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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
28TH MILITARY HISTORY DETACHMENT
11TH ARMORED CAVALRY REGIMENT
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96257

AVIC-WE

21 Sep 1969

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

Office, Chief of Military History
Washington, D. C. 20315

1. The following interview was conducted with Major John C. Bahnsen, Air Cavalry Troop Commander from Sep 68 to Feb 69 and First Squadron Commander, 11th ACR from Feb 69 to Sep 69. The interview was conducted by SP4 David McSpadden, 28th Military History Detachment at Major Bahnsen's office in Quan Loi.
2. The tape was recorded on side 1, channel 1 at a speed of 1 7/8 IPS on a National tape recorder. The tape is numbered 3.
3. There are no restrictions placed on the tape. The tape covers lessons learned in Vietnam by MAJ Bahnsen.
4. MAJ Bahnsen was graduated from West Point in 1956. He has since served as a tank platoon leader, tank company executive officer and company commander. Later he attended the Armor Advanced Course and taught armor tactics at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After one year in Vietnam as a Commander of a helicopter platoon, he served in the Pentagon Army Aviation Directorate for two years, where he assisted in re-writing the field manuals on armor tactics.

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2
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21 Sep 1969

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

The following is a transcript of the interview:

Question:

Are present armor tactics adequate, or should they be revised?

Answer: (06)

Tactics and doctrine as we teach them are basically sound. The most important thing to come out of my tour is the use of the helicopter in our Squadron organization. The Squadron has four, the Regiment has 48. The use of the helicopters with ground forces is the startling thing to come out of this war, I think.

In the First Squadron, in particular, I have had a UH1 helicopter in the air continuously over any movement of my troops, both as a spotter and as a director of ground traffic. I have done this by using my S-3 and assistant S-3 in the air until contact is made and then taking control myself from the air. Although I have commanded from the air and from the ground, I have found that when you are on the ground, even when everyone is together and can be seen, you still need somebody overhead to coordinate for you, direct the ~~artillery~~, direct your movement and watch the enemy movement. In any event, the UH1 is always over my contacts. I have proven its use in tactical doctrine, and I say that even though some people do not believe that a helicopter should be there continually. I have over-flowed my helicopters, but I have obtained good results.

Anyone can do this, and you do not have to be an aviator to employ effectively. The Commanders of the 11th ACR use their helicopters. I use mine more than an infantry unit because we move so much faster than they do, but I think the helicopter would assist infantry units by always being over the contacts. I think helicopters should be assigned to the Squadron Commanders permanently, with maintenance being preformed in that Squadron. I feel this should be studied closely in future organizations.

Question:

Would you advocate a greater use of helicopters?

Answer: (16)

I would not advocate a greater use of helicopters, but I would recommend the helicopter being used on a lower tactical level. Battalion-sized forces should have a helicopter, belonging to the commander, with maintenance pulled in that battalion. An Infantry Battalion could well use 2,3,4 helicopters.

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2

AVIC-WE

21 Sep 1969

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

I can not really give you a number, because we would have to consider cost effectiveness. I think we could do that, however.

As far as the helicopter is concerned, we could save people, spaces and equipment by the use of an Air Cavalry Troop in Vietnam, and replace some of the infantry battalions. One Air Cavalry Troop is equal to any Infantry Battalion in doing an equivalent job. I am not saying that they are equal in fire power or defending, but we are not defending here. In finding the enemy, keeping him honest and killing him the Air Cavalry Troop is equal to the Infantry Battalion. I would advocate this and it has been done before by Colonel Patton.

Question:

How much re-supply of First Squadron was done by air?

Answer: (22)

We could not have lived without the Chinooks to re-supply us. They supplied us on a day to day basis, everywhere we went. We have used ground lines of communication, but there was always the problem of securing a road whenever you did it. Consequently, we have used Chinooks almost exclusively. We have hauled tank engines out and have even hauled ACAVs out with the super cranes. We have maintained vehicles in the biggest bog-hole you have ever seen by putting track on the ground and having an UH1 haul the excess parts.

In the deepest jungle if we could put down an LZ(Landing Zone) they could get to us. We have spared no use of the helicopter in re-supply. There is a problem at the Regiment level, because our support is so far to the rear. That is, a problem of time and space that would change over night if we had a stable front. I don't have a solution for this problem, unless we could get closer to our support, which would be hard to do now in this country.

In the particular field of administrative logistics, our personnel section is so far to the rear that I have lost people in the pipeline going back and forth to Blackhorse Base Camp, Bien Hoa and Quan Loi to take care of their personal needs. This is a problem that we have not corrected, and it is the one thing we do worse than anything else in the Army, that is, handle people. I have not made a big dent in this problem, by having our personnel section so far to the rear. The only way to cure this, of course, is to move those people forward and we do not have the operating ability to move these people forward.

You consider administrative logistics in your tactical plans, but you do not let them limit your plans. I have never let them limit my operations.

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3

AVIC-WE

21 Sep 1969

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

I have known that I could not go from my base camp as far as fire support is concerned, but I never let logistics limit my operations. I have had to plan around the problem areas when I have had people gone, I have had ACAVs without side gunners on them. We have gone short any number of times, but support is good throughout Vietnam, probably the best we have ever had in the Army.

Question:

Evaluate and discuss the enlisted men, non-commissioned officers, and officers in your command.

Answer: (31)

All the people I have served with have been outstanding. What they lacked in experience and knowledge they made up in enthusiasm and the ability to get out and get the job done. The old statement of American ingenuity holds true here. I would say most of my track and tank commanders have been Specialists 4 or Privates First Class. They turn over so fast that we do not even get to making them acting sergeants.

I have had real good non-commissioned officers, the E-6 and E-7 ranks especially. They were dedicated people. The ones who are not dedicated never seem to get over here, they wiggle their way out of it somehow.

I have had a problem with some of the old-timers who did not want to fight. But the E-6s and E-7s coming up now are good. The only problem I have had with the middle management is that I never got enough quotas for the men I wanted to promote. I even had a shortage of E-4 allocations at one time because I had an excess of E-4s. The quota system ought to be removed in the war zone. I have had plenty of E-5s and E-6s, but I have had real shortages of E-4s and E-7s.

The officers I have had have been outstanding all across the line. They do not come to you unless they want to fight, with a couple of exceptions. I had a couple of officers who were commissioned in combat arms and did not want to fight or be here. As far as I am concerned, they should fight like everyone else. In one case I had to ship a man out, who admitted he did not want to fight and had no guts. This was the rare exception, a man who gets all the way through the ROTC program and then finds out he does not want to fight.

Question:

Evaluate and discuss the ARVN units, their fighting ability, equipment and morale.

Answer: (38)

I would say the ARVN fighting ability is directly proportional to the leadership they have. I take into consideration that some of them have been fighting this war for 15 to 20 years. When you fight this kind of war for 15 years you get tired of it. I don't know how they maintain the morale they have, knowing the casualties they have suffered. The ARVN units with good leaders perform excellently. The units I have worked with have all been good.

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Authority NND 927622
Date 6/22/61

AVIC-WE

21 Sep 1969

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

The 18th ARVN Division, which was supposed to be the worst unit they had, worked with us and did exceptionally well. When led and put on the backs of tanks and ACAVs and given the fire support, they perform like any other soldier, they do their job.

We just praised the 34th ARVN Rangers, a battalion from the 15th ARVN Cavalry and the CIDG. In every case they came to us, and no one knew how they would perform, but they were outstanding in every fight we had. All of them had good leaders, especially the Trungs Lees, the lieutenants at the company level, who have been good. I would say the CIDG are good soldiers. It would be better if they were led differently and organized into a force with regular organization. I would recommend that the CIDG be integrated into the ARMY as an elite force, given regular leadership from their own ranks through the company grade level, and given the best battalion commander available to run them.

Question:

Discuss and evaluate the Sheridan tank, its performance and maintenance.

Answer: (43)

The Sheridan is a fine tank when it is running. I am not in high praise of the Sheridan like everyone else is, but the Sheridan is better than an ACAV. It still has bugs, and it has not operated as well as it should have for my squadron. We have had problems with it, bugs that had to be worked out and its low availability rate. It is not a simple machine and does have problem areas that we have not licked. The seals on the main gun have always been a problem that is still not solved, despite what the people in the rear areas tell us. The engine still separates from the transmission. These problems were inherent in the design and I am not at all a believer in the Sheridan as the answer to the track vehicle world. The Sheridan is a killer, and when it is operational does a good job. The people who ride it have confidence in it, and I would be the last person in the world to tell the troops that it is not a good vehicle. When it is operational, it is good; when it is down, it is a pain.

Question:

What is the most impressive lesson you have learned during your year in Vietnam?

Answer: (47)

In the leadership area, I have always felt that if people are motivated and emotionally aroused and involved in a fight they will do better. I get very emotional in my fights, and I curse and give people a hard time and am what people have described as a "mean son-of-a-bitch". If you want to lead, in my book, the way to do it is to be a hard nose and get out there and be with them-- and make sure your people know that you are willing to be with them in any situation.

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5

AVIC-WE

21 Sep 1969

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

I do not say I advocate this for everybody, because some people would look pretty silly in some situations. I have been where I can see the people and where I have the most impact on people. The lesson I have learned, is that they get confidence and faith in the system when they see you down there in the fight, especially when it is good and hot. There is danger involved, but I do not see that much danger for a Commander because he usually does not stay in the front lines. If he can get away with this, he will lead the people better.

One occasion where the morale of whole outfit went up was the time I caught the dink in the creek bed, pulling him out by the neck. On occasions like this, and there were occasions like this in the Air Cavalry Troop, it has motivated my people. I can not measure it, it is an intangible. My two past bosses Colonel Patton and Colonel Leach were masters of getting out to the fight and leading by their personal example. I have always maintained that people will follow if you show them the way.

Question:

Discuss and evaluate the NVA, their morale, fighting ability and equipment.

Answer: (53)

This may sound funny from a Squadron Commander, but I hold the NVA in contempt. I feel sorry for them, we have killed them whenever we have found them. I admire the way they stand up and die like they do, but really they are kind of stupid. They come down from North Vietnam full of propaganda that they can attack armor. They have a healthy respect for armor, but they have been told the RPG will save them. I have seen them shoot an RPG and miss and never get the second round chambered. The RPG is not effective against armor, especially when the armor is fast moving.

When you make a contact, continue to march through the middle of them. We have done this religiously in the First Squadron. It is a proven fact that you take less casualties this way. I do not consider the NVA particularly good soldier. I admire the way the VC can stay out there in the mud year in and year out, but that is part of the Oriental philosophy. They feel that if they fight ten years they will win because we will go away. They are probably right, we don't have the patience to stay here ten years. The NVA is patient in planning things, but they would much rather pound you with mortars than make contact.

I consider the NVA leaders stupid when they try to attack armor or ambush our armored convoys. They just die by the house-hold lot full. The other day we had prisoners who were 20, 19, 17 and 12 years old. I can not admire a force that would send a 12 year old boy to the field. It is sickening. The leaders out there got caught with their pants down.

During my year here I have killed 16 NVA personally and I have had no real fear because (continued)

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6

21 Sep 1969

AVIC-WE

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

I knew they were more afraid than I was. Most of them were running away as I shot them. I think they are in awe of size of the American.

Their Sappers were well trained but they don't make that much of a difference to our armor forces, and I don't think they would be significant on another day.

Question:

Do you think it is better to keep the Squadron moving than to occupy Fire Support Bases, as basic armor tactics?

Answer (63):

We have moved the First Squadron Command Post 23 times in my five months as Commander. Sometimes I moved it just for the hell of it. I don't believe in building fire support bases or even putting up a berm. We just set the tracks around, set out listening posts and trip flares and kept the vehicles mobile.

We never had an attack on our night defensive position. If they had attacked we had planned to mount our vehicles and move towards them. That is my theory and we never had a chance to test it. We did have them attack our command post once and we did a right flank and advanced. That was the day I assumed command. I do not believe in digging deep holes or bunkers for armor. We did that in Loc Ninh, only because we have been there a month and the numerous rocket and mortar attacks.

Question:

Evaluate the integration of the Sheridan into the ACAV platoons.

Answer (67):

Most of the time I have used an organization of one tank platoon and one reconnaissance troop minus, and left one platoon in the tank company, and give them two ACAV platoons. My tank company commander has been directed to command from an ACAV, rather than a tank, to be just like the other reconnaissance elements in his force.

The tank organization in companies is good. It might be reorganized into four platoons, to have one platoon for each troop, with one left in the company. I would like to see four platoons, even at the cost of four tanks per platoon-- a 16 tank company, with one for the command post. For maintenance and combat losses you would need a 20-tank company. I think I can offer evidence to support this suggestion from our combat losses and maintenance problems.

Question:

Is the TOE adequate? Should there be changes?

Answer (73):

No, there should be many changes. The Howitzer battery, for example, does not have a commander's vehicle. They gave him a jeep, but if he wants to move

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22
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21 Sep 1969

SUBJECT: Exit Interview

his battery.

The forward observers are not as mobile as they should be because we don't have an observer team authorized for D Company. D Company has a forward observer tank, but no forward observer.

We have any number of changes that should be looked into. Someone should examine what we actually need, instead of applying the theory of saving space and cutting out people. I have been in the Pentagon shop that prepares TOE's, and those people don't do the fighting. They can think of a thousand reasons why you shouldn't get something. If those people would listen to the field commanders, the TOE would be a lot better. Sometimes the field commander would ask for more than he needs, but usually he has sound reasoning for his requests.

In the Air Cavalry Troop, no executive officer is authorized. I can't imagine how you are supposed to run a unit of 212 people without an executive officer.

Question:

What changes would you make in personnel strength?

Answer (75):

The squadron should operate at 110% strength to account for people lost to combat losses, R and R, and traveling to the rear for problems.

Question:

If you were required to maintain a twenty to one kill ratio, what tactical changes would you make in your operations?

Answer (75):

During my five months as Commander I have lost 41 men (killed) and killed 800 of the enemy. That's 20 to 1 in my book. I wouldn't change any tactics at all.

The communist system hides their casualties and the people of North Vietnam don't realize their losses. We need to educate the people. I think that if the North Vietnamese people knew their losses this war would come to a screeching halt.

Question:

Has military intelligence furnished adequate information for your operations?

Answer (78):

You never have enough military intelligence. I have taken prisoners-of-war right in the middle of a contact, personally talking to them, making them lead the way. I have put them on the tracks and used them (I know this is against the Geneva Convention), but we have used them to lead us to the enemy. I have put them in the forefront, but I haven't knowingly endangered them. I have used POW's on the ground extensively, and it is the best intelligence you have. The Air Cavalry Troop is the second best source, because their visual reconnaissance can pick up enemy movement and trails.

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