VIETNAM PRIMER

BY S. L. A. MARSHALL

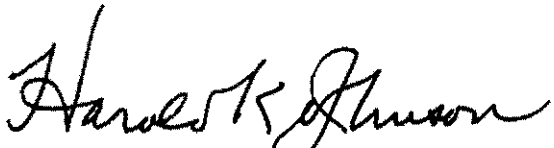
LESSONS LEARNED

HEADQUARTERS, DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

FOREWORD

The two authors of this study went to Vietnam in early December 1966 on a 90-day mission, one as a private citizen with vast experience in analyzing combat operations, the other, a Regular Army officer representing the Army's Chief of Military History. Their collaborative task was to train combat historians in the technique of the postcombat interview. In the course of conducting six schools for officers selected for this duty in Vietnam, they put into practice the principles they advocated, and from their group interrogation of the men who had done the fighting, they were able to reconstruct most of the combat actions of the preceding six months, including all but one of the major operations. The present work emerged from this material.

Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall, Retired, longtime friend of the Army, and Lieutenant Colonel David Hackworth, veteran of a year's combat in Vietnam as a brigade executive and infantry battalion commander, have pooled their experience and observations to produce an operational analysis that may help American soldiers live longer and perform better in combat. Their study is presented not as the official solution to all the ills that beset combat troops in Vietnam but as the authors' own considered corrective and guide for the effective conduct of small unit operations. Although it does not necessarily reflect Department of the Army doctrine, it can be read with profit by all soldiers.



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A critique of U.S. Army tactics and command practices in the small combat unit digested from historical research of main fighting operations from May 1966 to February 1967.

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The material presented in this pamphlet was prepared by Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall, U.S. Army, Retired, and Lieutenant Colonel David H. Hackworth, Infantry; and the opinions contained herein do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the Department of the Army.

LESSONS LEARNED

VIETNAM PRIMER

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THE POST-ACTION CRITIQUE

All of the lessons and discussion presented in this brief document are the distillate of after action group interviews with upwards of a hundred rifle companies and many patrols and platoons that have engaged independently in Vietnam.

Every action was reconstructed in the fullest possible detail, including the logistical and intelligence data, employment of weapons, timing and placement of battle losses in the unit, location of wounds, etc. What is said herein of the enemy derives in whole from what officers and men who have fought him in battle learned and reported out of their experience. Nothing has been taken from any intelligence document circulated to the United States Army. The document therefore is in itself evidence of the great store of information about the Viet Cong that can be tapped by talking with men of our combat line, all of which knowledge lies waste unless someone makes the effort.

The briefer company actions went less than one hour. The longest lasted two days and more. The average ran about three and one-half hours. To reconstruct a fight over that span of time required from seven to eight hours of steady interrogation.

Soon after engagement, any combat unit commander can do this same thing—group interview his men until he knows all that happened to them during the fire fight. In their interest, in his own interest, and for the good of the Army he cannot afford to do less. There is no particular art to the work; so long as exact chronology is maintained in developing the story of the action, and so long as his men feel confident that he seeks nothing from them but the truth, the whole truth, the results will come. Every division and every independent brigade in Vietnam has at least one combat historian. He is charged with conducting this kind of research; he can also assist and advise any unit commander who would like to know how to do it on his own.

Special rewards come to the unit commander who will make the try. Nothing else will give him a closer bond with his men. Not until he does it will he truly know what they did under fire. Just as the critique is a powerful stimulant of unit morale, having all the warming effect of a good cocktail on an empty stomach, and even as it strengthens each soldier's appreciation of his fellows, it enables troops to understand for the first time the multitudinous problems and pressures devolving on the commander. They will go all the better for him the next time out and he will have a much clearer view of his human resources. Combat does have a way of separating the men from the boys; but on the other hand the boys want to be classed with the men, and influence of a number of shining examples in their midst does accelerate the maturing process. The seasoning of a combat outfit comes fundamentally from men working together under stress growing in knowledge of one another.

Mistakes will be brought out during the critique. Their revelation cannot hurt the unit or the man. Getting it out in the clear is one way—probably the only way—to relieve feelings and clear the atmosphere, provided the dignity of all present is maintained during the critique. Should the need for a personal admonishment or advice become indicated, that can be reserved until later.

Far more important, deeds of heroism and high merit, unknown to the leader until that hour, become known to all hands. From this knowledge will come an improved awards system based on a standard of justice that will be commonly acknowledged. Men not previously recognized as possessing the qualities for squad and platoon leading will be viewed in a new light and moved toward promotion that all will know is deserved.

No richer opportunity than this may be put before the commander of a combat company or battery or the sergeant who leads a patrol into a

fight. He who hesitates to take advantage of it handicaps himself more than all others. If he does not know where he has been, he can never be certain where he is going.

That is to say, in the end, that something is lacking in his military character—a "zeal to close the circuit," which is the mark of the good combat leader.

THE CORE OF THE PROBLEM

Though it may sound like a contradiction to speak first of the tactics of engaging fortifications in a war where the enemy of the United States is a hit-and-run guerrilla, seeking more at the present time to avoid open battle than to give it except when he imagines that the terms are more than moderately favorable to his side, a moment's reflection will sustain the logic of the approach.

His fortified areas almost invariably present the greatest difficulty to U.S. tactical forces, and it is when we voluntarily engage them that our loss rates are most immoderate. At no other technique is he more skilled than in the deceptive camouflaging of his fortified base camps and semifortified villages. There, even nature is made to work in his favor; trees, shrubs, and earth itself are reshaped to conceal bunker locations and trench lines. Many of these locations are found temporarily abandoned, thus presenting only the problem of how to wreck them beyond possibility of further use. On the other hand, when he chooses to fight out of any one of them, the choice is seldom if ever made because he is trapped beyond chance of withdrawal, but because he expects to inflict more than enough hurt on Americans in the attack to warrant making a stand.

And there is more to it than that. The fortified base camps and villages are the pivots of the Communist aggression. Denied their use, the movement would wither. The primary problem of defeating the North Vietnam Army (NVA) south of 17th Parallel and the ultimate problem of destroying the Viet Cong (VC) between that line and the southern extremity of the Delta are joined in the tactical task of eliminating their fortified areas with maximum economy of force.

Years of labor and mountains of irreplaceable material have gone into building this network of strong camps over the country. It is the framework that sustains irregular operations, and a semiguerrilla army can no more get along without it than a conventional army can hold the field when cut off from its main bases. Yet there is no such camp or armed village in Vietnam today that is beyond the reach of U.S. forces. However remote and concealed, none can be moved or indefinitely kept hidden. To find and smash each, one by one, is an essential task, a prime object in conclusively successful campaigning. The Viet Cong movement cannot survive as a horde of fugitives, unidentified as they mingle with the village crowd and bury their arms in the surrounding paddies. When the fortified bases go, the infrastructure withers, and thus weakened, finally dies.

The fortified base camp is roughly circular in form with an outer rim of bunkers and foxholes enclosing a total system of living quarters—usually frame structures above ground—command bunkers, kitchens, and sleeping platforms (figs. 1 and 2). But as with the U.S. defensive perimeter, the shape will vary according to the terrain, the rise and fall of ground, and the use of natural features to restrict attack on the camp to one or two avenues. Some of the bases, and in particular those used only for training or way stations, have minimum defensive works. In all cases, however, the enemy is prepared to defend from a ground attack.

The semifortified village is usually an attenuated or stretched-out set of hamlets, having length rather than breadth, a restricted approach, bunkers (usually at the corners of the huts), lateral trenches, and sometimes a perpendicular trench fitted with fighting bunkers running the length of the defended area along one flank. There will be at least one exit or escape route rearward, though the position is often otherwise something of a cul-de-sac, made so by natural features. Tunnels connect the bunkers and earthworks, enabling the defenders to pop up, disappear, then fire again from another angle, a jack-in-the-box kind of maneuvering that doubles the effect of their numbers. An unfordable river may run along one flank while wide open paddy land bounds the other. The apparent lack of escape

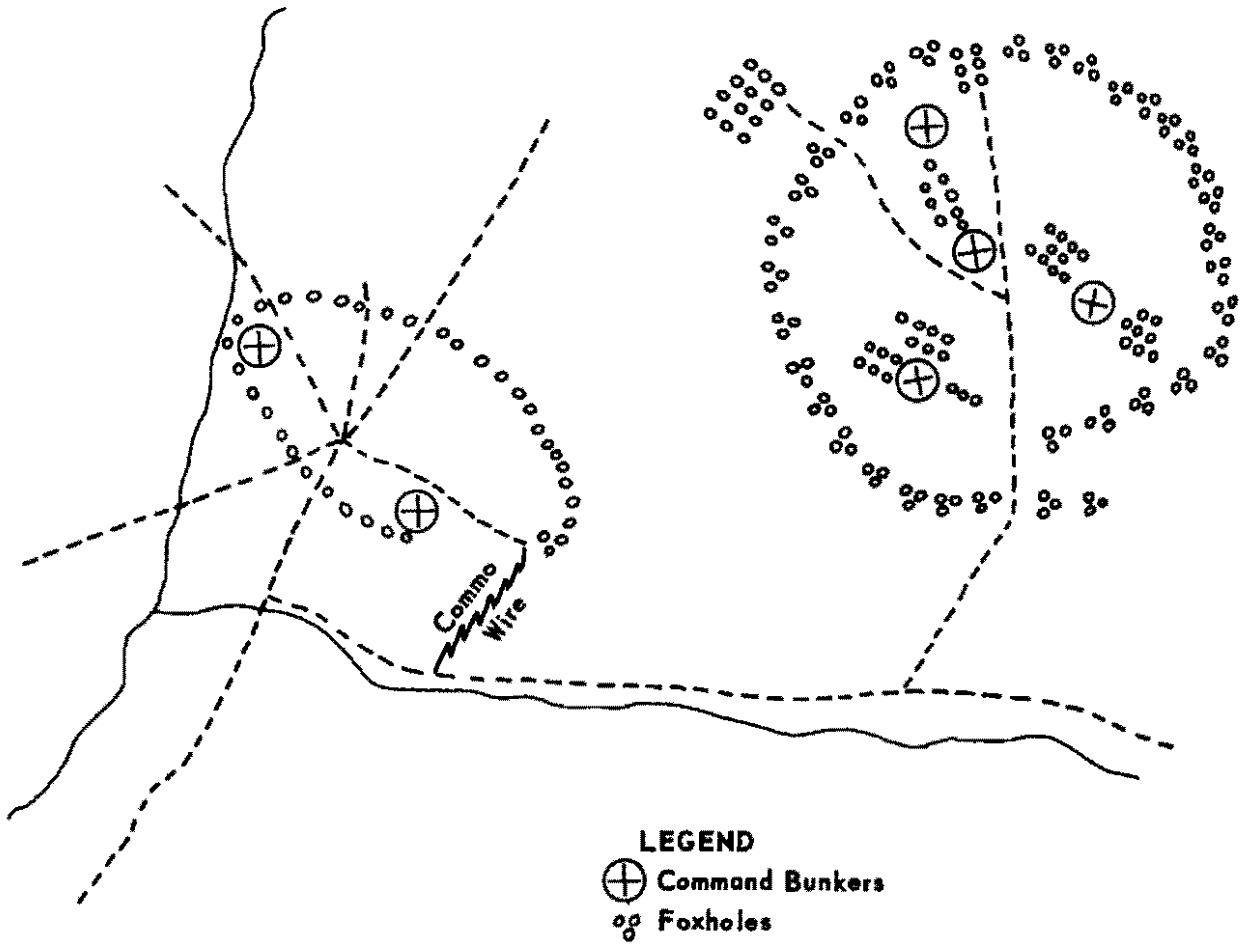

Figure 1. Battalion complex.

routes makes the position look like an ideal target for our side, with our large advantage in air power and artillery. But until bombardment has blown down most of the foliage any maneuver into the complex by infantry skirmishers is a deepening puzzle.

When the attempt is made to seal in the enemy troops, one small opening left in the chain of force, such as a ditch, the palm-grown slope of a canal bank, or a drainage pipe too small for an American to venture, will be more than enough to suit their purpose. They will somehow find it; there is nothing that they do better by day or night. It is as if they have a sixth sense for finding the way out and for taking it soundlessly. They are never encircled so long as one hole remains. Beaten, they will lose themselves in shrubbery and tree tops while the daylight lasts, get together when night closes, and make for the one exit.

Three ground units of the 1st Air Cavalry Division fought through an action of this kind in early December 1966, and took heavy losses. By dark the fight was won and resistance ended. The natural boundaries of the combat area permitted no chance for escape over 95 percent of the distance. Through a misunderstanding, the two rifle units covering the one land bridge left a 30-meter gap of flat land between their flanks. Though it was a moonlit night, the enemy remnants, estimated at two platoons or more, got away without a fight.

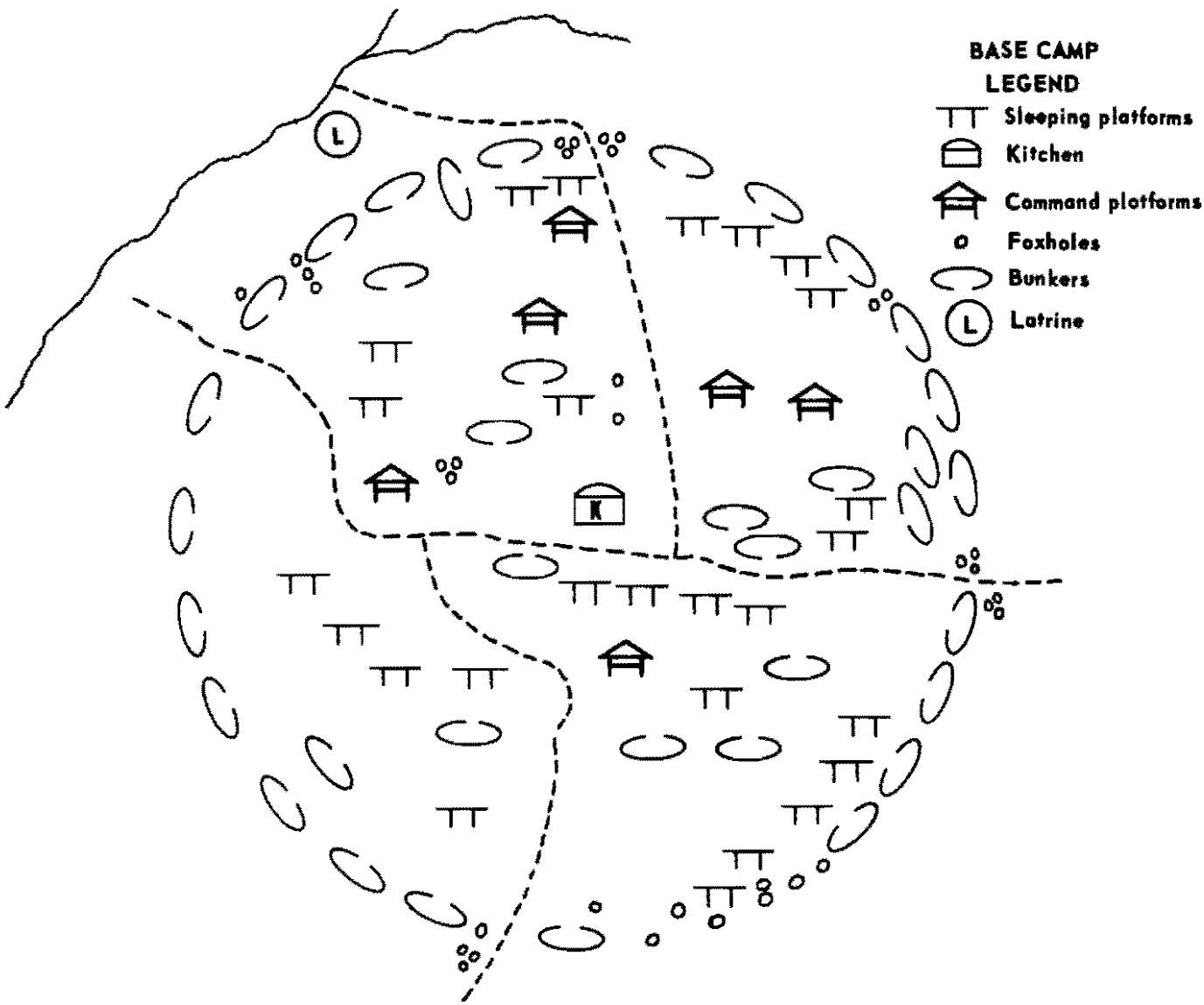

Figure 2. Enemy base camp.

LESSON ONE—THE DISTRICT ASSAULT

The record of U.S. Army operations in South Vietnam demonstrates one hard fact: a company-size attack upon an enemy fortified base camp or semifortified village, held in equal strength by NVA or VC Main Force with a determination to defend, and not subjected to intense artillery and/or air strikes beforehand, means payment of a high price by the attacker. The result of such an attempt is either ultimate withdrawal by the attacking force, too often after excessive loss, or a belated reinforcement and a more prolonged involvement than was anticipated or is judicious.

Yet the tactic seems to have a fatal allure for the average young U.S. rifle company commander. It has been many times tried and, just as often, failed. The enemy deliberately tries to make the position look weak, and hence attractive. One ruse is to leave frontal bunkers unmanned, though the approach of the attacker is known. Initial resistance will be offered by a squad minus, while within the complex a company plus is preparing to maneuver. The effort is subtly directed toward getting the attack snarled in a maze of fortifications not visible to the eye, whence extrication grows ever more difficult and advance becomes extremely costly.

The direct consequence for the rifle company that impulsively engages a position well beyond its strength, at least 50 percent of the time, will be as follows: (1) its battle order, or fighting formations, are weakened through immediate losses in its frontal element; (2) it must concentrate on the problem of extracting its casualties under fire; (3) its direct pressure against the enemy is diminished and disorganized. In short, overimpulsiveness runs counter to effective aggressiveness.

Upon contacting any such fortified position, where direct enemy fire by automatic weapons supplies proof of the intention to defend, the rifle platoon or company should thereafter immediately dispose to keep its strength and numbers (weapon power and men) latent and under cover to the full limit permitted by the environment. It may even simulate a withdrawal, continue desultory fire from its forward weapons, or seek the enemy rear when favored by terrain, weather, and light. The full-length assault is to be avoided while the heavy fires of supporting arms are brought in. The careful, fire-covered probe is the called-for expedient. The headlong rush, like the attempt at envelopment before any attempt has been made to feel out resistance, should be avoided absolutely (fig. 3).

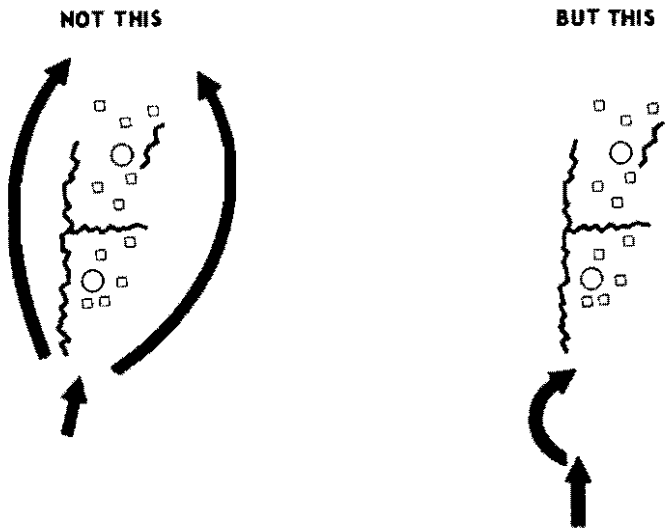

Figure 3. Attack on village.

Where environment and weather permit such intervention, artillery fires should concentrate on the rear, while tactical air targets on the enemy camp. Otherwise the effect of bombardment is likely to be the premature aborting of the position. Following bombardment, the direct frontal assault by the single rifle company should not be pressed unless reinforcement is already on its way, within 20–30 minutes of closing, in strength sufficient to engage at least one flank of the enemy position.

The attack should then proceed by the echeloning of fire teams, taking advantage of natural cover and concealed avenues of approach. Gradual advance is the one safeguard against full exposure and undue loss, as in the taking of a city. Holding at least one platoon in reserve is so much insurance against enemy attack on the flank or rear.

When casualties occur in the initial stage of encounter with the enemy in fixed positions, the extraction of WIA's by forward skirmishers should not be more than the distance required to give them the nearest protection from enemy fire. This stricture should include a relatively secure approach for the aid man. Extraction of the dead is to be delayed until the development of the action makes it unnecessary to be done under fire. Unless these rules are followed during engagement, unit action stalls around the attempt to extricate casualties, thereby yielding fire-and-movement initiative to the enemy. This effect was observed in approximately one-third of the company actions researched.

The data basis clearly indicates that the one most effective way to deal with the enemy fighting out of the fortified camp or village is to zap him with the heaviest artillery and tactical air ordnance, not to maneuver against him with infantry only. The "finding" infantry must also carry on as the "fixing" force, leaving the "finishing" to the heavy weapons that can both kill men and batter down protective works. If overextension is to be avoided, the sealing-in of the position may hardly be assigned to the unit that has initiated the action. The sealing-in is higher command's problem. Additional maneuver elements are dropped to the rear of the position, and if need be the flanks, to block likely escape routes, strike the withdrawing columns, and continue the mop-up once the enemy, realizing that our infantry in the assault will not fall victim to his subtle trap, wearies of the punishment. How far these reaction deployments are spread should depend on the topography, availability of natural cover, and all else connected with the enemy's ability to vanish into the landscape and our chance of cornering him before he does so.

LESSON TWO—WARNING AND MOVEMENT

For the rifle platoon or company to attempt envelopment of *any* village where there is some reason to suspect that it is fortified and will be defended is tactically as foolhardy as to assault directly any enemy position in a non-build-up area not subject to ground level or overhead surveillance. Reports from air observers that when seen from directly above at not more than 100 feet the village looks unguarded and unfortified are not to be considered conclusive, since it has been repeatedly shown that the enemy's skill with natural camouflage may wholly conceal at such distance a truly formidable position.

A "position" is defined for this purpose as that ground from which, on initial contact, volley or approximately synchronized fire from a number of automatic weapons is directed against the friendly unit in movement. Particularly, when the enemy opens with a mix of rifle and machine-gun fire, there is positive indication that he has not been surprised and rates himself strong enough to invite the attack. Even when he opens with random and unaimed rifle fire from somewhere in the background, this is no sure sign that he is getting away and that therefore prompt pursuit is in order. Here is a much-used VC–NVA ruse to draw the attack pell-mell into a well-concealed, defended position.

An attempt to envelop a village with light forces, when its possession of defended works or lack thereof is unknown, can only lead to dispersion of force and a regrouping at unnecessary cost when the village is defended. A careful probe on a narrow front with a fire base in readiness is the proper method. If fired upon, the unit then has two options: (a) house-by-house and bunker-by-bunker movement into the complex as in attack on any built-up area; or (b) the calling in of heavy support weapons, according to the volume and intensity of the enemy fire. Any attempt to close escape routes by surrounding a succession of hamlets prior to developing the situation by limited probing is either prohibitively hazardous or time wasting. Any direct fire out of a village serves warning. And, as previously said, so does erratic and distant fire from beyond the hamlet when it is time to the American forward movement and is roughly counter to the direction of the attack. This familiar enemy come-on is an incitement to rush into a well-laid ambush.

A sudden volley fire out of the hamlet, wood patch, or any location must prompt caution and reconsideration rather than prompt immediate forward extension in the assault. The enemy does not volley to cut and run; almost never does he do so even when his sole object is to delay and disrupt pursuit, after breaking off engagement. Furthermore, the enemy does not employ ground as we do, with emphasis on fields of fire and a superior height. He may do so some of the time; his surprises are staged most often by his choosing a position that we would rate impractical or untenable. He will fortify a ridge saddle to fire therefrom in four directions, ignoring the higher ground. Thus he can block advance via the draws or engage the attackers at close quarters when they move via the trail which often follows the spine of the ridge. Or he may rig a deadfall in front of a seeming dead-end where slopes to front and rear seem to cut off all possibilities of escape. In village defense, he will leave empty his best-situated forward bunkers covering the one track that leads into the first hamlet to create the illusion of abandonment. As a result the assault is enticed into an interior jungle of foliage-covered works and underground passages that in combination will facilitate the enemy's rapid movement from point to point. To thwart his design, the following measures are indicated:

(1) In the approach march, except when it is over terrain where observation to front and flanks removes any possibility of his immediate presence in strength, *all ground should be approached as if he were present in force.* Seldom in Vietnam are there marches over such an obviously secure area.

(2) Defended built-up areas, whether of purely military character or a native hamlet, when clearly supplied with surface works and amplified by underground passages, are not to be reckoned as proper targets for the rifle company or smaller unit operating unassisted. One or two "snipers," or riflemen operating from cover, spending a few rounds in token resistance and then fleeing, do not constitute "defense of a village" or of a wood line. Four or five enemy continuing to fire together at close range from any such location after being taken under fire should be accepted as warning that larger forces are immediately present. If the enemy force is no larger than a platoon minus, its advantage in position still warrants the prompt calling in of maximum supporting fires.

LESSON THREE—DOUBLING SECURITY

The record of more than 100 U.S. rifle companies and as many platoons that have been heavily engaged since 1 May 1966 shows unmistakably that the most frequent cause of surprise, disorganization of the unit under fire, and heavy initial losses has been excessive haste in the advance overland and outright carelessness about security.

A great part of our shock killing losses occur in the first stage of engagement. The enemy, fortunately, is not skilled at following up a first advantage in surprise fire. His musketry, when large numbers of his people engage at close range, is highly inaccurate compared to our own. Our losses in the rifle line once the fight is joined are rarely extravagant. The great wasting of lives comes of too much rushing in the movement to contact or of tactical carelessness in the first stages of engagement. A column that indulges in all-out chase of the enemy can be caught by him if it has not taken pains to make sure that it is not being followed. Or the column on departing its night location may expose its intent to continue in widely separated fractions disregarding whether its every move is under enemy observation. Or it may march blindly onto ground such as a jungle clearing when common sense dictates extreme caution.

In every incident that has involved the destruction of a platoon-size unit, the misfortune was due less to enemy guile than to our own lack of judgment. The enemy is fairly well skilled at laying ambushes and using lures and ruses to draw forces in the right direction. But he is not superhumanly clever. Applied common sense will beat his every design. It is not common sense to run chances by making haste when one is rushing straight to an entrapment. Consider two recent examples of sudden shock loss due to impetuous advance:

(1) The platoon on patrol moved out over the same route—a straight running trail—taken by a patrol the previous day. There was no periodic halt to scout enemy presence in any or all four directions. No stay-behind party was peeled off to see whether the patrol was being followed. The platoon in single file continued on the same azimuth for two hours. That line, projected, led to two large clearings in the jungle separated by less than 200 meters. The column advanced across the center of the first clearing, 125 meters wide, and on the far side of the wood line walked directly into a well-prepared ambush.

(2) The company had passed the night in defensive perimeter adjacent to much higher ground where observation was unrestricted by vegetation. The Cambodian border lay directly to the west. Although the men on LP (listening post) duty could hear enemy moving through the grass nearby during the night, when the company moved out shortly after first light it did not reconnoiter the high ground to the south along its line of march. The lead platoon advanced directly past it, and was soon 1,000 meters forward of the main body, which was also in motion. The rear platoon was kept tied to the ground of the night position, 600 meters behind the main body. While one group of enemy engaged and immobilized the main body, after luring it into an ambush, another closed on the rear platoon from two sides and in two minutes of action annihilated it with automatic weapons.

The "lessons learned" from these two experiences are so glaringly apparent that it is not necessary to spell them out. There remains but to examine the main reasons why the practice of "pushing on" persists at the expense of conservation of force. They are, in order of importance and cost:

(1) The greenness of commanders of the smaller tactical units and the emotional confusion deriving from the momentum with which they are projected afield via the helicopter lift followed by the dash to form a defensive circle around the LZ (landing zone). This sprint-start blocks understanding that the pace thereafter as the unit deploys must be altered radically. The jolt comes of the abrupt shift from high gear to low. It is

not enough to "slow down to a fast trot." Prudence requires nothing more or less than a tight reining-in for a fully observant and fully secured advance.

(2) Pressure from higher commands to "get on with it." There is rarely any such urgency except when some other unit has become heavily engaged and is gravely endangered. Even then, making sure of the degree of urgency to avoid making a bad situation worse is the primary obligation of higher command. Too often the unit sent posthaste on a rescue act has emerged having taken far greater punishment en route than the unit to be rescued. Last, it should be noted that such pressures from above are exerted much less frequently in Vietnam than in Korea or in World War II.

(3) The assignment of a predetermined "objective" that while hardly warranting the name implies that Unit Alpha must either link with Unit Bravo at Point Niner by 1100 or prove itself remiss. Often no situational urgency exists, and the obstacles on the march may be greatly unlike for the two units and not have been tactically plotted or analyzed. There is nothing wrong with the designation of the rendezvous point. The error is made in the assignment of a definite hour. Each unit must be allowed to cope properly with its own march problems. The first arriving simply take up a defensive posture until the second closes.

(4) Selecting in advance the location of the night perimeter when too little thought has been given to the stress and unavoidable delay which may be imposed upon the unit by natural obstacles or minor and harassing enemy elements. Forced marches in these conditions are usually attributable to the designation of what the map or prior reconnaissance has indicated would be a viable LZ. Even if it so turns out, it may not be worth the striving, if the marching force arrives in a state of exhaustion. A unit closing on its night position, and having to go at its defensive preparation piecemeal just as darkness descends, is in an acutely vulnerable position. There are some marked examples from Paul Revere IV, fought in December 1966, that deserve careful regard. The troops were put under a heavy and possibly unnecessary handicap by an extended march and late arrival at the ground to be defended. Their lack of time in which to organize properly gave the enemy an opening advantage. Nonetheless, there was no panic. The NVA surprise achieved only limited success. The salient feature of these actions was the counter-surprising ability of the average U.S. rifleman to react quickly, move voluntarily and without awaiting an order to the threatened quarter, and get weapons going while the position was becoming rounded-out piecemeal under the pressure of direct fire.

LESSON FOUR—CONTENDING WITH JUNGLE

The word "jungle" is too loosely used by U.S. Army combat troops in Vietnam to permit of broad generalizations about what tactical formation best serves security during movement and conservation of force should significant contact ensue. The term is misapplied every day. Men fresh from a fight say something like this, "We engaged them in impossibly dense jungle." Then a detailed description, or a firsthand visit to the premises, reveals it was nothing of the kind; it was merely the thickest bush or heaviest tropical forest that they had yet seen.

So for the purpose at hand some definition is thought necessary, rough though it may be. If troops deployed in line can proceed at a slow walk, with one man being able to see three or four others without bunching, and each having a view around him somewhere between 20 and 30 meters in depth, this is not jungle, though it may be triple-canopied forest. The encumbrance to movement out of tangled vegetation and the extreme limiting of personal horizon due to the obstruction of matted vines, clumped bamboo, or banyan forest with dense undergrowth such as the "wait-a-minute" thorn entanglement are evidence of the real thing irrespective of how much sunlight permeates the forest top. The impediment to movement and the foreshortening of view are the essential military criteria. When we speak of jungle we therefore mean the condition of the forest in which forward movement is limited to 300–500 meters per hour, and to make this limited progress troops must in part hack their way through.

When any troop body—our own or the enemy's—is thus confronted, it cannot in any real sense maneuver; and the use of that verb is a self-contradiction. The troop body can only imperfectly respond to immediate pressures which bring one man closer to another in the interests of mutual survival and the organic will to resist. The unit so proceeding and not yet engaged is best advised to advance single file for lack of any more reasonable alternative. Its point—the cutting edge—

Troops moving through brush single file.

should be not more than 200 meters to the fore, to conserve energy and insure the promptest possible collection in emergency. Serving as both the alarm element and the trail-breaker, the point needs to be rotated at not more than one-hour intervals, for work sharing. To broaden the front and advance in platoon columns doubles the risk and the work without accelerating the rate of advance. Should both fronts become engaged simultaneously, being equally compromised, the existence of two fronts compounds the problem of over-all control and unified response. The

column in file, hit at its front, may more readily withdraw over the route already broken or reform forward and align on the foremost active element, which rarely may extend over more than a two-squad front.

The data basis on such encounters makes clear that U.S. infantry in Vietnam can withstand the shock of combat under these supremely testing conditions. A number of the sharpest company-size actions in the 1966 campaigning were fought and won in dense jungle, and several of these encounters have become celebrated. On the other hand, the same data basis indicates that this is not a productive field for our arms, and for the following reasons:

(1) The fight on average becomes joined at ranges between 12 and 20 meters, which is too close to afford any real advantage to our man-carried weapons.

(2) Should the top canopy of the jungle be upwards of 40–50 feet high our smokes other than WP (white phosphorus) cannot put up a high enough plume for the effective marking of a position.

(3) Supporting fires, to avoid striking into friendly forces, must allow too wide an error margin to influence the outcome decisively.

(4) Mortars are of no use unless they can be based where overhead clearance is available. (A highly workable technique being employed by units in Vietnam is to fly the mortars into the defensive perimeter, LZ permitting, each night and lifting them out prior to movement.)

(5) The advance of reinforcement is often erratic, always ponderous, and usually exhausting.

(6) Medevac, where not impossible, is almost invariably fraught with nigh unacceptable risk.

In the true jungle the enemy has more working for him than in any other place where we fight him. But the added difficulties imposed by nature cannot exclude the necessity for engaging him there from time to time. It is enough here to spell out the special hazards of operating in an environment that, more than any other, penalizes unsupported engagement by the U.S. rifle unit and calls for maximum utilization of heavy support fires at the earliest possible moment. All-important to the unit commander is timely anticipation of the problem and the exercise of great caution when operating in dense jungle.

On the more positive side, according to the record, the jungle as to its natural dangers is not the fearsome environment that the imagination tends to make it. In all of the fighting operations analyzed, not a single U.S. soldier was reported as having been fatally bitten by a snake or mauled by a wild animal. In Operation Paul Revere IV, one man was killed by a falling tree during a clearing operation, the only such casualty recorded. Leeches are an affliction to be suffered occasionally; troops endure them and even jest about them, knowing that the discomfort will be eased shortly. The same is true of "jungle rot," a passing ailment of the skin that usually affects the hands and forearm; it comes of abrasions caused by pushing through thorny jungle growth. A few days under the sun will dry it up. Most of the fighters who get it do not even bother to take leave; they bandage the sores while they are afield, then take the time-and-sun cure on their return to base camp. Losses due to malaria can be kept minimal by strict adherence to the prescribed discipline. One major additional safeguard, within control by the unit leader, is that he refrains from marching and working his men to the point of full exhaustion, a common sense command practice in all circumstances.

LESSON FIVE—RATES OF FIRE

According to the data basis, the U.S. infantry line in Vietnam requires no stimulation whatever to its employment of organic weapons when engaged. The fire rate among patrols in heavy, if brief, contact is not infrequently 100 percent. Within the rifle company, during engagement prolonged for several hours, the rate will run 80 percent or more and the only nonfirers will be the rearward administrative element or the more critical cases among the early wounded. It is not unusual for one man to engage with three or more weapons during the course of a two-hour fight.

Except during the first five minutes of unexpected engagement, which almost impels an automatic rate, fire control is generally good. The men themselves, even in unseasoned units, quickly raise the cry: "Hold your ammo! Fire semiautomatic!" No U.S. infantry unit, operating in independence, has been forced to withdraw or extract, or made to suffer a critical tactical embarrassment, as a result of ammunition shortage. Gunners on the M–60 go lighter than in other wars; the average carry is 1,000 rounds, with 1,200 being about the outside limit. But in no single instance have the machineguns ceased fire during a fight because the position had run out of machinegun ammunition.

When suddenly confronted by small numbers of the enemy, the Americans firing their M–16's will in the overwhelming majority of cases miss a target fully in view and not yet turning. Whether the firing is done by a moving point or by a rifleman sitting steady in an ambush, the results are about the same—five total misses out of six tries—and the data basis includes several hundred such incidents. The inaccuracy prevails though the usual such meeting is at 15 meters or less, and some of the firing is at less than 10 feet. An outright kill is most unusual. Most of the waste comes from unaimed fire, done hurriedly. The fault much of the time is that out of excitement the firer points high, rather than that the M–16 bullet lacks knockdown power, a criticism of it often heard from combat-experienced NCO's. The VC winged but only wounded by an M–16 bullet, then diving into the bush, makes a getaway three times out of four, leaving only his pack and a blood trail.

As to effectiveness over distance, until recently the data basis deriving from 6 major and approximately 50 minor operations contained not one episode of VC or NVA being killed by aimed fire from one or more M–16's at ranges in excess of 60 meters. Then, out of Operation Cedar Falls in January 1967, there developed 6 examples of such killings at ranges upwards of 200 meters. The difference can be explained by the nature of the terrain. Most of the kills during this operation were made in the open rice paddy.

The M–16 has proved itself an ideal weapon for jungle warfare. Its high rate of fire, lightweight, and easy-to-pack ammunition have made it popular with its carrier. But it cannot take the abuse or receive the neglect its older brother, the M–1, could sustain. It must be cleaned and checked out whenever the opportunity affords. Commanders need assign top billing to the maintenance of the weapon to prevent inordinate battlefield stoppages. The new field cleaning kit assists the purpose.

The fragmentation hand grenade, a workhorse in the infantryman's arsenal of weapons in Korea, is of limited value in jungle fighting. The record shows that all infantry fights in the jungle are characterized by close in-fighting at ranges from 12 to 20 meters and that the fragmentation grenade cannot be accurately delivered because of the dense, thickly intertwined and knotted jungle undergrowth that blocks its unrestricted flight. In numerous cases it was reported that the grenade striking a vine and being deflected would then rebound on its thrower, causing friendly casualties.

The soldier enters battle with the average of four hand grenades strapped to his already overloaded equipment. He has been taught in training that the grenade is the weapon for close in-fighting. He learns empirically about the difficulty attendant on using a grenade in the

bush. Many times the record shows that he had to learn his lesson the hard way. The data basis shows that fewer than 10 percent—6 percent being the usage factor of World War II—of the grenades carried into battle are ever used. The configuration of the grenade itself makes it cumbersome and therefore dangerous, as it is carried on the outside of the soldier's equipment and is susceptible to any vine and snag that tugs at the safety pin.

Out of this research then it may be reckoned that the soldier's load could be lightened by two hand grenades and that all commanders should closely analyze their unit's techniques for the employment of this weapon. Procedures must be developed and then practiced by troops on specially prepared jungle hand grenade courses. The trainer should bear in mind during this instruction that post-operation analysis of World War II and Korea showed that the soldier who had training in sports always excelled with the grenade. The information collected in Vietnam fully supports this conclusion. The old byword that was once synonymous with the art of grenade throwing, "Fire in the Hole," should be brought back in use to warn all that a grenade has been dispatched and cover must be sought.

LESSON SIX—COMMUNICATIONS

Not one example has been unearthed of a critical tactical disarrangement or defeat suffered by a U.S. infantry unit of any size or by an artillery battery because of radio failure or a break in communications. Many RT's (radio operators) get shot up and their conspicuous equipment invariably attracts the enemy fire. (Units are avoiding this hazard by concealing the PRC–25 in standard rucksacks.) But no less invariably, the shift to another frequency or the improvising of a relay saves the day. In the defense of LZ Bird on 26 December 1966, all radios went out for one reason or another during the high tide of action. Nonetheless, there resulted no serious impairment to the action of the small infantry and artillery fractions generating counterattack within the perimeter, though heavy interdiction of enemy escape routes might have been brought in a few minutes earlier had not radios failed. That failure only slightly blurred the aftermath to one of the more spectacular U.S. victories of the year.

Despite the technological gain in our field communications since the Korean War, and it has been truly noteworthy, a serious gap exists in the flow of critical information during the time of combat. The pinch is most acute at platoon and company level. Some of it is due to the far greater mobility of operations in Vietnam, compared to anything we have experienced in the past, and it may also be in part attributed to the peculiar nature of the war. There are no "little fights" in Vietnam; platoon-size and company-size engagements compel the direct attention of top command. It is not unusual for the company commander, at the time of engaging the enemy, to have his battalion, brigade, and division commanders all directly overhead, trying to view the action. Each has some reason for being there. But their presence does put an unprecedented strain on the leader at the fighting level, and also on his radios, as everyone "comes up" on the engaged unit's "freq" to give advice. There are frequently too many individuals trying to use the same frequency to permit of any one message running to length. So brevity is a rule worked overtime, too often to the exclusion of fullness of necessary information. A rule that must be followed is that except for rare and unusual circumstances all commanders should follow established radio procedures and not "come up" on the radio of the next subordinate unit.

One further glaring gap is to be noted. When the unit, having had a hard go in combat, is relieved or reinforced by another which must continue the fight, very rarely does the commander going out tell the full story, giving the detail of situation, to the incoming commander. Just as rarely does the latter insist on having it. This is an understandable human reaction, since both men are under the pressure of the problem immediately facing their units in a moment of high tension, the one withdrawing and worrying about extricating casualties, the other bent on deploying under fire without loss of time. But the danger of not having a full and free exchange as the relief begins is that the second unit, left uninformed, will at unnecessary cost attack on the same line and repeat the mistakes made by the first unit. The record shows unmistakably that lessons bought by blood too frequently have to be repurchased.

Another weakness common among junior leaders is the inaccurate reporting of the estimate of the situation. Estimates are many times either so greatly exaggerated or so watered-down that they are not meaningful to the next higher commander who must make critical decisions as to troop employment and allocation of combat power. The confusion and noise of the battlefield are two reasons why faulty estimates are made; overemotionalism and the sense of the drama are others. These factors, coupled with the judgment of an impulsive commander who feels that he must say something on the radio—even if it is wrong—are the crux of the problem. Commanders must report the facts as they see them on the battlefield. If they don't know the situation, they must say just that!

LESSON SEVEN—SECURITY ON THE TRAIL

Strictures against the use of trails by U.S. forces during the approach may be uttered ad nauseum, with emphasis upon the increased danger of surprise and ambush. The utterance does not, and will not, alter the reality that more than half of the time the U.S. rifle platoon or company is moving it will go by trail the full distance or during some stage of the journey. In such an area as the Iron Triangle, trails are unavoidable if one is to move overland at all; the alternative is to move around by sampan and stream. The bush and forest-covered flats flanking Highway No. 13 have a network of crisscrossing trails, with as many as five intersections in one acre of ground. It is humanly impossible to move across such a tract without getting onto a trail.

"What's wrong with it? That's where we find the VC," is an argument with a certain elementary logic in its favor. That is, provided that maximum security measures in moving by trail are punctiliously observed. What measures are most effective under varying conditions is a moot subject, awaiting statement and standardization before hardening into a doctrine. As matters stand, the young infantry commander gropes his way and makes his decisions empirically, according to the various pressures bearing upon him.

For the rifle company not in file column but formed more broadly for movement toward the likelihood of contact, the commander again has no firm doctrinal guide. The formations adopted vary widely, and the reasoning that supports some of the patterns is quite obscure. Within one battalion there will be as many designs as there are companies for traversing exactly the same piece of terrain. If it is reasonable to believe that there must be one optimum formation that best safeguards the security of the body in movement, then letting it be done six different ways is hardly reasonable.

"Main trails" or "speed trails" in the Vietnam bush average not more than 3½ feet in width except at intersections. When a unit goes by trail through the heavy bush, it has no alternative to single file. Practical working distance between the point and the front of the main body should vary according to the roughness of the terrain and how far one can see ahead. In Vietnam, as almost anywhere else, the flatter the ground the straighter the trail; and if the ground is cut up, then trails are tortuous. The scouts should be at 20 and 10 meters beyond the van of the point squad, observation permitting. The point squad ought to be relieved every hour to assure continued vigilance. At each relief it buttonhooks into the bush until the main body comes up, though this is not the practice if the column is approaching an intersecting trail or streambed or coming to any built-up area. Once in sight of a stream crossing or trail mouth, the scout element (including the point squad) proceeds to check it out, after reporting the sighting to the main body. Its surest maneuver is a hook forward through the bush over both flanks that should close beyond the intersection in sufficient depth to abort any ambush (fig. 4).

If the main body closes to within sight of the point while it is so moving no real additional jeopardy will result, provided the column marks time and maintains interval. During such a halt, any attempt by the main body to form a partial perimeter will merely cause bunching. Depending on conditions of terrain, visibility, and like

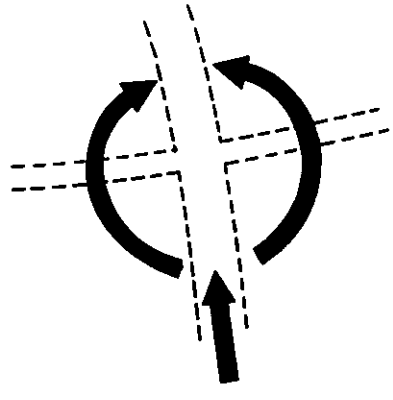

Figure 4. Forward hook.

factors, the rear of the point may be anywhere from 200 to 50 meters ahead of the lead platoon's front man. At lesser distance than 50 meters its security value dwindles. The VC will let scouts pass an ambush to get at the point, or will pass up the point to hit the main body, thereby doubling confusion to the column. The double hook forward by the point cuts the danger for all concerned.

Nature itself limits the threat of lateral ambush against a column going by jungle trail as opposed to one going through tall elephant grass or over a path where banks or bushes on either side offer concealment for the enemy. The bush is too thick; to put fire on the trail, the field of fire from Claymore or machinegun would be too short; too few targets would be within reach of any one weapon. A 5- to 10-meter break between squads—which does not retard movement—enhances march security.

Where making its circular deployment to check out any suspected ambush site, the scout element should be supported by the machinegun, which is best placed with No. 2 man of the point. An alternative to this move is to have the gunner reconnoiter the bush forward with fire; if the bush is extra thick, the M–79 may do better. The RT is with the point's last man, who serves as breakaway, running the word back should there be instrument failure.

When a stay-behind party is dropped from the column to check on whether it is being trailed, it should peel off from the front of the main body and enter the bush without halting the latter's advance. Its maneuver is S-shaped so that it takes up automatically a full ambush posture instead of being a simple fire block (fig. 5).

The column moves on and through the stay-behind group (2 fire teams, with a machinegun in the down-trail team). The forward team springs the trap as the enemy party comes even. The rear team fires only if the enemy doubles back or is too numerous for the forward weapons.

Other than in attack on road columns, the enemy does not appear to use front-and-rear ambushes, i.e., the delivery of surprise fire from cover by a block up front, quickly followed by an attack on rear or midway of the column. Except along the wood line of a clearing the "impenetrable" jungle does not lend itself to such tactics in assault

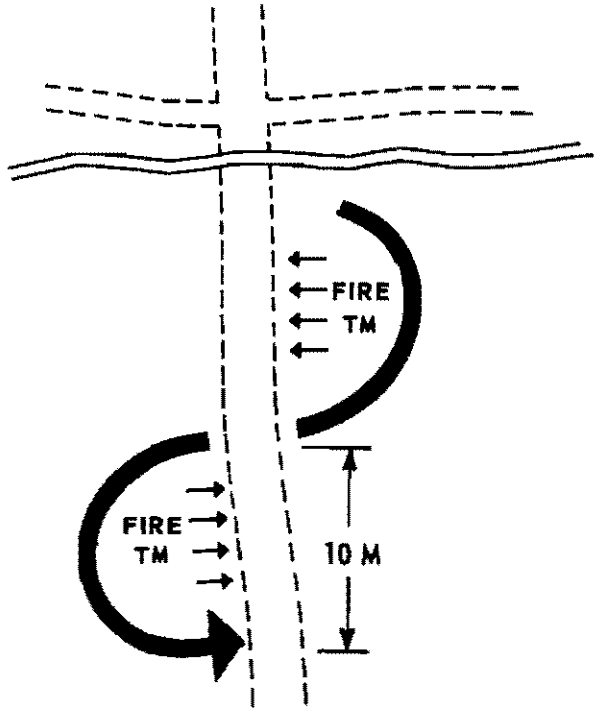

Figure 5. Double hook.

against a column moving by trail. More favorable to the design of the VC and NVA is their use of a killing fire from out of concealment against the head of the column from a wide spot in the trail. This may be automatic fire or a command-detonated mine. Their Chicom-Claymore is a potent weapon when so employed. It may be hidden within a hollow tree or fixed with camouflage in a clump of foliage. The mine is set to command a long stretch of trail and is one of the hazards of moving along it (fig. 6).

There is no warning and no follow-through; it is a one-weapon affair. During Operation Attleboro, a single command-detonated Claymore set in a tree killed or wounded 26 men strung out over 40 meters of trail. It was fired from 5 meters forward of the front man. The column was rushing from battle urgency and the scout element did not take enough time to look over the ground thoroughly. The first scout alone had been permitted to pass uptrail beyond the weapon. *Obviously the formation—point and the front of the main body—had become closed too tightly.* On the wide trail the advance was moving in a fashion that served only to put more people at the mercy of the weapon (fig. 7). Had they been following ex-

Machinegun team.

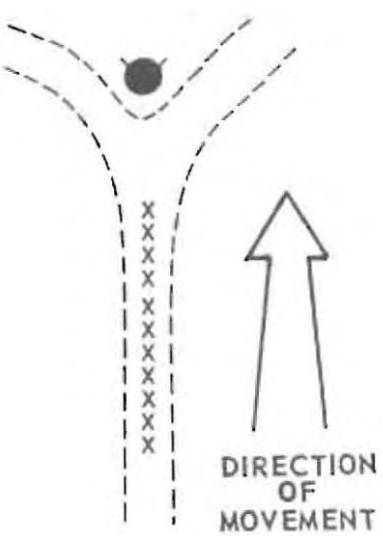

Figure 6. Claymore site.

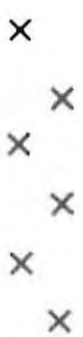

Figure 7. Claymore toll.

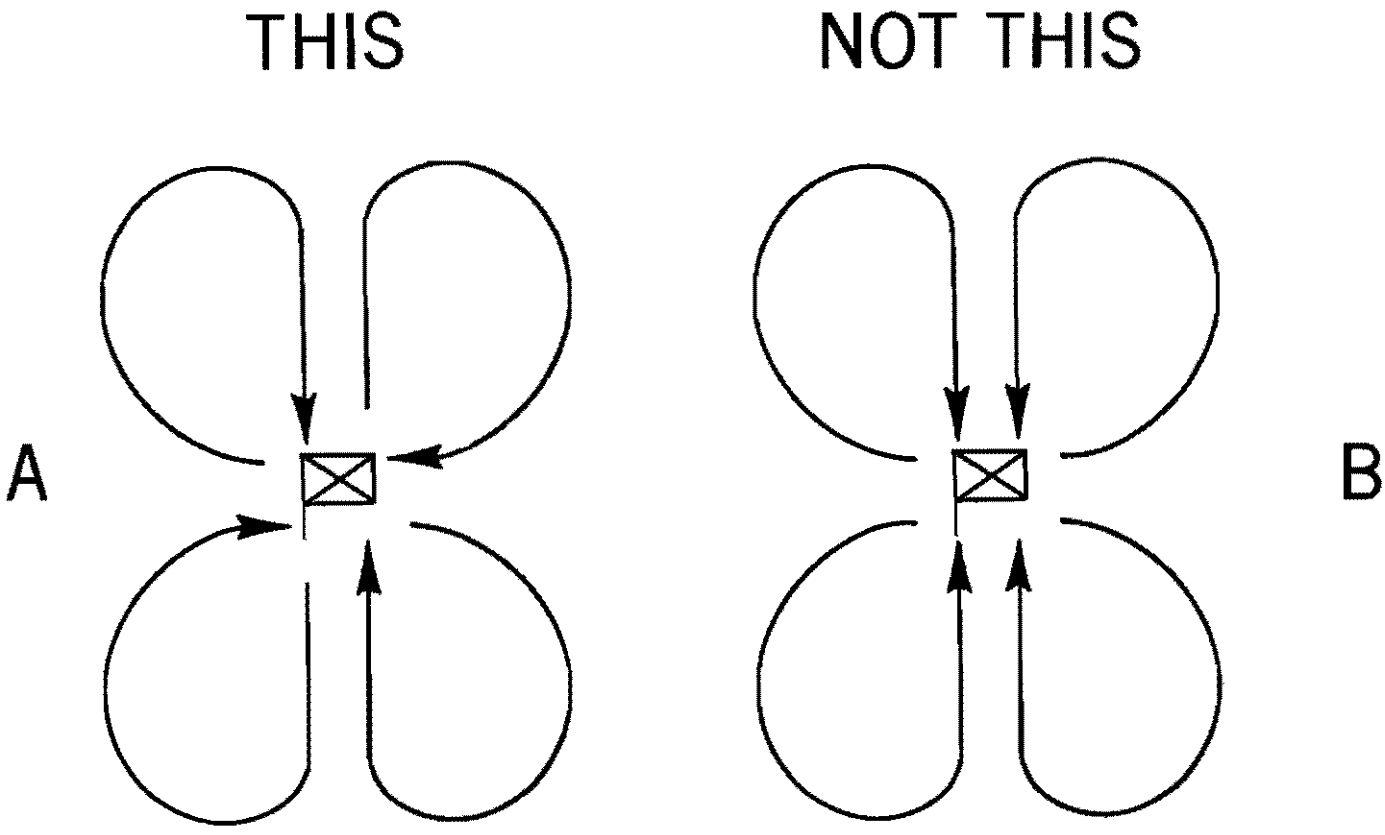

Figure 8. Cloverleaf.

actly in single file, each body would have given more protection to the men that followed.

Periodic "cloverleafing" or some variation of that movement by the column in movement is supposed to be SOP for field operations in Vietnam. The object is to beat out a limited area around the base of the command during a security halt or rest halt or before the troops set up the night defense. Four patrols may be sent out anywhere from 100 to 500 meters for this all-around sweep.

Among the cloverleaf variations possible, one has clearly obvious advantages (fig. 8). The preferred option, "A," affords a double check timewise both forward and rearward of the column's route of advance and makes maximum use of the deployment. At all stages of the sweep it also exposes a smaller element to the danger of surprise and ambush. The "buttonhook," used extensively by the Australians for ambushing an enemy force that is following one of their columns, is in essence the covering of one quadrant of the four-circle cloverleaf. It is executed usually over a much smaller radius.

When a company- or platoon-size patrol conducts sweeps of the vicinity before setting up for night defense, the priorities are: (1) the arc covering its line of advance into the ground, (2) the intervening ground between the perimeter and the LZ, and (3) the sector judged least defensible. Particularly if darkness is imminent, organization of the position (meaning the assignment of sectors and placing of men and weapons, but not necessarily digging in) precedes the dispatch of watering parties and the placement of LP's.

Division and brigade commanders afield stoutly contend that the cloverleaf kind of precaution is always taken by patrols, or by a company moving cross country in search of the enemy. The same story is told at battalion. Analysis of more than 100 company operations at the fighting level reveals that the story very rarely stands up. The average junior leader simply gives lip service to the principle. Just as trails are used despite all taboos, most of the time little scouting takes place outward from the U.S. column traversing them, despite all admonition. Contributing to the almost habitual carelessness of junior leaders is a be-

setting vagueness on the part of many superiors in stating the mission and making it specific as to its several essentials. The unit should not be told to "check out" a certain area, or to "run a patrol through the jungle patch ahead and return," as if it were the simple problem of putting a policeman on a beat. Each patrol should have a stated purpose. It risks hazard to gain something; it must therefore be told what it is after. Prisoners? Ambushing of the enemy? Destruction of a bridge? Caches? Location of a suspected base camp? Observe signs of enemy movement but not engage? Seek a trail entrance? The list of possibilities is long. But if the average leader is given only a general instruction he will comply in the easiest way, and nine times out of ten that means taking the trail, probably the same trail going and coming. If he is told at the start, "Be at LZ Lazy Zebra by 1800 for extraction," and he discovers that too little time has been allowed to do anything well, the door is open for him to go forth and do all things badly. Command *must* keep itself informed of where its patrols have moved recently and *must* safeguard its upcoming patrol against the danger of becoming trapped from having beaten over the same old route.

LESSON EIGHT—THE COMPANY IN MOVEMENT

One large unresolved question is what formation is best for the rifle company in movement under the conditions of the Vietnam war where the enemy is highly elusive, seeks contact only when he expects to stage a surprise, is adept at breaking contact and slipping away, and operates in a countryside that well serves these tactics.

The VC and NVA are not everywhere, though they are apt to be met anywhere, and hence all movement should be regulated accordingly. No deployment is militarily sound which assumes that the enemy is not close by. If that axiom were not true, there would be no rush to form the defensive perimeter when the unit is dropped on the landing zone. Yet it is too often disregarded in jungle movement by leaders who refuse to believe that the enemy can strike without warning from out of nowhere.

There is a great variety to the countryside. The less-dense jungle has more the nature of a tropical forest in the matted thorn bush, clumped bamboo, bamboo thicket, creepers, and lianas do not greatly impede movement. There are vast stretches of still more open country, almost treeless, flats covered only with elephant grass standing higher than any living thing, barren volcanic hills, paddy lands uninterrupted save by their own banks, and dikes that stretch on for miles.

Some areas are densely populated. Others are wholly abandoned, even by the enemy. In January 1967 a Special Forces patrol, which had been on its own for 32 days, marched 230 kilometers in 22 days without seeing one human being, domesticated animal, or habitation.

Vietnam is not "mostly untamed jungle." Large and decisively important parts of it are cultivated flat land denuded of forest and bush except along the stream banks. Almost as much of it is fertile, relatively flat, not heavily forested or overgrown, but still undeveloped and almost deserted. In the central plateau there are broad lava flows where no grass grows. Some of the volcanic hills are boulder- and slab-strewn and almost barren of vegetation.

Any of these landscapes is likely to become battleground, and several of them in combination may be crossed by a rifle company in a single day's march.

The question of what formation best serves military movement over such a greatly diversified land may be answered only by thinking of what is being sought: (1) security, (2) control, and (3) concentration of fire power without undue loss of time and personnel. These are not in any way separate aims; each reacts upon the others. Security and control are desired so that fire concentration can be achieved when nothing else counts more.

So the precept must follow: the more complicated a formation and the more numerous its parts, the greater the danger that control will be lost in a moment of emergency, especially when the unit is moving over countryside the nature of which prohibits visual contact between the various elements.

Yet "the wedge," which has numerous variations, is the formation that the average U.S. rifle company commander prefers to use during advance into enemy country. It is extremely difficult to control during marches over cut-up ground and possesses no inherent advantage in bringing fire power to bear quickly against the threatened quarter (fig. 9). In fact, it has several built-in handicaps.

The forward platoon in center and the two platoons right and left each use a point, with scouts out. So there are never less than seven elements to control. That is several too many, should the body have to re-form suddenly to meet an assault from an unexpected direction. Thus formed, the company extends over a wider area than if the columns were more compact, though the advantage is decidedly marginal. Nothing else is to be said in favor of the wedge, for its design neither strengthens security on the move nor favors rapid and practical deployment for combat. If the

Soldier crossing stream.

formation should be hit from either flank, greater confusion will ensue than with a simpler pattern. Should the enemy be set up and ready to fight on a concealed broad front directly to the fore, all three columns are likely to become engaged before the commander has a chance to weigh whether full-scale involvement is desirable.

On the other hand, suppose that the company is making its approach march in 2-column formation (fig. 10). The width between columns should be approximately equal to their length when the terrain permits. If either column is hit from the flank and faces toward the fire, the other is automatically in place to serve as a reserve and protect against a turning maneuver. Further, if the advance guard (scouts and point) draws fire in volume signifying enemy determination to stand, the force is in position either to be committed whole at once (fig. 11) or to fight on a narrower front with half of its strength while keeping a 50 percent reserve. (fig. 12).

When the enemy fire and the condition of the advance element permit, the scouts and point should displace to rearward as the company shifts to line of skirmishers, lest the whole organization be drawn willy-nilly into a full-scale commitment. In the Vietnam fighting, according to the data basis, the latter initial disarrangement occurs approximately half the time in attacks on a fortified position. The scouts or the men in the point become engaged and take losses; the lead platoon becomes scattered and disorganized in the effort to extricate them; the fire line thereafter gradually becomes reknit on ground too far forward, greatly to its disadvantage and harshly limiting the supporting air and artillery fires.

Much is heard in Vietnam about VC and NVA employment of the inverted l ambush. This tactic gets its effects from an intensifying concentration of fire. The enemy normally fights out of timber or other natural cover, and the flanking side usually runs parallel to a trail. The twin-column company formation is far more properly disposed to cope with the l than is the wedge or any eccentric formation, particularly if it is moving with a few flankers out, a practice it should

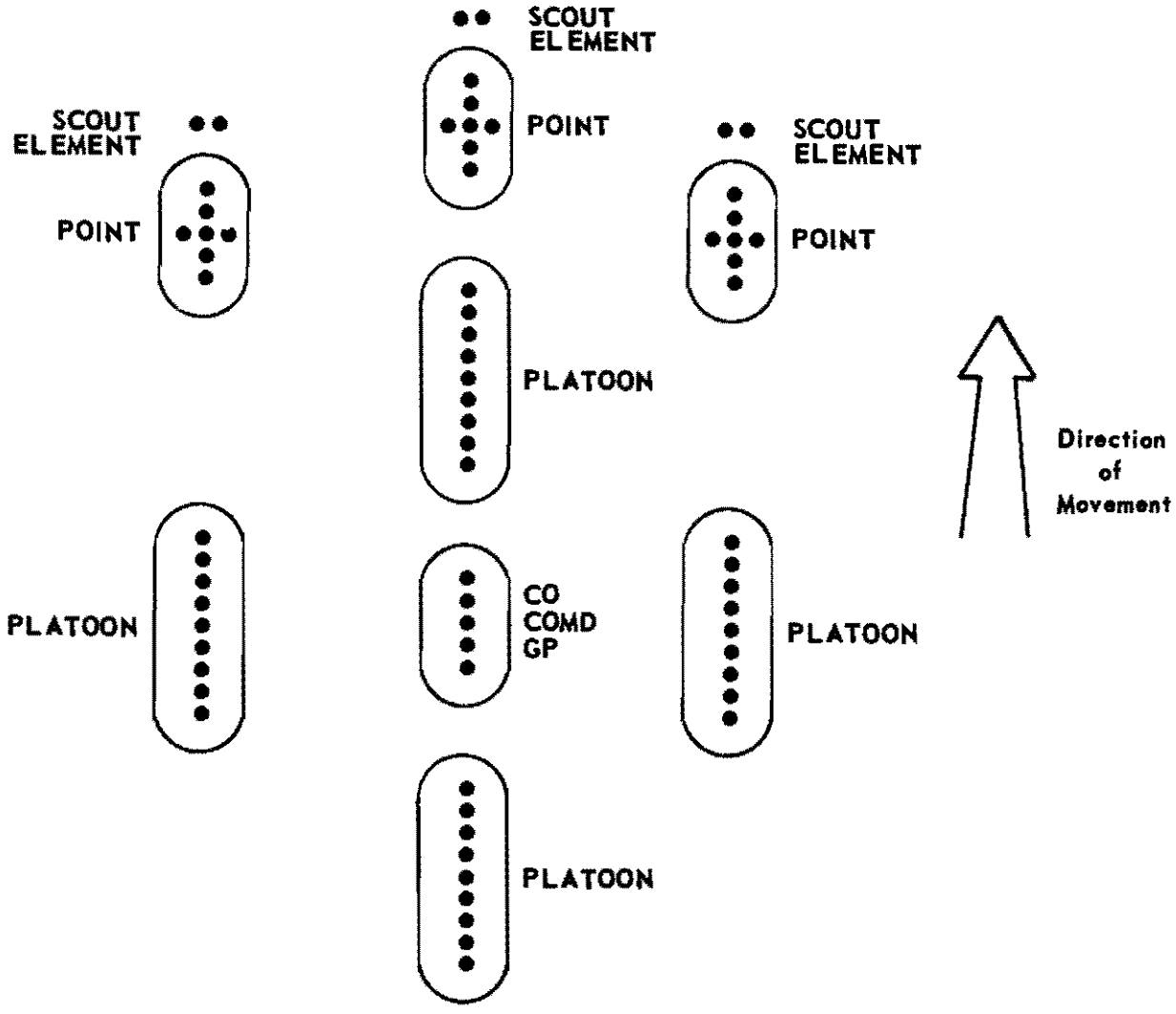

Figure 9. Wedge formation.

adopt wherever natural conditions permit (fig. 13). In fact, almost anywhere that the enemy can use the L ambush practically, our people can use flankers to serve as a buffer.

The righthand column, in the correct position, needs only face right to engage. The lefthand column moves into line against the enemy force blocking the line of movement. The company CP is located according to the intensity of fire and availability of cover (fig. 14).

So confronted, the enemy loses any initial advantage in fire or maneuver, and his problem of collecting forces to alter the terms of the contest is probably more complex, since he had planned to execute a set piece. The data basis is too limited to warrant generalizing about VC–NVA tactical arrangements for exploiting the L ambush. But in the few examples when the fight went to a finish, the enemy reserves were placed to support the vertical bar of the L. This is the logical way to employ them if an ultimate envelopment is the object (fig. 15).

Whether to accept line-against-line engagement on these terms, however equal, is the prime question for the U.S. force commander from the start of action. He may not have any option initially because his position may have been weakened by early losses before he was able to get the feel of his problem. At any stage it is preferable that, maintaining loose contact in the interim, he backs away with the main body as promptly as he can. At the same time he should call for maximum striking power against the enemy positions. The L ambush, by reason of its configuration, is an ideal

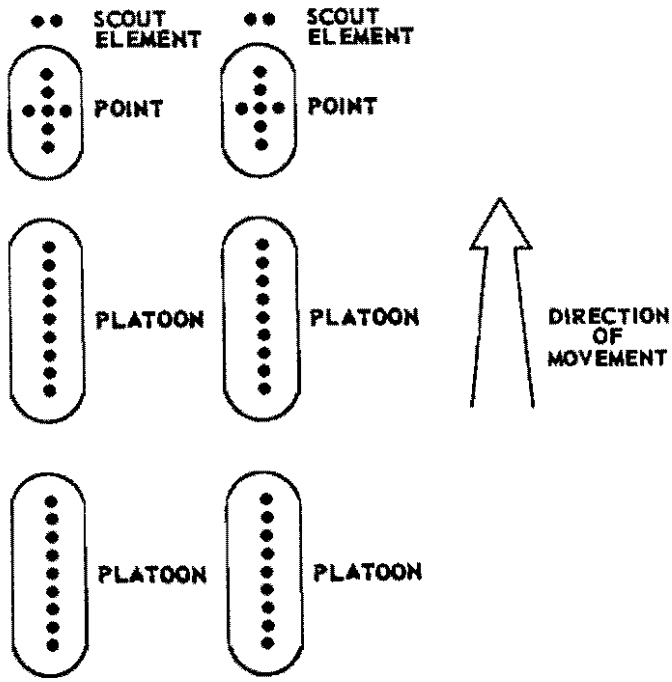

Figure. 10. 2-Column formation on the march.

target for field artillery and tactical air operating in combination. The vertical bar is the prime target for the artillery—gun-target line permitting—because it can be worked over with maximum economy and minimum shifting of the guns. The horizontal bar is the proper mark for TAC Air because the boundaries of the run may be more readily marked manually when a withdrawal is perpendicular to the line of advance than when the strike parallels the line of advance and withdrawal (fig. 16).

There is one postscript dealing with the enemy use of the L ambush. The examples of record indicate that the enemy reserve will maneuver in an attempt to block our line of withdrawal. The effort normally takes the form of setting the ambush along the first stream or trail crossing on the immediate rear. Withdrawal over the same route used in the advance is therefore to be avoided. The movement should be an oblique from the open flank where the enemy has not engaged (fig. 17).

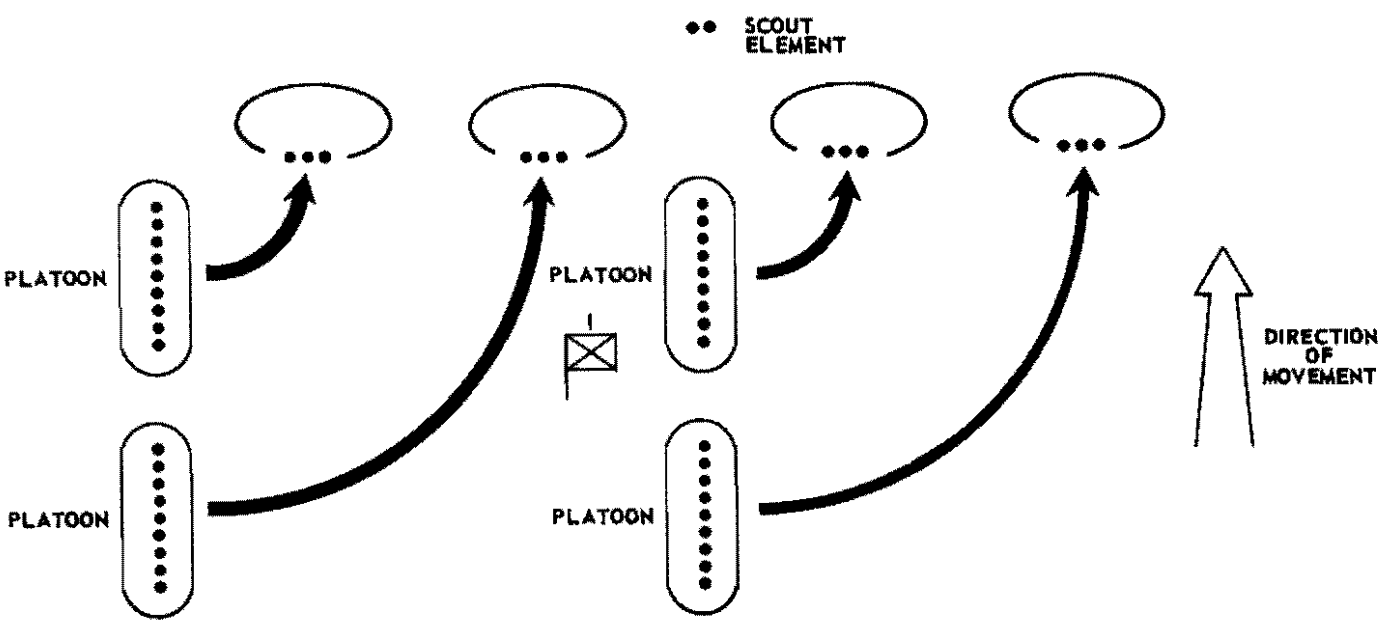

Figure 11. 2-Column formation fully committed.

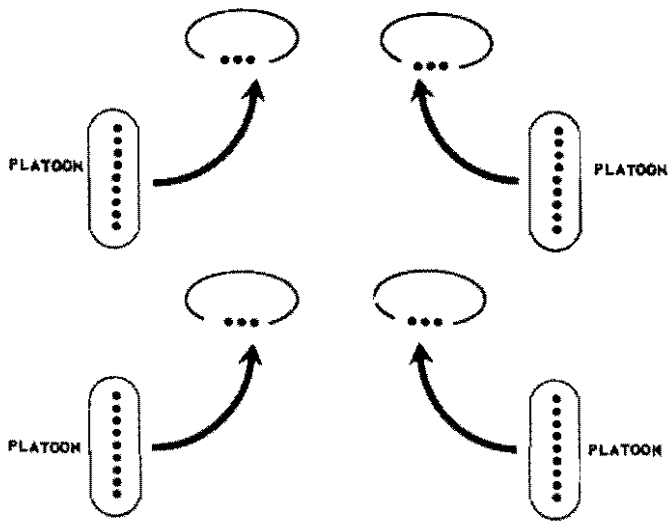

Figure 12. 2-Column formation partially committed.

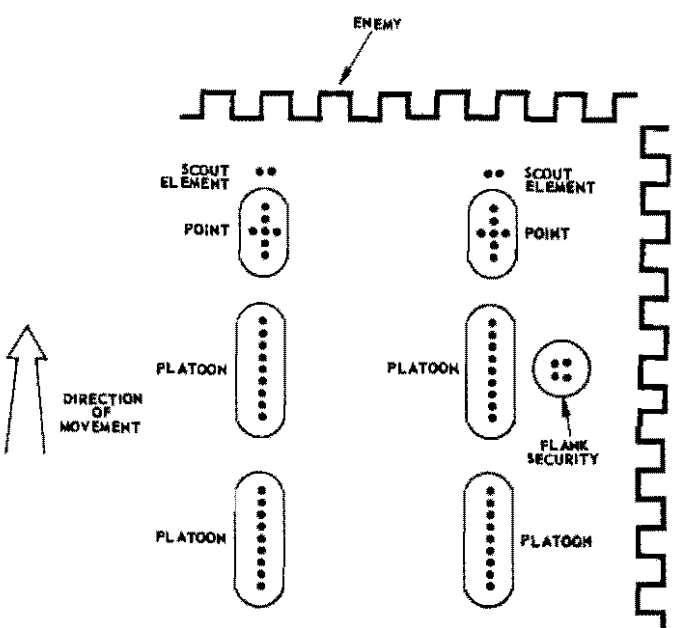

Figure 13. "L" ambush.

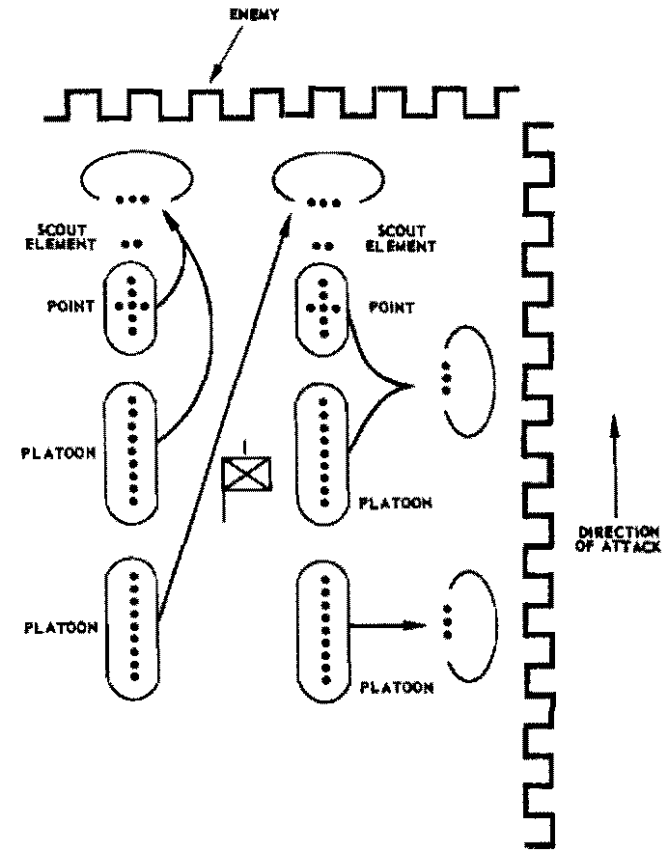

Figure 14. Maneuver against "L" ambush.

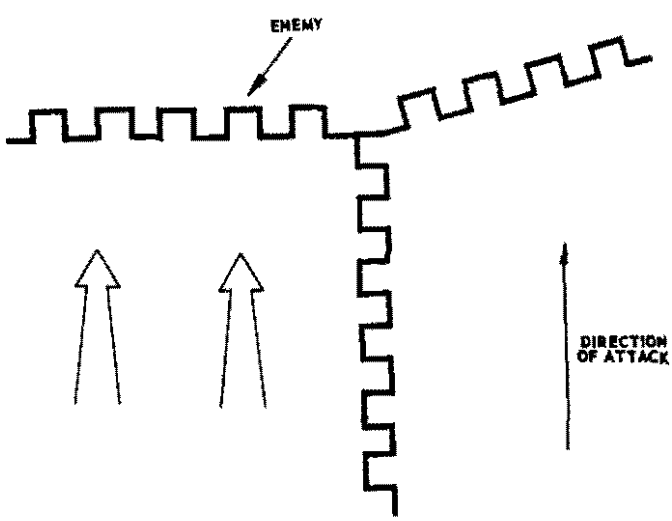

Figure 15. Enemy reserves in "L" ambush.

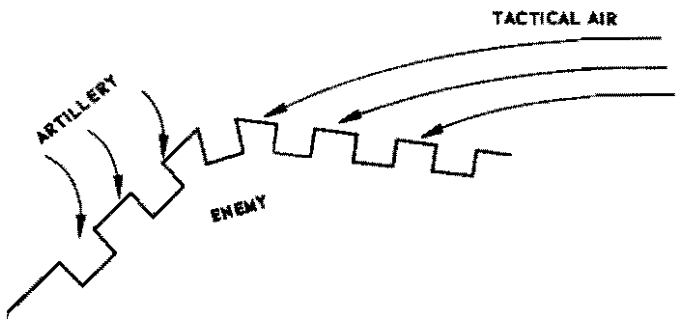

Figure 16. Fire coordination against "L" ambush.

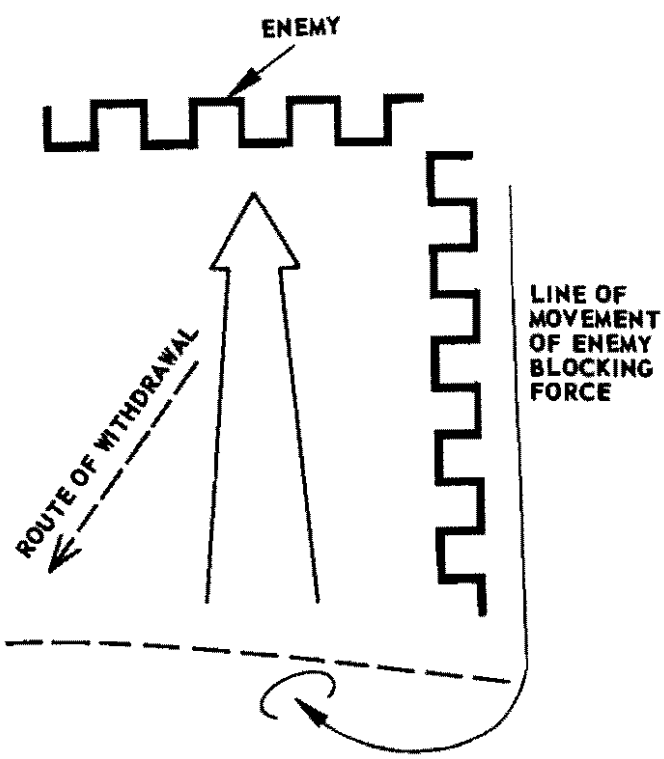

Figure 17. Withdrawal from "L" ambush.