

ARTICLE ABOUT THE SUCCESS OF
AMERICAN ADVISOR SUPPORT EFFORT
FOR VIETNAMESE RANGER OPERATIONS
PUBLISHED IN THE FEB 1952 EDITION
OF VIETNAM MAGAZINE.

ARTICLE WRITTEN BY CAPTAIN
CHARLES K. NUCSON BASED ON PREVIOUSLY
UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL.

The South Vietnamese Ranger companies would prove their mettle by penetrating the heart of War Zone D.

By Charles K. Nulsen

Ranger battalions had been formed within the U.S. Army during World War II but had been deactivated after that conflict. In August 1950, at the beginning of the Korean War, Ranger companies were again formed, but they were deactivated in August 1951. Although the Ranger school would continue to provide Ranger-qualified personnel, it was not until 1969 that the Army's LRRP (long-range reconnaissance patrol) units in Vietnam were designated as Ranger companies.

In the interim, however, Ranger companies were formed within the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam; i.e., the South Vietnamese Army). In 1959, without prior U.S. approval, the ARVN activated some 65 "special action" companies by taking one company from each of its four-company infantry battalions.

By June 1960, the ARVN convinced the U.S. MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) of the effectiveness of these units, and the MAAG agreed to fund and support the creation of specially trained ARVN Ranger battalions and the creation of a Ranger training center at Duc My.

Several Special Forces mobile training units were sent from Fort Bragg, N.C., to Vietnam to assist in training and organizing Ranger units for the Republic of Vietnam. The Ranger companies that were formed as a part of this training program were dispersed among the provinces to act as small, highly mobile and hard-hitting tactical forces for the province chiefs. Although never intended as such, many of the specialized companies became, in fact, personal bodyguards for the province chiefs. To correct this misuse, the ARVN, upon advice from MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), which had succeeded MAAG in February 1962, formed the 30th Special Battalion in early 1962 from four of the separate Ranger companies.



American advisers discuss defense measures with members of the 42nd ARVN Ranger Company near Cam Au. What distinguished the Rangers most from other ARVN troops was their élan on the offensive.

The 30th Special Battalion was assigned to III Corps for operations and further assigned to the province chief of Phuoc Long province, Lt. Col. Do Van Dien. But before the 30th, an experimental battalion that was the first unit in Vietnam to become fully equipped with the AR-15, could get many missions under its belt, a presidential plan for utilizing about 80 percent of the ARVN's entire Ranger force was implemented.

President Ngo Dinh Diem, by decree on November 15, 1962, created Phuoc Binh Thanh Special Zone (PBTSZ) for the purpose of centralizing the Republic of Vietnam's efforts to eliminate the longstanding Viet Cong (VC) threat in War Zone D. The PBTSZ, located approximately 45 miles northeast of Saigon and covering roughly 30 square miles, was formed by combining three provinces—Phuoc Long, Binh Long and Phuoc Thanh—under one commander. That commander was Lt. Col. Do Van Dien, an energetic and brave 26-year-old leader who was a graduate of the Ranger school at Fort Benning, Ga.

Colonel Dien had been a captain in President Diem's palace guard and had become a favorite junior officer of the president's. The plan called for the

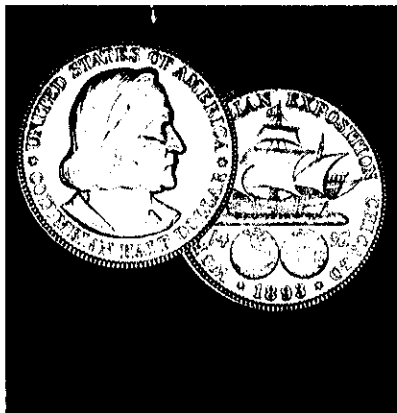
exchange of all regular ARVN units in the province for Ranger companies. Once the exchange was complete, Colonel Dien had 22 Ranger companies (including the 30th Special Battalion) under his operational control. By Christmas 1962, the 32nd ARVN Regiment was assigned to PBTSZ to bolster the force level. The Rangers usually operated in three company combat units, giving PBTSZ the equivalent of 10 battalions of infantry. The artillery support amounted to one battery of 155mm howitzers, 3½ platoons (seven tubes) of 105mm howitzers and two platoons of 4.2-inch mortars.

War Zone D had been used for years by the VC and their forebears, the Vier Minh, as a safe haven for training, resupplying and resting their combat units. As the American forces were to later find out, the area was thickly underbrushed with a dense growth of hardwood trees that made tactical unit movements slow and difficult to control and aerial observation all but impossible. The VC 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 War Zone D. Spotted throughout the zone was an extensive network of way stations, about 15 to 20 kilometers apart, that were used as stopover points for units infiltrating from North Vietnam.

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 five to 15 days. The Rangers were tightly equipped and carried six days of rations consisting of rice stuffed in a socklike cloth hung around the neck and a bottle of the omnipresent Nuoc Mam

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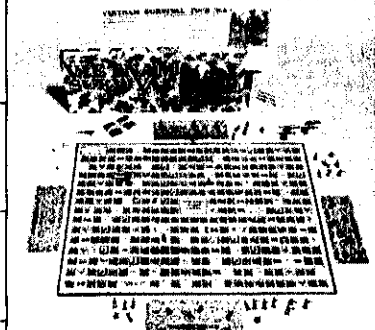
fish sauce carried in the pocket of the field pack. This was sometimes supplemented by captured rice and chickens.

Shortly after President Diem established PBTSZ, a U.S. advisory effort was organized to assist in the planning, training and operations of the new Ranger-dominated force and its mission to neutralize War Zone D. The new advisory organization consisted of a senior adviser and staff for PBTSZ, along with a senior adviser and staff for each of the three included provinces. The advisory detachment headquarters was established as Phuoc Long province headquarters in a town the French and Vietnamese called Phuoc Binh but the Americans began calling Song Be, after the river that flowed nearby. (An article, "The Fight for Song Be," was published in the premiere issue of *Vietnam Magazine*.)

The longest and most successful penetration of War Zone D by the PBTSZ Rangers was conducted between February 2 and 16, 1963, during an operation code-named "Hard Times I." The operation was planned around intelligence collected from a Viet Cong defector who claimed he knew the location of War Zone D headquarters. The first attempt to get by the VC security forces and into the inner fortress ended in disaster. Colonel Dien's deputy halted his Ranger force at approximately 1530 to allow the soldiers 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; to compound the error, the column did not move out until 0800 the next morning. The Rangers had moved only 500 meters from their campsite when 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 an old lesson—to prevent ambushes in the jungle, it is necessary to move on after supper and keep moving for a half-hour after dark before stopping for the night. Moving the next morning before first light is also essential.

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. 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 by following the original route.

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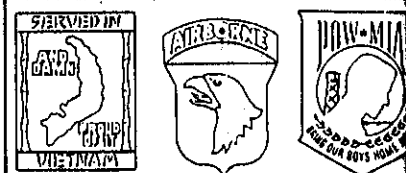
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The first encounter with the VC, and the first major decision that had to be made, came at the end of the fourth day's march. About 1730, the lead element of the column ran into a small VC way station that looked as if it might accommodate a squad. Colonel Dien halted the column and drew everyone back, leaving only a few Rangers to keep constant surveillance over the enemy camp. Luckily the VC had not been alerted. Colonel Dien was not certain of his exact location, nor—and more important—of his position in relation to the main objective. After consulting with his U.S. adviser who accompanied the column, it was decided to attack the way station just before dawn the next morning. The rationale was simple: "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." If Zone D headquarters could not be found, a minor victory could be claimed.

The Rangers started to get into an attack position around 0400. 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 forward at double time to support the lead elements. During the confusion of the next 30 to 45 minutes, it was difficult to piece together exactly what was happening. After the momentum of the Ranger attack carried through a large base area complex, it was evident that something big had been hit. The Rangers picked up one wounded VC and brought in another who had voluntarily surrendered.

Through interrogation of these two prisoners, it was discovered that Zone D headquarters had been found 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 a delaying action. The wounded VC, who had been a sergeant in the security platoon, died several hours later. The man 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

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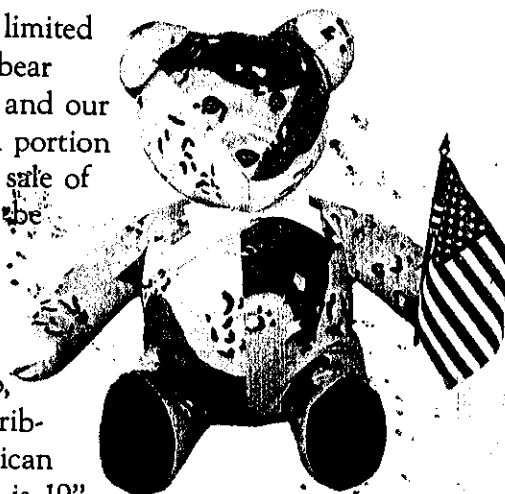
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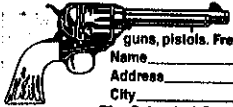
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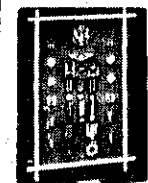
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months and provided the best intelligence yet received on VC operations in Zone D. During a thorough search of the camp, many documents that had been left behind were uncovered, one of which had a complete roster and a list of all VC unit designations in War Zone D.

The political officer indicated that he knew the location of other installations. At about 1400, the column set out to find these camps. An hour later, an area that was honeycombed with bunkers and cleared fire lanes was found. Three elaborate defensive positions were not occupied. Apparently the VC had decided not to stand and defend but to move out and try to catch the Rangers off guard. Several other small camps and many bunkers were also found, 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. The Rangers moved that night, with Colonel Dien acting as compass and point man, until an hour after dark to shake off any VC that might be following.

Zone D headquarters had been occupied on February 8 and the operation lasted until February 16. Subsequent VC base camps that were discovered included a 200-man hospital, a training center and ordnance depot, and a battalion base camp. By February 15 all of the Rangers were fairly well exhausted and the column walked out of Zone D and occupied Dong Xai without incident.

That operation, the longest sustained operation in War Zone D ever conducted by the Vietnamese, was a great psychological victory for the Rangers. The operation clearly demonstrated how small units of Rangers could effectively operate from five to six days without resupply—move through the jungle, find base camps, destroy them, and keep moving without being defeated by the enemy in his own backyard.

The aggregate experience of the operations confirmed the lessons 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 when inspired by outstanding leadership such as that provided by Colonel Do Van Dien. □

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