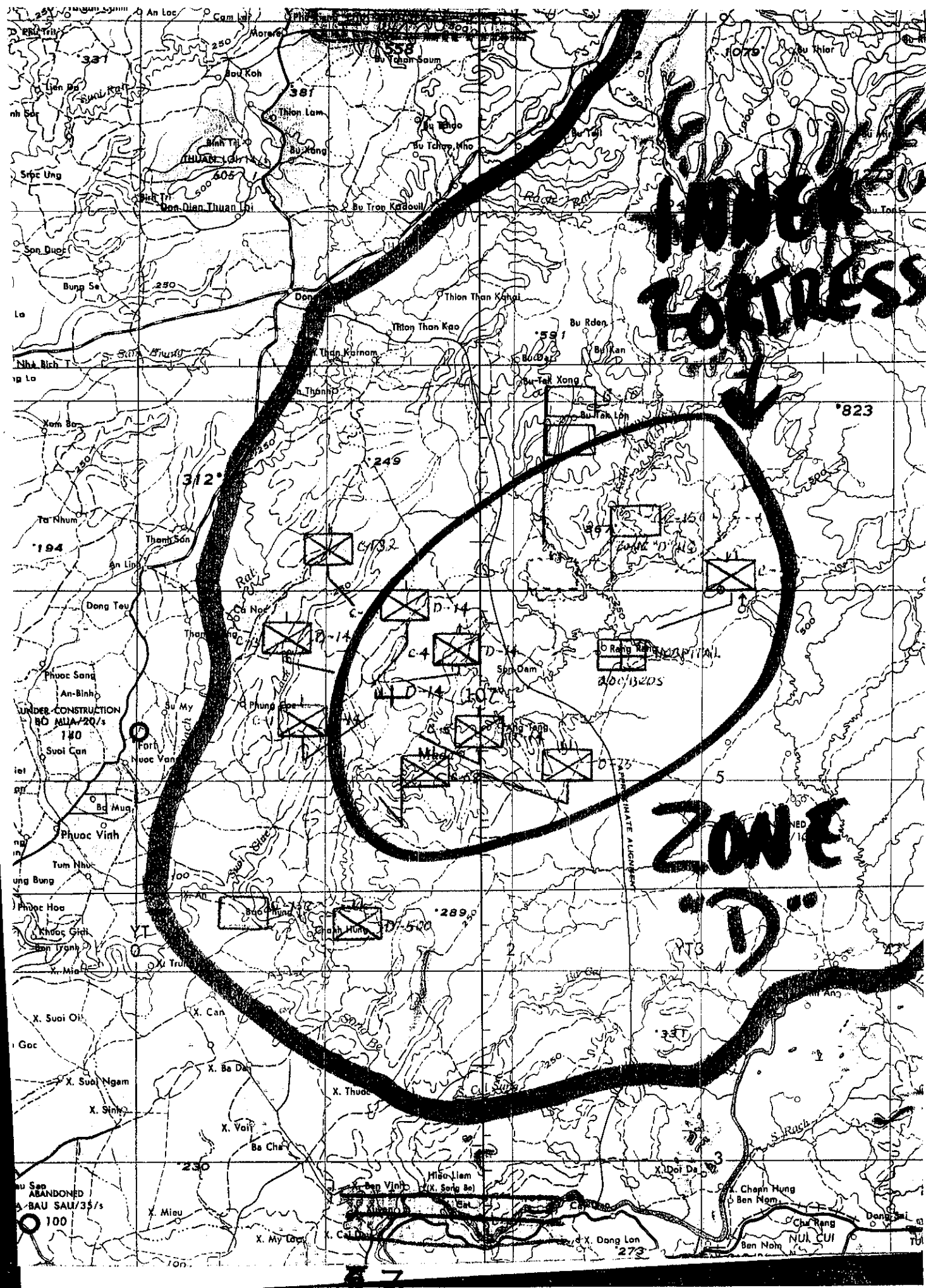
SOUTH VIETNAM



PBT RANGER OPERATIONS IN ZONE "D"  
ANNEX - MAP OF SOUTH VIETNAM

# PHUOC THANG SPECIAL ZONE





4



## 'D-ZONE' PENETRATED

# Viet Inroad in Red Area

SAIGON (AP)—For the first time in the four-year history of the war in the Republic of Vietnam, government troops appear to have made real inroads into a stubborn communist pocket north of here known as "D Zone."

During the past week, Ranger patrols in company strength have been operating close to Viet Cong bases in the jungle, tearing up installations, destroying ammunition and supplies and forcing the enemy to keep moving.

Contact with the guerrillas has been light, although the government claims more than 30 ene-

my killed in the operation.

Penetration of D Zone is an important psychological step for Saigon forces. The area is shown on communist maps as a "liberated zone," in which Viet Cong forces can operate with complete safety.

Roads running through the zone, including arterial Route 14, have been subjected to a bloody series of communist ambushes. The main center of Viet Cong strength and its co-ordinating headquarters are believed to be somewhere in D Zone. Several of the radio propaganda transmitters the Viet Cong call "Liberation Radio" are said to be

beaming their programs from the zone.

Another strong communist pocket—the southern tip of Vietnam—has been carved off by Saigon forces since the

SAIGON (AP)—An unknown number of communist Viet Cong attacked early Tuesday a government strategic hamlet in the Cambodian border province of Tay Ninh but were repelled after about an hour fight, an information spokesman said Tuesday.

One source said about 50 Viet Cong were killed and one captured. Defense spokesman would not say the government claimed about 20 Viet Cong were believed killed or wounded but carried off by the guerrillas.

First of the year, to starve out an estimated 10,000 communists believed hiding in the mangrove swamp there.

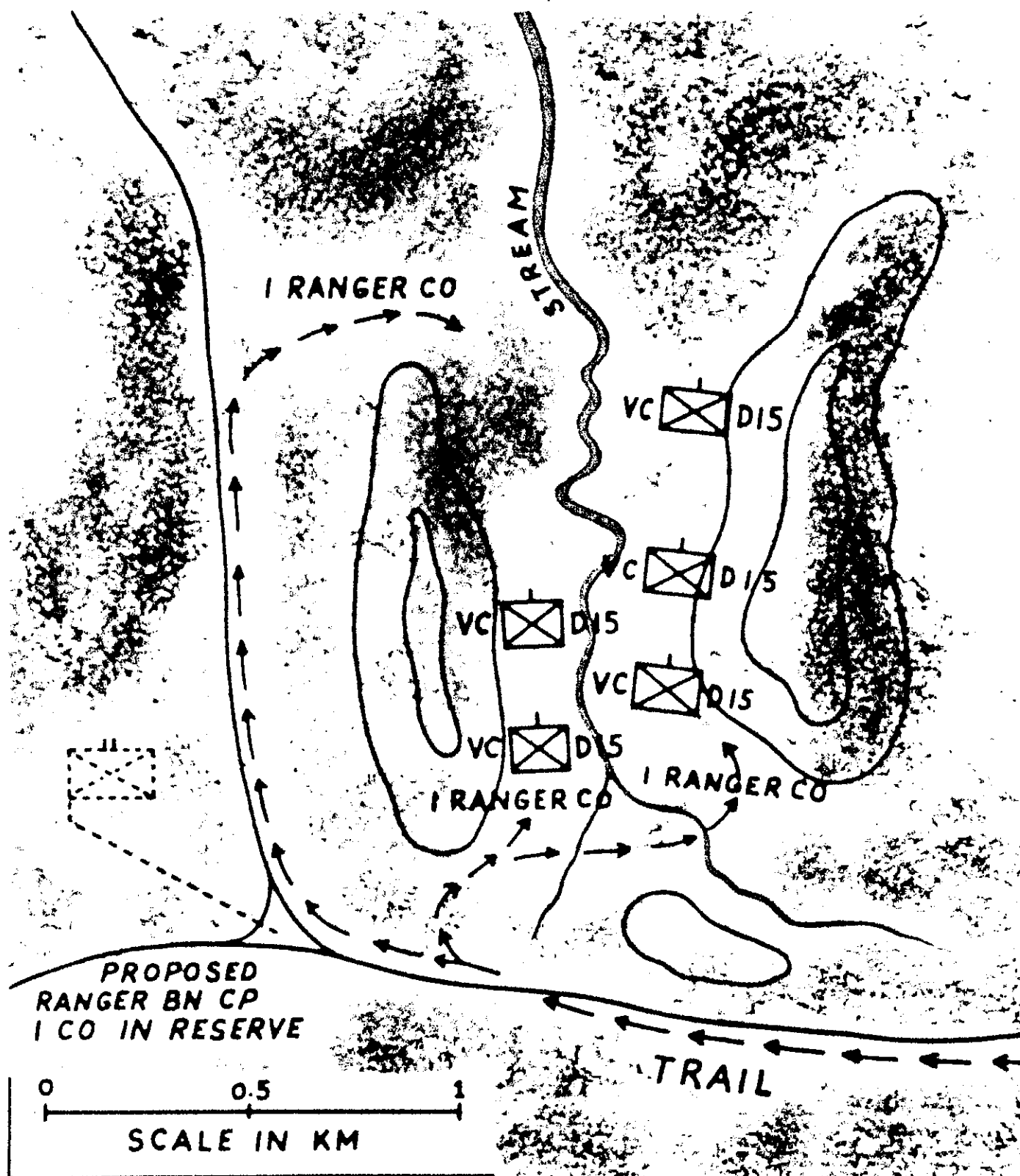
In the north, government units are operating deep in mountainous territory near the Laotian frontier called "Interzone Five" by the Viet Cong. This is another of the Viet Cong's most feared bastions.



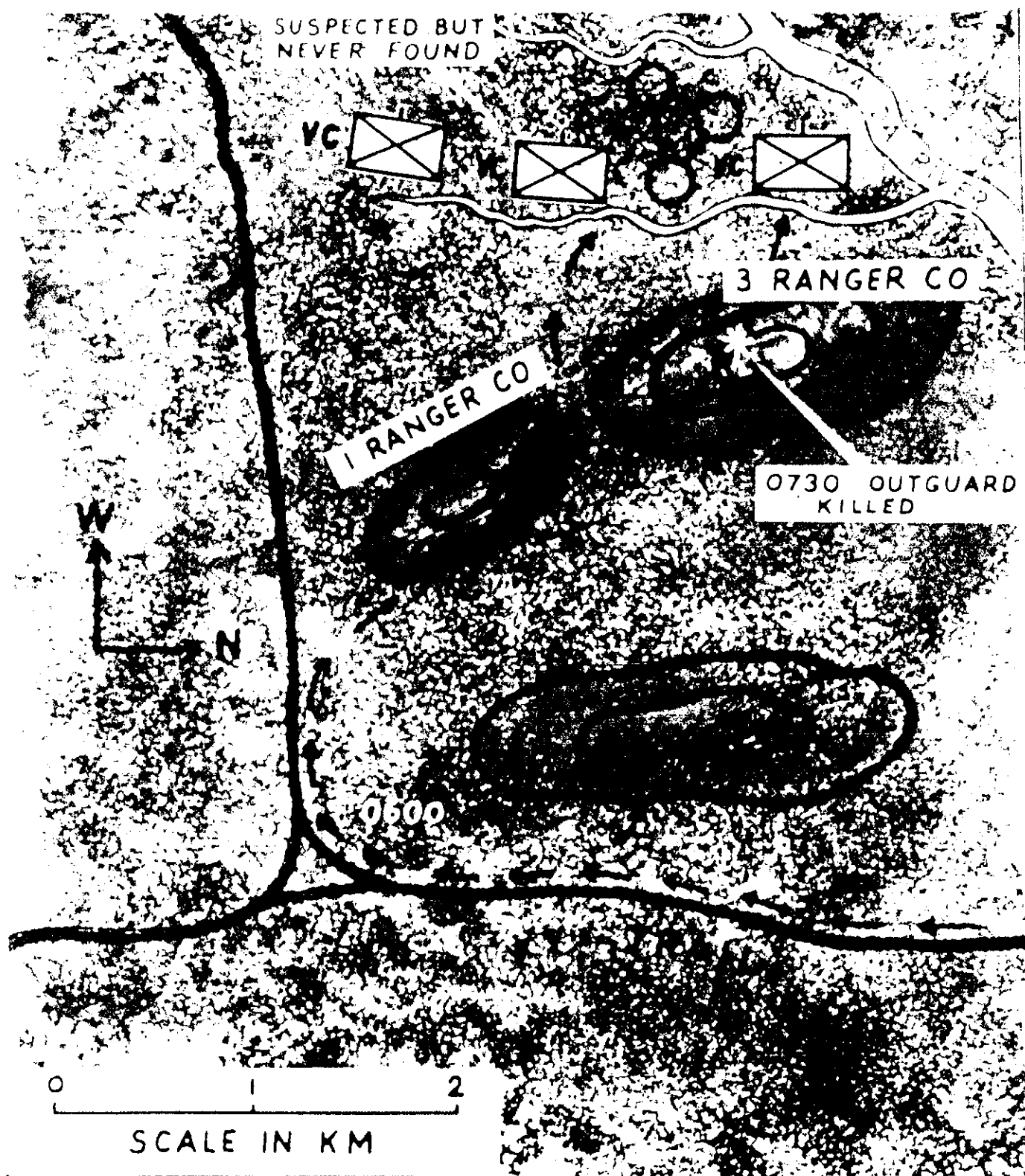
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# THE PLAN OF ATTACK ON DI5 240630 DEC 62



# THE ACTUAL ATTACK ON D15 240730 DEC 62







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