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"ADVISING AS A PRELUDE TO
COMMAND"

BY

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INTRODUCTION

This essay reviews the author's experiences while serving as the Senior Adviser to the Commander of Phouc Binh Thanh Special Zone, Republic of Vietnam and highlights the lessons learned during three selected Vietnamese ranger operations conducted in War Zone D during the period November 1962 to July 1963. The operations are viewed from the perspective of present events in Vietnam and how the lessons learned in 1962-63 influenced and assisted the author in 1966-67 as an infantry battalion commander fighting with US troops in the adjacent area of War Zone C.

The story of operations with the Vietnamese rangers in War Zone D is told in narrative style to underscore the personal challenges and hardships from which the lessons learned in jungle fighting were hypothesized. It is believed that a detailed description of the environment and insights into the psychological pressures experienced during these operations will provide a better understanding of the tactical judgments expressed in this essay. On the other hand, the tactical principles which shaped US battalion operations in 1966-67 are outlined without support of a combat narrative. This is done mainly to emphasize the imposed tactical restraints during the second tour rather than to recount personal battle experiences.

BACKGROUND

Phouc Binh Thanh Special Zone was created by presidential decree on 15 November 1962 for the purpose of centralizing the

Republic of Vietnam's efforts to eliminate the long standing VC threat in War Zone D. It was formed by combining three provinces--Phouc Long, Binh Long, and Phouc Thanh (now defunct)--under one commander and exchanging regular Army of Vietnam (ARVN) companies for ranger companies. Once the exchange was complete the Vietnamese commander had 22 ranger companies under his operational command. By Christmas 1962 the 32d ARVN Regiment was assigned to Phouc Binh Thanh Special Zone (PBTSZ) to bolster the force level. Since the rangers usually operated in three company units, PBTSZ had the equivalent force of ten battalions of infantry. The artillery support amounted to one battery of 155mm howitzers, 3 1/2 platoons (7 tubes) of 105mm howitzers, and 2 platoons of 4.2" mortars.

The area of War Zone D is located approximately 45 miles northeast of Saigon and roughly covers 30 square miles. It is as menacing and as forbidding today as it was six years ago. There are still portions of this jungle fortress that have not been penetrated by US forces. For years the Viet Cong, and the Viet Minh before them, have used the thickly under-brushed, hardwood forests of Zone D as a safe haven for training, resupplying, and resting their combat battalions. After many months of operations, it was discovered that 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 in this inner fortress, while the security forces operated around the outer limits of this center area. Spread throughout

the zone was an extensive network of waystations that were used as stop-over points for units infiltrating from North Vietnam. The waystations were about 15 to 20 kilometers apart and served very much the same purpose as our ~~pony express stations~~ stage coach stop did in the old west. During these operations, we found that most of the VC installations were within 500 meters of the twisting MaDa River which ran through the middle of the war zone. This was simply an accommodation to be near the water supply. See map at inclosure 1.

Normally the tactics adopted 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. See map showing traces of penetrations, inclosure 2. 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 a pocket of the pack. In many instances, rations were supplemented by captured rice and chickens.

The operations during this period were successful because the Vietnamese military commander, Lieutenant Colonel Do Van Dien, had the energy and the will to follow through with his plans. He accompanied his rangers on operations in the jungle and personally led his men in attacks on VC base camps.

OPERATIONS

Zone D, 1962-63

Our first operation started early the morning of 19 November 1962, in what was described at the time as the largest

helicopter-borne operation of any war.[1] Forty-two helicopters flew the equivalent of two stripped-down ranger battalions to their destination. One airborne battalion jumped in support of the operation. As the operation was planned, we were to seize four objectives and make a river crossing within a 12-day period. It was a carefully thought-out, phased operation that included an inflexible time schedule fixed by a definite date to cross the Dong Nai River. A reinforced engineer company with security forces was helicoptered into the crossing site on D+3 to prepare a bridge for a crossing on D+5. The crossing was to be conducted 20 kilometers and two objectives away from the original LZ.

An airstrike, 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 landing and upon assembly to become the reserve force. Instead of following the plan, they jumped prior to the landing, and on the objective. Needless to say with prelanding airstrikes, the early airborne battalion assault and 42 helicopters in the air, what hopes there were for gaining surprise, quickly faded. In spite of these blatant forewarnings, in three days of local operations in the vicinity of the first objective, three VC were captured and five small installations uncovered. Four American advisers with the rangers, as well as the Vietnamese commander, assessed that more could be

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[1] Richard Tregaskis, Vietnam Diary (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 207.

captured if a longer time could be spent in the area. Knowing that we had not even begun to follow through on the intelligence already collected, higher Vietnamese headquarters ordered adherence to the original plan, thus the ranger force moved on to the next objective. As we left the initial objective area, we all had the distinct feeling that a great opportunity had been lost. After attacking another VC waystation in the second objective area and just before the rangers arrived at the Dong Nai River, the operation was suddenly called off for reasons which were never fully explained or understood at that time.

This operation taught us two valuable lessons. First, never again would we telegraph our intentions to the VC by using large numbers of helicopters as flying trucks. On all subsequent operations, we walked into the jungle and helicopter support was limited to resupply missions. Second, we avoided phased operations set by a definite time schedule. Other operations were to point out the success that could be obtained by staying in an area long enough to get good intelligence and have time to act on it. We would find that it takes three to four days to fully exploit the up-to-date information volunteered by VC captured on the operation.

* * *

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 the map by a former North Vietnamese first sergeant who had defected from D 15 several weeks earlier. The operation began on 21 December 1961

from the crossroads town of Dong Xai, which in May 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 22 December. 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. See map inclosure 1. (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 deep concern over the necessity for speed caused us to adopt a course of action, which in more normal circumstances, no one 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 which would be remembered.

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. 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 to his front by keeping his eye on the luminescent twig. Without this assistance from nature, the only thing that would have brought us through 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 glowing 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 man 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 Colonal 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. See sketch map inclosure 3. The surprise gained by the overnight march through the jungle had evaporated in one 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 seventy 75mm 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 to Dong Xai. That noon the rangers 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 adviser'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.

* * *

The longest and most successful penetration of War Zone D by the PBTSZ rangers was conducted between 2 and 16 February 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 sent his deputy as commander of 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 dark before stopping for the night. Darkness in the jungle will protect any force. Moving the next morning at 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 by following 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 waystation 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 waystation 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 consultating with my deputy, one the the two other US advisers on the operation, I recommended that we attack the waystation 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 waystation 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 leadtime to warn D Zone 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 leadtime 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 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 months and provided the best intelligence we had 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. 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 eleaborate 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 rose early 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, radioed back to base camp, and had helicopters fly us out additional supplies. 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 8 February 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 16 February. 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 unforgettable meals 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 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 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 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. 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.

The 3d Battalion of the 21st Infantry, "Gimlets" was part of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, which had been activated at Fort Devens, Massachusetts in August 1965, and had arrived in Vietnam in August 1966. The brigade was organized on a "train and retain" basis, which in my judgment proved highly successful in producing an effective fighting unit. For one year the entire brigade had trained together in tactics designed to find and defeat the Viet Cong. When the brigade established its postions to the northwest of Tay Ninh City, the troops were ready for their mission.

The first mouth was spent preparing the base camp and assisting the Philippine Civic Action Group construct its base camp, which formed the other 180° of the 196th's defense perimenter. During the next two months the three infantry battalions of the brigade were fairly much on their own to conduct operations in specifically assigned areas. It was in this phase of operations that the lessons learned during the previous tour had their greatest influence. I might note at this point that my battalion S3 had had a previous tour as an adviser to a Vietnamese Civil Guard battalion in Binh Dinh Province. His experience reinforced the notions on how to fight the VC that I had acquired during my War Zone D advisory days. With this commonality of experience, we developed plans for the rifle companies to operate on their own with resupplies flown in every three days. The company commanders were trained for this, and relished the idea of taking their companies out on independent missions. These preliminary company operations

conducted more or less as training missions proved again that continued movement on the ground could provide surprise and give the needed security to an infantry unit.

During this phase of the brigade's break-in period, some companies from the other infantry battalions in the brigade were operating under the prevalent US tactical doctrine of relying on overwhelming firepower and paying less attention to surprise and stealth. Because of the country-wide compulsion that US commanders were under to stick to this SOP, the basic tenets of this doctrine are spelled out below.

Offensively, most operations were helicopter assaults which would begin with an artillery preparation, gunship passes and air on call. Since this was SOP, it was followed whether the particular objective needed it or not. Usually after the operation was underway, the many higher commanders, who were directly concerned with what was happening on the ground, would be in their "command choppers" stacked up at various altitudes above the action. At the slightest provocation from the ground action, these commanders would invariably urge a troop pull back in order to bring in massive firepower. The tendency from higher headquarters was always to do it with firepower rather than stealth and movement.

In the defense, supporters of this way of operating accepted the fact that the VC would know where you were and would attack in strength at the weakest point. Therefore, the best approach was to prepare a strong perimeter defense each night. The SOP, in this situation, prescribed that US units stop about 1530 every day and arrange to have night defensive kits brought in by

helicopter. The standard kits consisted of barb wire, claymore mines, night scopes, mortars and sand bags. This always meant having supper at a site selected in the early afternoon and spending about four hours digging in before nightfall. Artillery defensive concentrations were always fired as a precautionary measure to have fire support available on a moment's notice. This particular arrangement always assured that an infantry company was seldom overrun; however, it also gave the VC sufficient time to plan and carry out night long harassing attacks with some casualties among the US troops and usually an undetermined number of casualties for the VC. It really was a button-up attitude that placed the infantry on the defense and inadvertently made a unit an easy target for the VC. In many instances, defensive positions at night are unavoidable and necessary, but in many other situations they are not necessary and can be avoided.

From my observations, on the other hand, when companies or even platoons operated following the concepts of stealth and movement, the results were inevitably to decrease US casualties and increase the known VC kills. On several independent company and platoon operations in which units of the 21st Infantry walked into an area and stayed three days without resupply, the infantry squads were able to surprise small enemy installations and win decisive victories with no US casualties. The results were never dramatic, but the kill ratios were always favorable. This system appeared to produce results quickly, although with numerically less VC casualties than were obtained by the larger scale operations with their attendant mass logistical and heavy fire support demands.

The larger-scale helliborne, air, and artillery supported operations invariably telegraphed our intentions and thus made it more difficult for the US units to locate the VC. When contact was made during battalion size operations, it was almost always made on the enemy's initiative. The results were usually more VC bodycount, but with a corresponding rise in US casualties. The higher bodycount always brought resounding praise from all commanders, which, among other things, perpetuated the planning of large unit operations.

Although I had a bias for small unit, surprise-type operations based on previous experience as an adviser, large-scale, heavily supported operations are necessary, particularly around VC base camp areas, and are quite effective when well planned. It was certainly true when my battalion did engage a regular VC or North Vietnamese unit, particularly if it were a well defended base camp, the timely coordination of air and artillery fires was key to defeating the VC with minimum friendly casualties. There were about five instances during my seven months as battalion commander when the coordination of all fires on a base camp proved to be the deciding factor.

Whereas the need for massive fire support occurred only five times in seven months, the established SOPs resulted in my using air, artillery, and gunships almost on a daily basis. Practically every operational plan called for helicopters and fire support. The reliance on, and propensity to use, all available support caused me to seriously question the need for such extravagance, particularly when the situation seemed to dictate otherwise. This feeling was made even more poignant since it had been proven to me that surprise and stealth in the jungle were just as effective with less logistical

effort. Our tactical doctrine, I concluded, must take into account both extremes, using both techniques, depending on the situation. The two cases might be characterized as "the heavy hand versus the light touch."

One of the most indelible impressions of my War Zone D tour was the correctness of the theorem that operational success was in direct proportion to the amount of time spent in an area. It always took four or five days to become sufficiently acquainted with the local terrain and inhabitants to make effective estimates. Accurate intelligence became available at a faster rate after the initial "thrashing around" period than it did in the beginning of an operation. This theory was corroborated during my second tour. The difficulty was, that given the amount of available helicopter support, it was always tempting for higher headquarters to order the "Gimlets" picked up and taken to an unknown area where someone had seen a VC soldier disappearing into the jungle. This "pick up and put down" tactic was glamorous and hard charging, but it was more difficult to keep up with the situation and consequently, to maintain the subordinate unit's enthusiasm for each new adventure. There is a need to have the ability to keep the VC off balance by rapid reaction, however, it need not be practiced to the exclusion of the more thorough if not slower moving, tactical doctrine.

Other commanders in Vietnam have had similar feelings towards the use of more ground tactics and less emphasis on fire and helicopter support. In reporting on some of General Willard Pearson's views, a columnist stated:

> One of Pearson's somewhat heretical notions--for an airborne general--is that the helicopter makes too much noise. Troops should enter a guerrilla battlefield on foot, stealthily and in small units. The helicopters can then come thundering in with reinforcements, making all the noise they want--but after the smaller units have flushed or pinned the enemy.
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> Another view not shared by other generals is in the use of harassing artillery fire in support of ground operations. 'It doesn't do much good and discloses what friendly units are in the area,' Pearson says.[2]

The author goes on to tell of General Pearson's successes in the First Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division in using these tactics. He continues to quote General Pearson:

> He wants more night patrols, night operations by the choppers, smaller and lighter patrols with the men living five days or so alone in the jungle.
>
> 'We believe we should outfox him, out guerrilla him,' Pearson says. 'Once control is established we can throw off our own guerrilla cloak and react violently, destroy him with superior firepower and mobility. We believe in clandestine entry to the battlefield, marching at night or using stay-behind forces to catch him when he returns.'[3]

It appears that those who have put their faith in the infantryman's ability to use the "light touch" method have been rewarded by success and have become avid supporters of small unit operations. Many commanders have tried only the "heavy hand" method and have been unwilling to take a chance, as they saw it, to fight the infantry the way it should be fought. Not

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[2]George McArthur, "Screaming Eagles Sharpen Claws with New Tactics," New York World Journal Tribune, February 5, 1967, p. 23.

[3]Ibid.

to use both techniques is like a golfer concentrating on his tee shots but neglecting his putting.

The latest reports from Vietnam reveal that the US military campaign of 1968 apparently has reversed the previous emphasis and become more small unit oriented than in preceding years.[4] David Hoffman has reported in the Washington Post:

> The Mekong Delta hunting ground of the US 9th Infantry Division has become a kind of laboratory for the invention and testing of small battle tactics.
>
> Not for more than a month has the 9th Division tangled with a Vietcong unit larger than a reinforced platoon. But despite the dearth of major battles in a traditional VC stronghold, the division has reported killing 800 to 1000 Communists per month since early September, at the cost of relatively few American lives.[5]

Perhaps this is an inevitable trend with many of the VC main force units pushed across the borders into base sanctuaries, as well as the increased emphasis on pacification operations, which has kept US units in closer to the urban areas. While this paper criticizes the overuse of the heavy hand method, full credit is given to the fact that the massive US military effort has provided the opportunity for this recent change in tactics.

CONCLUSIONS

The year spent advising Vietnamese rangers on operations in War Zone D prepared me for conducting small unit, mobile operations

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[4]See "A Different War Now, with Abrams in Command," US News & World Report, August 23, 1968, p. 12.

[5]Tuesday, November 26, 1968, p. A15.

using stealth and cunning with the minimum air, artillery, and helicopter support. Those operations proved successful against the VC in well entrenched jungle positions. Moreover, the "light touch" learned through the rigorous experiences of 1962-63 was enriched by the experiences of using massive firepower and the helicopter during US battalion operations in 1966-67.

The lessons learned during the first tour were extremely valuable, if not the source of some frustrations during the second tour. Perhaps the value of an advisory experience combined with command experience is the realization of the broad spectrum of tactics that can be used effectively. US field tactics must stress the need to use firepower and helicopters in their proper role and not let availability, fear and inexperience take the lead in determining what tactic to use. Small unit operations, stealth, surprise, and movement should always be the basic manner in which counter-insurgency operations are conducted. Firepower and helicopter support should be used, not because they are available, but because the circumstances demand their use. In sum, all methods of operating must be within the US military's capabilities and the propensity to use the "heavy hand" or "light touch" should be based on the dictates of the situation and the US should develop in its leaders the confidence to use either one.

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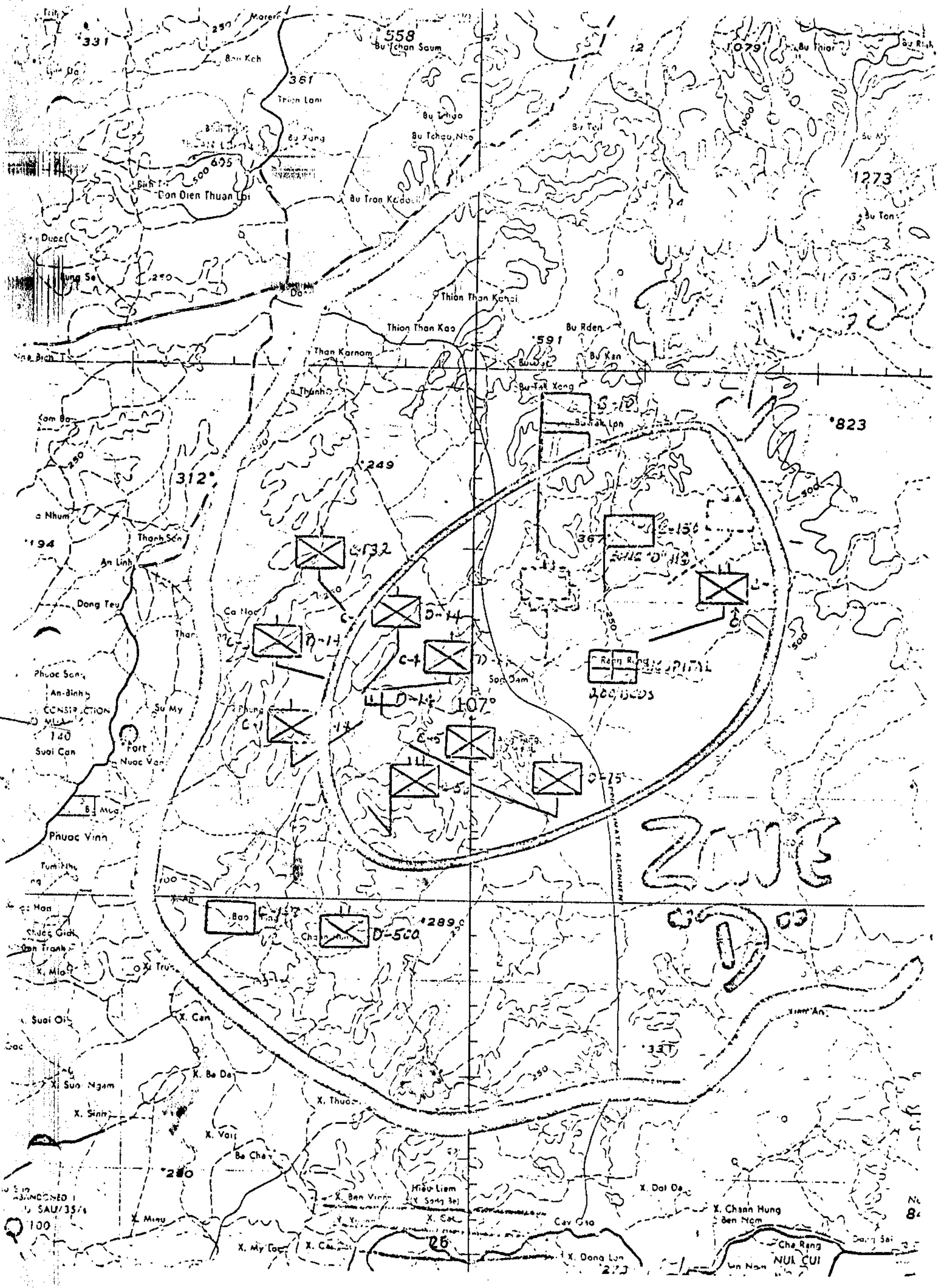

331
558
Bu Tchan Saum
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X. Be Dai
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X. Sinh
X. Voi
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ABANDONED
SAU/35
100
Hieu Liem
X. Ben Vinh
X. Sat
X. Dat Do
X. Chanh Hung
Ben Nom
X. Dong Lon
Cay Gao
X. My Loc
NUI CUI
Cha Rang
Xien An

PHUOC - BINH - THANH SPECIAL ZONE