



First Battle

Combat experience submitted by Captain Bisantz for use by Project Share.

Introduction:

The 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division arrived in the central highlands during the 1965 Christmas Season. On 22 February 1966, following local base area security operations and extensive route security work along Highway 19, the Brigade jumped off on OPERATION GARFIELD. This was a search and destroy, border surveillance operation which was to continue, with a name change to LINCOLN, until 5 May 1966. Initially the Brigade

air lifted from Pleiku to Ban Me Thout where a forward base was established. Working north, in the area bounded by Highway 14 on the east and the Cambodian Border on the west, the battalions met little resistance although there were extensive indications that NVA forces had been in the area recently. About 10 March the Brigade Base Camp moved north to the abandoned air strip at Buon Brieng.

On 9 March an Eagle Flight from Company A, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, received ground fire while reconning an LZ. Subsequently the entire company was lifted into the area, but contact was not regained. On 10 March the remaining elements of the 1/35th were lifted into the area, and extensive patrolling activity began. A battalion base consisting of the Battalion TAC CP, the Recon Plat, the 4.2 platoon and a battery of 105mm Howitzers was established. Company A was given the mission of securing the battalion base and providing the battalion's ready reserve force. Up to this time no element of the 3d Brigade had had any major contact with the enemy.

Narrative:

About EENT on 14 March two reinforced squad size ambush patrols moved out of the perimeter and proceeded toward their previously reconned positions east and west of the Battalion CP along the trail complex adjacent to the EA WY. The patrol moving west had moved about 500 yards, halfway to their position, when the point man came face to face with an NVA patrol

point man coming toward the battalion's position. Both men fired immediately and ducked for cover. The rest of the squad immediately came on line, initiated assault fire, and moved forward against sporadic enemy fire. The squad leader, SSG R. C. Williams, prudently halted the squad when he came abreast of the point man. By this time all enemy fire had ceased and it was completely dark. On the orders from battalion, the squad returned to the perimeter and prepared to occupy their ambush positions later in the night. There had been no friendly casualties, and enemy casualties were unknown.

Extensive mortar H & I fires were initiated in the contact area and continued through the evening. At approximately 0100 hours the base was hit with a heavy enemy mortar barrage. An estimated 125 to 130 mortar rounds fell in a tight dispersion pattern in the western, unoccupied end of the LZ. Counter mortar fire was immediately started with unknown results. There were no friendly casualties, and the enemy fire came no nearer than 50 meters to friendly positions. H & I fires in the area were resumed with new intensity, and the 3d Platoon of Company A was alerted to prepare to move out on a combat patrol at first light.

About 0600 hours the 3d Platoon reached the point of the previous night's contact and found many blood trails in the area. Moving on a little bit further they found approximately 18 rounds of 81mm and 82mm mortar ammunition.

The platoon was directed to continue its patrol west along the trail complex adjacent to the stream. By noon they had moved about 2500 meters and requested further instructions. At the same time as the Platoon Leader, 2LT Pat Lenz, was receiving orders to return to battalion, the point man, SP4 Hood, came upon some WD-1 phone wire laid along the edge of the stream bed. He passed the word back and cautiously moved forward. The platoon leader ordered his trail squad to move upon the left side of the platoon to cover the other bank of the stream. Almost simultaneously the point element of the platoon opened fire on a squad of NVA soldiers deploying to their front.

The platoon leader immediately sent his platoon SGT, PSG Jones, and an RTO to check a clearing on the platoon's right rear. He deployed his platoon on line and began to assault the enemy. The volume of enemy fire increased greatly, and the platoon was almost immediately on the defensive. The platoon leader received a wound in the thigh, and several other men, including two squad leaders, SSGs Holbrook and Williams, were wounded and killed in the first few seconds. Realizing he was greatly outnumbered, the platoon leader ordered a withdrawal toward the clearing at his right rear.

Throughout this period radio contact with the platoon leader's RTO had been sporadic at best, due to his location in the stream bed; however, the platoon's second RTO who was with the platoon SGT was able to relay messages between the platoon leader and company commander. At this

time a FAC from a sister battalion was orbiting the scene, and after some difficulty he was able to locate the platoon and direct an air strike. Napalm and 20mm cannon was dropped with 50 meters of friendly forces and stopped the NVA assault just as it was about to overrun the platoon.

When the initial contact was reported, 3d Brigade diverted all available lift into the battalion CP, and within 15 minutes there were sufficient helicopters to lift a platoon. The 1st Platoon, commanded by 2LT Richard Coleman, was loaded and lifted to the LZ. The 3d Platoon had been calling continually for reinforcements. The gunships had been unable to put down suppressive fire because of the intermingled forces at the edge of the LZ. The pilots of the 170th Aviation Company did not hesitate however, and at the cost of one pilot killed and three crewmen wounded, the 1st Platoon was landed. Two of its members were killed before they hit the ground. The platoon immediately attacked the enemy and secured the LZ, killing 15 NVA soldiers within 30 meters of the edge of the clearing.

The 2d Platoon, commanded by 2LT James Kelsey, was lifted in about 15 minutes behind the 1st Platoon. They immediately deployed to form half of a pincers against the enemy force which had retreated into prepared positions. As the fight progressed the Battalion S3 had gone airborne in an OH-23 to coordinate the troop lift and supporting artillery fire. The area south of the contact was kept sealed off with steady fire from two 105 batteries. At about 1500 hours Company B 1/35 was lifted

into an LZ about 2 kilometers west of the contact area and ordered to sweep east in an attempt to catch the fleeing NVA forces. They were successful in killing two and capturing one.

By 1500 hours it was apparent the enemy had decided to quit the battlefield under the cover of a cleverly concealed small stay-behind-force which was effectively slowing the advance of Company A. Reduction of these positions was a bunker by bunker operation requiring the use of M-72 LAW and grenades. The enemy positions were cleared by 1630 and Company B came from the west to link up at 1730 hours. By dark all captured enemy material had been evacuated, and a perimeter had been established. An analysis of the enemy positions and the number of enemy dead (48) indicated that the 3d Platoon had been opposed by a reinforced NVA company (approximately 150-200 men). Approximately 18 individual weapons (CHICOM carbines, AK-47) and 2 lt machineguns were captured along with numerous packs, documents, and field gear. Friendly losses were 10 KIA and 20 WIA.

Analysis:

The ambush patrol, in its meeting engagement, apparently disrupted the enemy's plan to mortar the battalion base.

Early the next morning the combat patrol succeeded in gaining contact with the enemy, the first definitive contact the brigade had had on Operation Garfield. The results of this contact and other patrols in that area revealed

an extensive, well established enemy infiltration route whose prior existence had not been known. Subsequent friendly activity resulted in the destruction of several enemy waystations, campsite, and training areas, the seizure of a large ammunition cache, and a battalion supply cache complete with unit flags, history, and payroll documents.

Captured documents at the scene of the battle indicated that the NVA forces had been expecting US activity in the area to the extent that operation plans against US forces had been prepared. Why these plans had not been executed is open to speculation. Later analysis tended to indicate that the aggressiveness and firepower of the US units coupled with the relatively slow reaction time of the NVA units prevented their massing for attack purposes.

Lessons Learned:

NVA forces will not offer battle against US units unless they have a great superiority in numbers or are caught by surprise. In this particular case both conditions were present. As soon as the 3d Platoon began to receive reinforcements, the enemy main body withdrew under cover of a small holding force. The US troops had also found the enemy in what the enemy thought was their secure, undetected base. In fact, the area where the battle took place had been patrolled two days before with negative results.

Artillery alone will not prevent exfiltration of enemy forces from an objective area. The NVA ability to break down into small groups and slip

out of the battle area under the protection of stay-behind covering forces is well known. In this case sufficient troops and lift were not available to completely encircle the enemy, and as a result a large portion of the enemy force escaped.

Landing zones are critical terrain in this part of RVN. The existence of the landing zone and the platoon leader's immediate realization of its importance meant the difference between defeat and victory.

All bases must be protected by aggressive patrolling. The longer the base is occupied the more extensive the patrolling should be. In this case a small patrol completely nullified the effectiveness of an enemy mortar attack.

RTOs at all levels must be especially selected and trained so as to act intelligently and correctly under adverse conditions. For a period of about 20 minutes the platoon's only contact with the company and all supporting fires, including the FAC, was by relay through a relatively inexperienced junior RTO. Through his previous training and knowledge of SOPs for adjustment of artillery and TAC air, he was able to keep the company commander informed of the situation and influence the outcome of the battle.

Field wire laid along a trail or stream bed should first be followed by TAC air and/or artillery fire, and then by patrols. In this particular case the discovery of the wire and engagement with the enemy were almost simultaneous, but it was made SOP that in the future wire would not be followed until extensive fire support could be brought to bear on the suspected enemy location.