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U. S. Special Forces personnel have
trained RVN soldiers to near perfection
to execute "doubleheader" type
operations

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Double-Header Airmobile Operations In Vietnam

WO Bruce P. Mauldin

ARMED AVIATION in Vietnam has seen many big changes. The 52d Aviation Battalion, supporting the ARVN II Corps in Vietnam's rugged central highlands, has brought into operational use a concept of airmobile operations which promises to be highly effective.

One of the major problems encountered in airmobile operations in the mountains and jungles of II Corps is that, due to excellent cover and concealment afforded by the dense jungle, the Viet Cong can often retreat unseen from a tactical zone while the assault force is just beginning to land. Noting this, as well as the fact that the enemy usually retreated along a known or easily predictable route, the 52d sought a method of turning these retreats into ARVN's advantage.

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Quick response to air intelligence is vital to success of doubleheader operations

Developed by Col Theo C. Mataxis, Senior American advisor to II Corps, the "Mataxis Doubleheader" concept is based on the fact that Special Forces A Teams have established bases, each consisting of several rugged strike force companies, along a line which runs generally north and south near the western border of Vietnam. Two adjacent camps become involved in a doubleheader operation. Theoretically, bases of operation could be established near each other specifically for conducting such an operation, but the Special Forces camps provide a ready-made pickup point, emergency landing area, and readily available source of reinforcements should they become necessary.

The concept behind this type operation is to "squeeze" the enemy force between two friendly forces. This is not a new concept, except that in past operations of this nature, usually conducted wholly by ground transport, the VC have proved

Special Forces A teams have trained men readily available for action at predesignated points



Let an airlifted ARVN force drive the enemy then later in the day when the enemy second force in their escape path

highly adept at escaping out the sides of the "sandwich."

One solution would be to use four separate forces moving toward each other, but this would involve a fantastic number of troops. The basic problem was one of mobility. In other words, the ground units could not get into position to begin the squeeze quickly enough to prevent the enemy from evaluating the situation and escaping.

This was when aviation came into the picture. Why not move a force in by air to a primary landing zone, let the ARVN troops drive the VC in a given direction, then later in the day, when the VC are least expecting it, land a second force in their escape path and trap them? In this case the assault would take on the aspects of an ambush, completely taking the VC off guard, and they would be forced to fight or surrender. Even if the VC did not run from the first force, but chose to fight, reinforcements could be moved in almost immediately. Thus the "Mataxis Doubleheader" was born.

Initial planning involves choosing a primary landing zone in a hostile area. The 52d Battalion prefers LZs at least large enough for three aircraft, but due to terrain limitations and the small number of suitable LZs in any one given area, this is often impossible. The LZ is often a river sandbar.

The second LZ is chosen in an area usually no more than 20 kilometers from the first, preferably closer, and in the direction in which the Viet Cong force is anticipated to move.

A staging area is chosen. It will usually be an improved airfield located as nearly equidistant as possible from the two camps to be used as loading areas.

Early on the morning of the operation, the aircraft in the airmobile force move from their home base to the staging area. Logistics has been taken care of, and command, medical, and mess areas are established. A lone O-1 reconnaissance aircraft takes off into the dawn. The pilot will make a last weather check before the operation begins. His radio call comes, and soon the entire field is enveloped by the high-pitched whine of the UH-1B's turbine engines. Radio checks are completed, the aircraft line up on the runway, and the empty copters take off, looking like so many jet-powered tadpoles.

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and trap them*

Long before dawn, a crew briefing was conducted at home base, so the pilots and crews know exactly what today's operation will entail, yet there is little of the usual chatter over intercoms. This is going to be a long, hard day.

Soon Camp A is in sight, with its tiny dirt airstrip lined with over 200 troops. They probably aren't chattering too much either. These are Montagnard tribesmen trained to near perfection by U. S. Special Forces soldiers. They comprise some of the toughest fighting units in Vietnam.

Now we're airborne with our fighting friends on board.

The LZ is close now. We see the VNAF fighters going in on pass after pass, plastering the LZ with their heavy firepower. Now the armed UH-1Bs start their run. Same treatment, different weapons, a lot slower maybe. Better insurance right now than Lloyd's of London.

Descend, land, unload, move out before your buddy eats up your tail rotor on the way in.

Second lift same routine, then back to the stagefield to feed those hungry choppers some JP-4. This is where the ground crews really shine. They can do everything but change the engine in under 5 minutes, including patching holes.

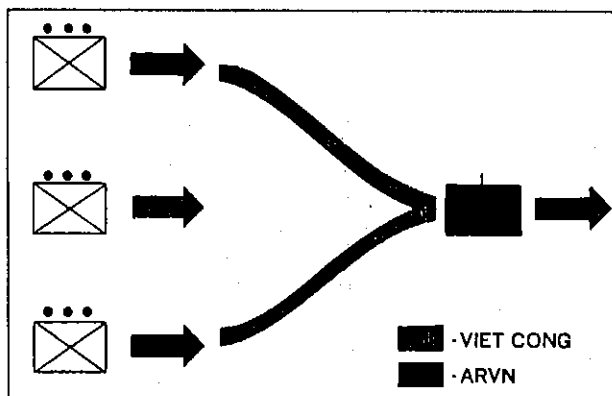
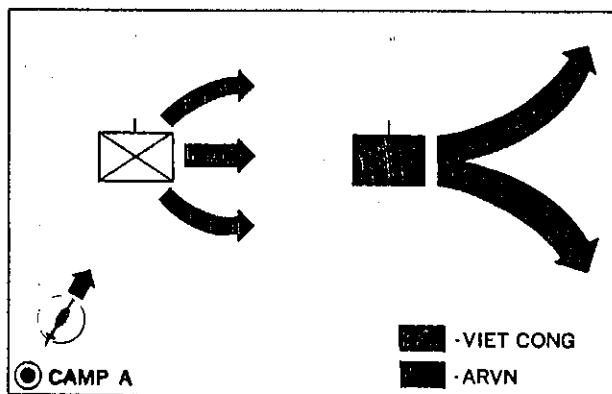
Until now this has been just like any other combat assault. Normally we'd already be on our way home. But now we just sit and wait; 1400 is a long time away.

But it comes, and we move out again. This camp has a nice wide runway, but we're gone again with a load of troops too soon to admire it. Two lifts into the new LZ (300' x 100', to 3,000 feet elevation, in 150- to 200-foot trees), and then we head home.

Whether or not the "squeeze" worked we won't know until later, but we do know that we've given it a fighting chance with a bunch of helicopters, untold hours of planning, and a little sweat. What we have done is conduct two airlanded assaults into two separate areas, employing troops from two separate strike force camps. We have done this for the price of one operations order, one stagefield, and one logistical effort.

This is what the textbooks would probably call "maximum use of U. S. Army Aviation in the tactical zone." Or something like that.

Two-pronged envelopment action by airmobile forces



Below: At 1400 the second airmobile force is airlifted into the retreat path of the VC, and immediately spreads to flank the VC force. Airmobile force A also begins closing in on the flanks and the VC are trapped.

