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ARMOR IN VIETNAM



COMBAT NOTES

**HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES ARMY
VIETNAM**

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By JW NARA Date 11-15

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ARMOR OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM

The challenges presented by the war in Vietnam have posed significant problems to armor units in exploiting to the fullest their fire power, mobility and shock action. Armor has, however, been used effectively in stability operations, throughout Vietnam. The elusiveness of the enemy has required modification of the traditional roles of armor with increased emphasis on finding him, holding him, and then delivering the mass of fire power which is available in an armor unit to destroy him. The terrain in which the enemy prefers to operate and establish base areas is generally terrain in which it is very difficult for US helicopter supported infantry units to operate. It is even more difficult for armor units to be used to their fullest capability. The enemy also operates in small groups, seldom massing except just prior to an attack. The most profitable objective for armor is the mass of the enemy force. The enemy rarely presents this opportunity to armor units. It is therefore necessary to intercept him and bring to bear the full weight of armor fire power just prior to launching his attack.

The enemy in Vietnam currently operates in small groups and effectively employs anti-tank weapons against US forces. The NVA/VC is well trained in the use of rocket propelled grenades and courageously uses them in the best of tank killer tactics of WW II.

The effective employment by the enemy of anti-tank weapons reinforces the lessons learned that the tank/infantry team should be employed in all armor operations. In some instances, the jungle crushing ability of the M48 tank and its resistance to mine damage has dictated a role of leading attacks not preceded by infantrymen. Further, because of the differences in the mobility of the M48A3 tank and the M113 armored personnel carrier and M113 ACAV, it has not always been possible to employ the tank/mechanized infantry team. When this occurs, the mechanized infantry is severely handicapped without the fire power of the tank and the tank becomes vulnerable to the enemy RPG team without the protection of infantry. Modifications in tactical concepts have been adopted which have resulted in successful operations. Introduction of the M551 Sheridan vehicle is making possible an optimum combination of infantry and armor protected fire power in cavalry units.

Successful armor operations which have been conducted in Vietnam have been characterized by detailed planning and aggressive and violent execution.

NIGHT OPERATIONS

The Attack. The enemy traditionally moves the bulk of his forces at night and attempts to mass his forces prior to offensive operations under cover of darkness. Armor units, by taking advantage of their night movement and firing capability, can rapidly move to engage the enemy and bring fire power and shock action decisively to bear upon him.

On the night of 18 February 1969, Troop L, 11th ACR, selected a night defensive location approximately seven kilometers west of Tan Son Nhut airfield. The position selected was in close proximity to a known enemy infiltration route in a dry rice paddy, affording good fields of fire and excellent observation. Upon closing into

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the area, a reconnaissance was made to locate likely routes of enemy movement and to gather information about the surrounding terrain. A detailed plan of attack was then formulated for use in the event an enemy force was detected. All personnel were briefed on the plan, fires were coordinated, and preparations were made to detect and engage the enemy. Night observation devices were so located to give thorough coverage of the targeted area. At approximately 0300 hours, an enemy force was sighted moving toward the troop position. Personnel were alerted and preparations were made to execute the planned attack. The troop commander allowed the enemy force to advance to within approximately 500 meters of the troop position before giving the order to engage the enemy. The vehicle lights were used to illuminate the battle area. The rapid reaction of Troop L, executing its pre-planned operation, caught the enemy by surprise. The results were no friendly casualties and 24 enemy KIA and 2 CIA.

Counterattack. One night in late January 1969, FSB Diamond, near Tay Ninh, was attacked by an estimated NVA battalion size force. B Troop, 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, located approximately 10 kilometers away, was ordered to move to FSB Diamond and assist in repulsing the enemy force. B Troop moved rapidly by road to a position approximately 6000 meters from the FSB, then conducted a sweep across the rice paddy towards the FSB. The sweep, which was illuminated by aircraft flares, was oriented to strike the enemy on his flank. The rapid movement and the intense fires of the troop disrupted the enemy attack, created confusion among the enemy and caused him to retreat in disorder leaving the battlefield littered with equipment, dead and wounded. The key to the success of this operation can be attributed to prior planning and thorough reconnaissance conducted by the troop earlier. Once the troop was ordered to move, a well planned operation was conducted which capitalized on the traditional capabilities of armor--speed, mobility and shock action.

Defense Armor units, with their inherent protection and massive direct fire capability, are well suited for the hasty defense. This capability is especially suitable for operations involving the tactical displacement of artillery batteries. Artillery can be moved rapidly, protected in the movement by the armor, then the displaced artillery can be protected by a hasty defense established by the armor unit.

A Troop, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry was assigned a mission of securing an artillery fire support base in the vicinity of Bau Binh, west of Highway 13, and seven kilometers north of Lai Khe. The defensive position, in an abandoned rubber plantation, was occupied at 191150 March 1967.

A Troop was employed with two platoons on a perimeter around the fire base and west side of Highway 13. At 192300 March, a herd of cows with bells ran across the highway just north of the perimeter. Immediately after the cows cleared the road, a caliber .50 machinegun opened fire on the perimeter from the vicinity of the cattle crossing (Figure 1). The machinegun was engaged by tank fire and destroyed. No further action occurred until 200030 March at which time the fire base came under mortar fire from the west and east sides of the perimeter. Simultaneously, a ground attack was launched against the southern sector of the perimeter, using recoilless rifles, automatic weapons and small arms. Organic and supporting fires were placed on the enemy, illumination was used to expose the enemy, and the platoon at the ambush location was ordered back to the perimeter. Armed helicopters quickly responded to the situation and provided close-in aerial fire support. The ambush platoon, enroute to the perimeter, encountered

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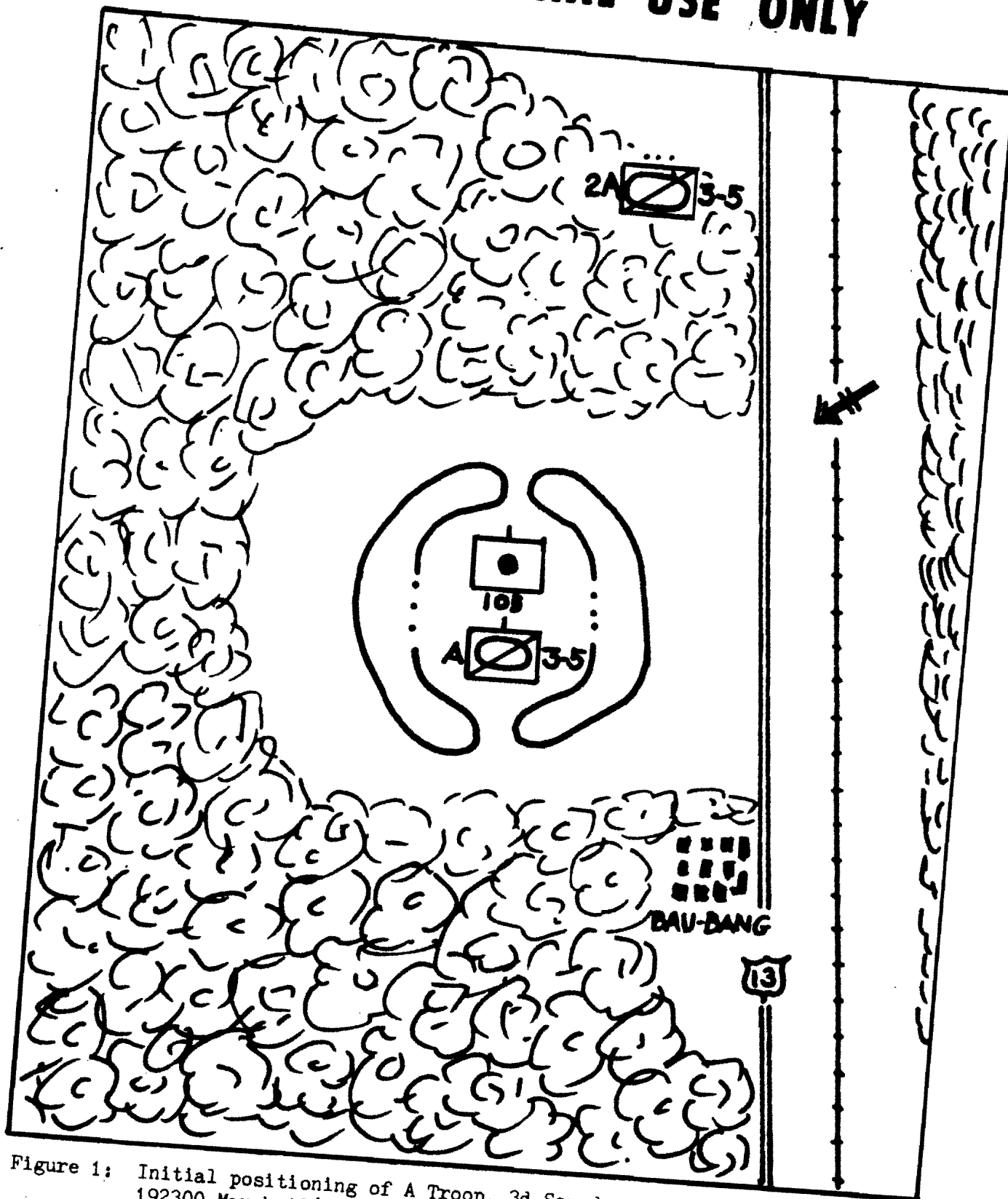


Figure 1: Initial positioning of A Troop, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry at 192300 March 1967.

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an enemy ambush approximately 400 meters northeast of the perimeter and over-ran it. On arriving in the battle area at 200100 March, the platoon assumed defense of the southwest quadrant of the perimeter (Figure 2). At 200115 March, the 3d Platoon of Troop C was placed OPCON to Troop A and moved up highway 13 from the south. This platoon was brought into the rear of the attacking enemy force and placed heavy direct fires on it. The platoon was then moved into the perimeter to strengthen the defense. The 1st platoon of Troop B was placed OPCON to Troop A and moved into the battle area along the highway from the north. On arriving at the east side of the battle area, the platoon attacked around the southern half of the perimeter, entered the perimeter on the west side and assumed a position to strengthen the defense (Figure 3). At 200300 March, tactical air strikes were employed on the concentrated enemy forces east of the perimeter. At 200345 March, the enemy terminated their attack. At 200500 March, all action ceased and enemy contact was lost. The results of these actions were four US soldiers killed, 38 wounded and 1 missing. Material losses were one M106 and one M113 destroyed and one F100 crashed. Enemy losses were 227 killed (body count), 5 PW's (wounded), numerous crew served and individual weapons captured. Subsequent observations and discoveries of enemy bodies increased the enemy KIA to more than 400.

The Offensive/Defensive Position. Operating in known VC base areas, armor units have the ability to move across country rapidly and set up strong points quickly without losing combat effectiveness. After considerable planning and a thorough reconnaissance, units move just at dark and set up platoon or company size strong points astride known or suspected enemy routes of movement creating a situation that will invoke enemy attack. The units organize their positions as an offensive NDP with LP's, concertina wire, trip flares, claymores and RPG screens (Figure 4). All means available to the units are used to detect movement and provide early warning of an approaching enemy. Once contact is made, all modes of illumination are used to light up the battle area and all organic and supporting firepower is used to destroy the enemy. On the evening of 10 March 1969, A Troop, 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, established a troop strong point astride a suspected enemy infiltration route east of Tay Ninh. The position was a typical night laager with tanks and Sheridans spread throughout the configuration. Listening Posts were established about 200 meters outside the perimeter. At 2300 hours, one of the LP's detected enemy movement. The troop was alerted and the Sheridan's night vision devices were used to scan the area and keep the enemy under surveillance. When it became apparent that the enemy was preparing to attack the troop, the LP's were pulled in and the troop went on full alert. Just as the enemy approached the perimeter wire, the troop opened fire and illuminated the area. The enemy was caught by surprise and in the open. The devastating fire power of the cavalry troop prevented the enemy from breaching the position and repulsed him leaving 38 VC bodies on the battlefield which included the battalion commander and a company commander.

Tank Ambushes Although armor vehicles are difficult to hide and make a considerable amount of noise while moving, they have been used in ambush positions. At night, the noise created by the moving column is used to cover the noise of the separated vehicles moving into and establishing the ambush position. These positions, set up on known or suspected routes of movement, use all available means of early detection to identify enemy movement before the enemy can locate the ambush site.

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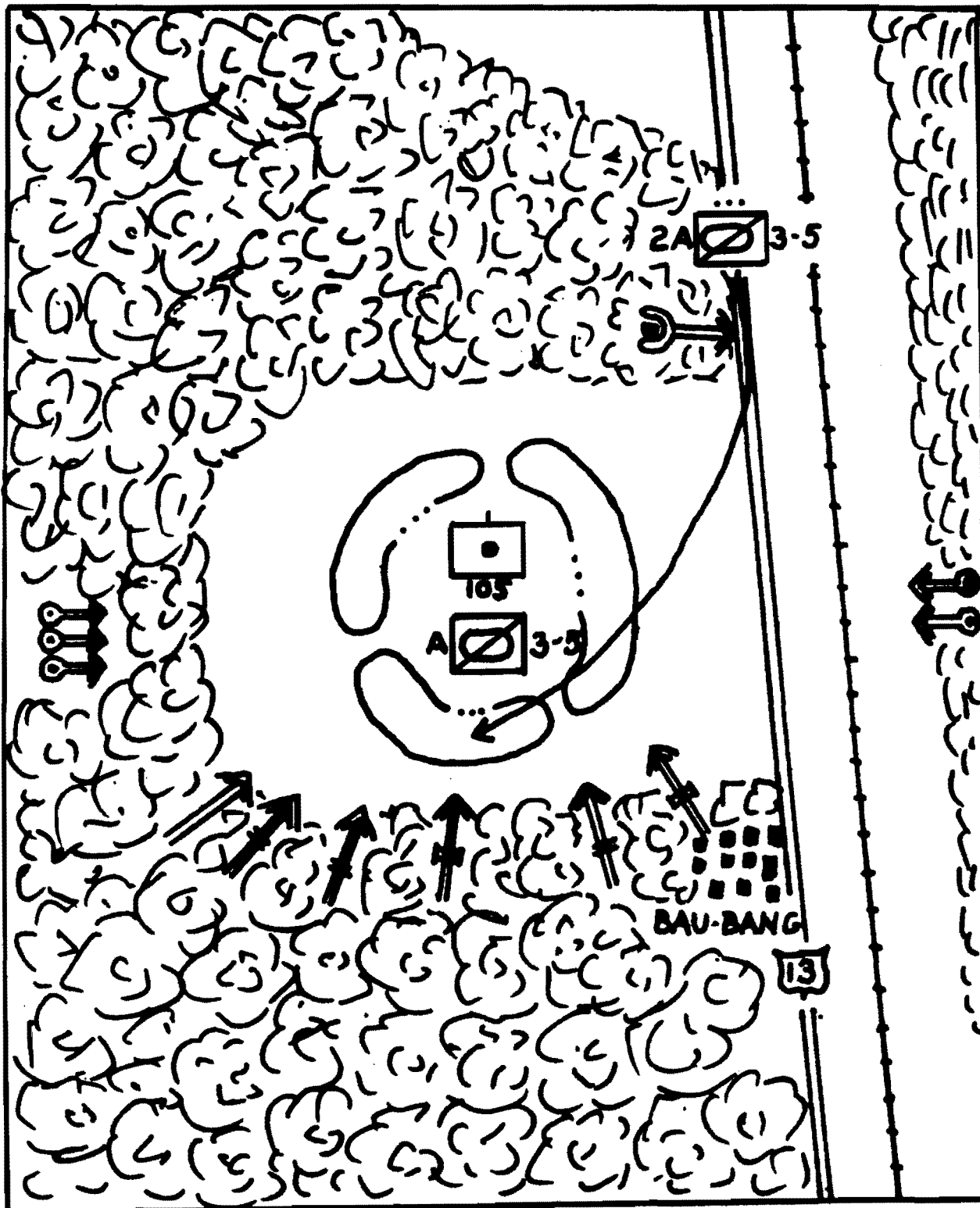


Figure 2: Position of A Troop, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry after arrival of the Second Platoon at 200110 March 1967.

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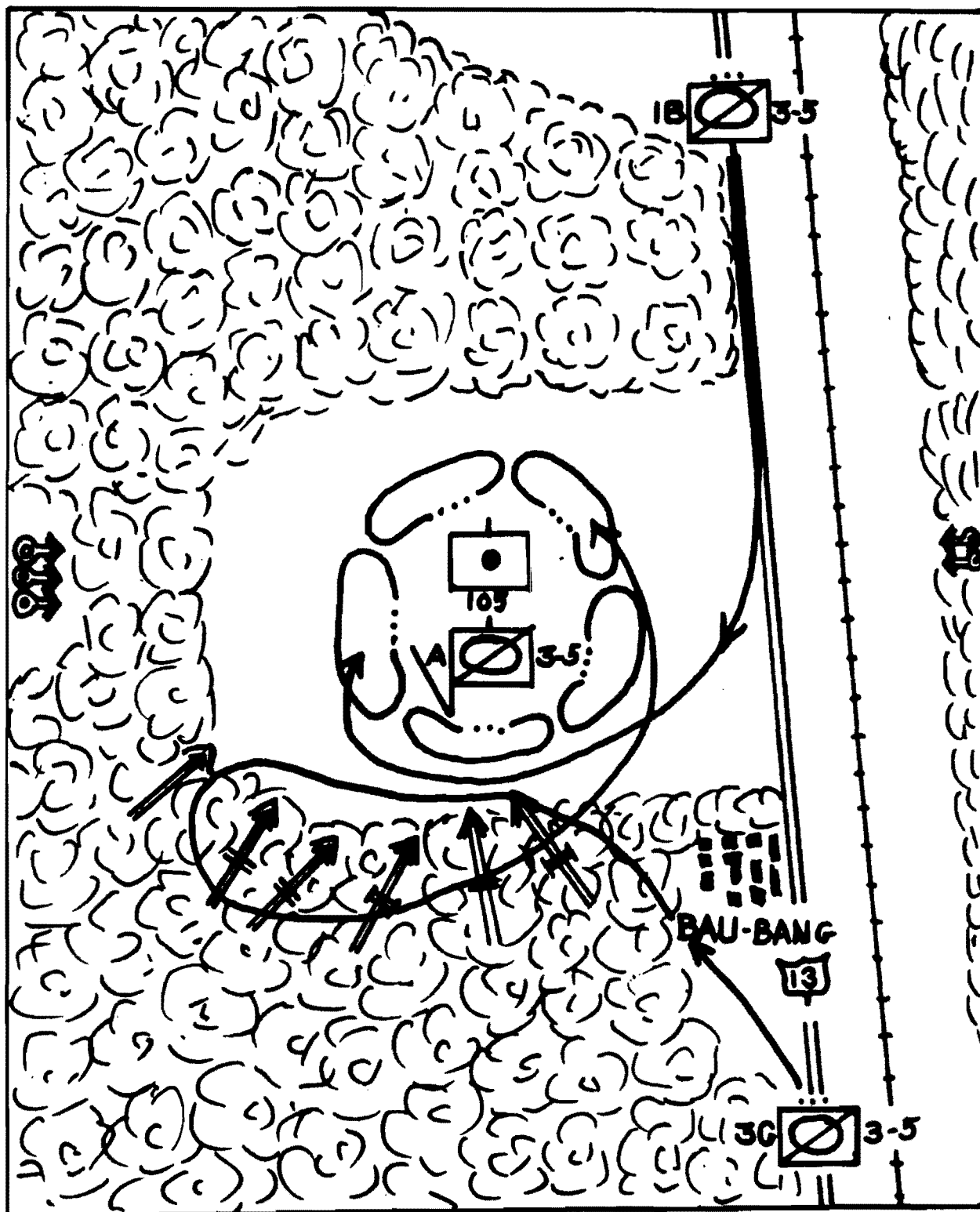


Figure 3: Final position of A Troop, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry after arrival of 2 additional OPCON platoons at 200300 March 1967.

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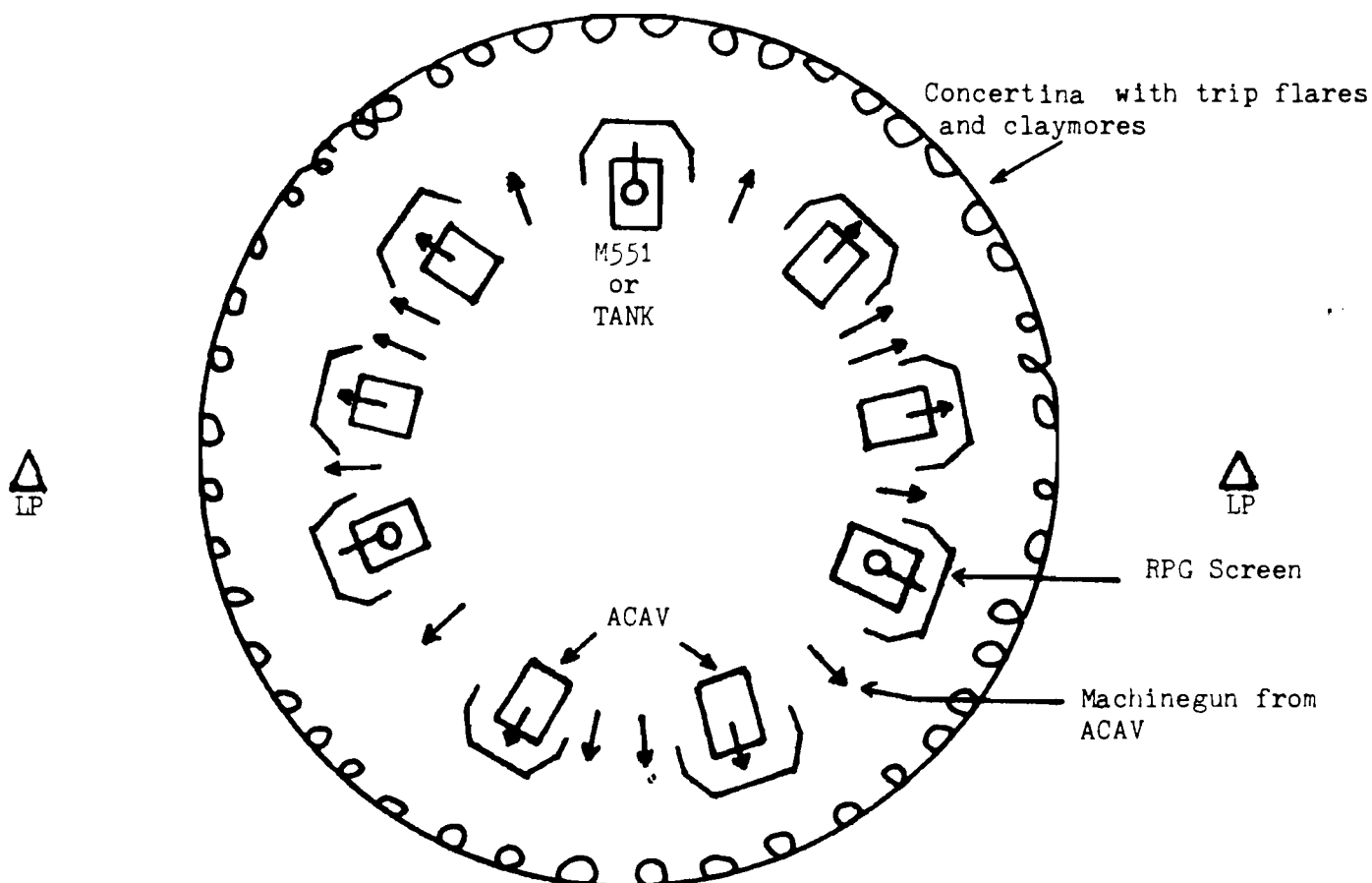


Figure 4: Typical Armored Cavalry Platoon Night Defensive Position: Vehicles are positioned in a circle approximately 10 meters apart. Machineguns are dismounted from the ACAVs and positioned between the vehicles. Sleeping and fighting positions are dug around the vehicles (only one man is allowed to remain on each vehicle to man the Cal .50 machinegun and the main gun on the tank or ARAAV). RPG screens, made of chain link fence and long engineer pickets, are erected around the front of each vehicle. Concertina wire, trip flares and claymores surround the position. LPs are established approximately 150 to 200 meters from the position. (Note: A Troop NDP is organized similar to the platoon except a troop NDP is larger. Each platoon establishes its proportionate share of the perimeter and the troop CP vehicles are positioned in the center.)

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Fire support is planned in detail to insure adequate support is provided to the ambush element. Routes in and out of the area are thoroughly reconnoitered for use by the parent unit should the ambush element require assistance. The 2d Battalion, 34th Armor has effectively used this method of ambush with good results. In the late evening, a tank company moves into a NDP and leaves behind armor ambush patrols consisting of three vehicles. These ambushes consist of two tanks and one M113 with an infantry squad and radar set. The infantry provides security for the vehicles and establishes listening posts. The radar provides early warning of any movement in the area. The force is small but it is capable of delivering a potent punch of firepower and shock effect. With its high degree of mobility, it can maneuver to engage the enemy after the ambush is sprung or to move away from the main thrust of the enemy while delivering a great volume of fire. Aggressiveness on the part of the ambush element is the key to its success. The enemy will be stunned and the ambush element can gain the initiative and overpower the enemy and either destroy or rout him.

The Cordon. The enemy frequently moves into villages and hamlets at night in order to obtain food and recruit personnel. Armor with its inherent mobility can be used at night to rapidly establish a cordon around the village to seal the enemy inside where he can be apprehended in a detailed daylight search. During the morning of 21 September 1969, 3d Squadron, 11th ACR was given a mission to cordon and search a village north of Quan Loi. Late that afternoon, two troops conducted a zone reconnaissance in an area near the village, at which time two infantry platoons were dropped off in night ambush positions several hundred meters from the village. The two cavalry troops then departed the immediate area and set up a NDP approximately 2000 meters from the village. At 0055 hours, 22 September, artillery cover and deception fire was initiated to cover the noise of the vehicles as their engines were started. The two troops moved rapidly from their NDP, using the noise created by the artillery to cover their movement, and arrived at their objective at 0155 hours. At the same time the Armored Cavalry troops were moving, the two infantry platoons moved toward the objective to assist in completing the cordon. When the cordon was completed and the objective illuminated, a loudspeaker was used to advise the villagers to remain in their houses and that a search would be conducted at first light. At approximately 0630 the search was conducted by local GVN officials and resulted in one VCI being captured along with a small cache of weapons and ammunition. Interrogation of the villagers revealed that the artillery fire did an effective job in covering the vehicle noise.

DAY OPERATIONS

Reconnaissance in Force. Armor is effectively employed in its more traditional reconnaissance role in Vietnam through the reconnaissance in force which is designed to find, fix and destroy the enemy in his base areas or infiltration routes when the weather and terrain permit the employment of armor. These operations require the integrated tank/infantry team or an armored cavalry unit and are most effective when employed in conjunction with air cavalry.

An armor unit is normally assigned an area of operation (AO) by its higher headquarters. In order to locate all the enemy forces that may be operating in the area,

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a ground reconnaissance must be conducted. The company commander analyzes his assigned area on a map, then he and his platoon leaders make an aerial reconnaissance. The company AO is then subdivided into platoon sectors. The platoons move to their assigned sectors to conduct a thorough reconnaissance. When the brush is thick or terrain is such that the vehicles cannot be moved through an area, the platoons dismount infantry to search the area. As the platoons move, helicopter scout teams (LOH covered by Cobra) cover the surrounding area in front of the ground elements to locate enemy positions. When an enemy force is located, the platoon's mission changes from reconnaissance to attack. Armed helicopters, artillery or tactical air are called upon to fix the enemy force in position and block its withdrawal while the armor unit assaults the position. If the enemy force is too large for one platoon to overcome, one or both of the uncommitted platoons may join by attacking from different directions.

Navigation in the jungle and brush is difficult, therefore, the platoon leader relies on the aerial scout to assist in navigation. Once an enemy is located, observers in helicopters or fixed wing aircraft assist the ground force by giving direction changes to the lead vehicle. This enables the force to negotiate or go around the difficult terrain and avoid any delays in reaching their objective.

On 12 October 1969, two platoons of F Troop, 2d Squadron, 11th ACR assisted by an aerial scout team, were conducting a reconnaissance in a densely wooded area south of Mang Chi. The helicopters were conducting an aerial reconnaissance about 500 meters in front of the platoons when they received small arms fire. The helicopters returned fire and held the enemy in position while the two platoons deployed on line and attacked the position, killing 5 VC soldiers and capturing four RPG's. While the platoons were searching the area, one of the ACAV commanders noticed that some VC soldiers had crossed a nearby canal and were running away. The ACAV took them under fire but could not hit them. Armed helicopters were called in to assist. The ACAV commander directed the helicopters to the area and then marked the enemy position with M79 grenades. The helicopter pilots located the position and killed 5 VC soldiers with machinegun and ARA fire.

Sweep. The flanking sweep of armor, a classical maneuver, was effectively employed outside of Long Binh Post on 23 February 1969. As part of the Tet offensive, a battalion of 274 NVA Regiment attempted to effect a penetration of the Long Binh Post perimeter following an intense mortar and rocket attack. An armored sweep supported by air and artillery was conducted one kilometer south of the Post by two troops of the 1st Squadron, 11th ACR (Figure 5). Initially, A Troop made enemy contact and B Troop was deployed to support A Troop. As one company of the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry deployed in a blocking position, both troops deployed their Sheridans on line and, employing all their organic weapons, completely overran their objective areas. The 1st Squadron was credited with 88 NVA KIA and 6 POW's plus substantial amounts of war material captured. Friendly casualties included 1 KIA and 7 WIA. This operation was particularly significant because it was the first operation in Vietnam where the fire power and mobility of the Sheridan were employed. The devastating effect of the 152mm gun with the fleshette round, coupled with the Sheridans' high degree of mobility, accounted to a large extent for the success of this operation.

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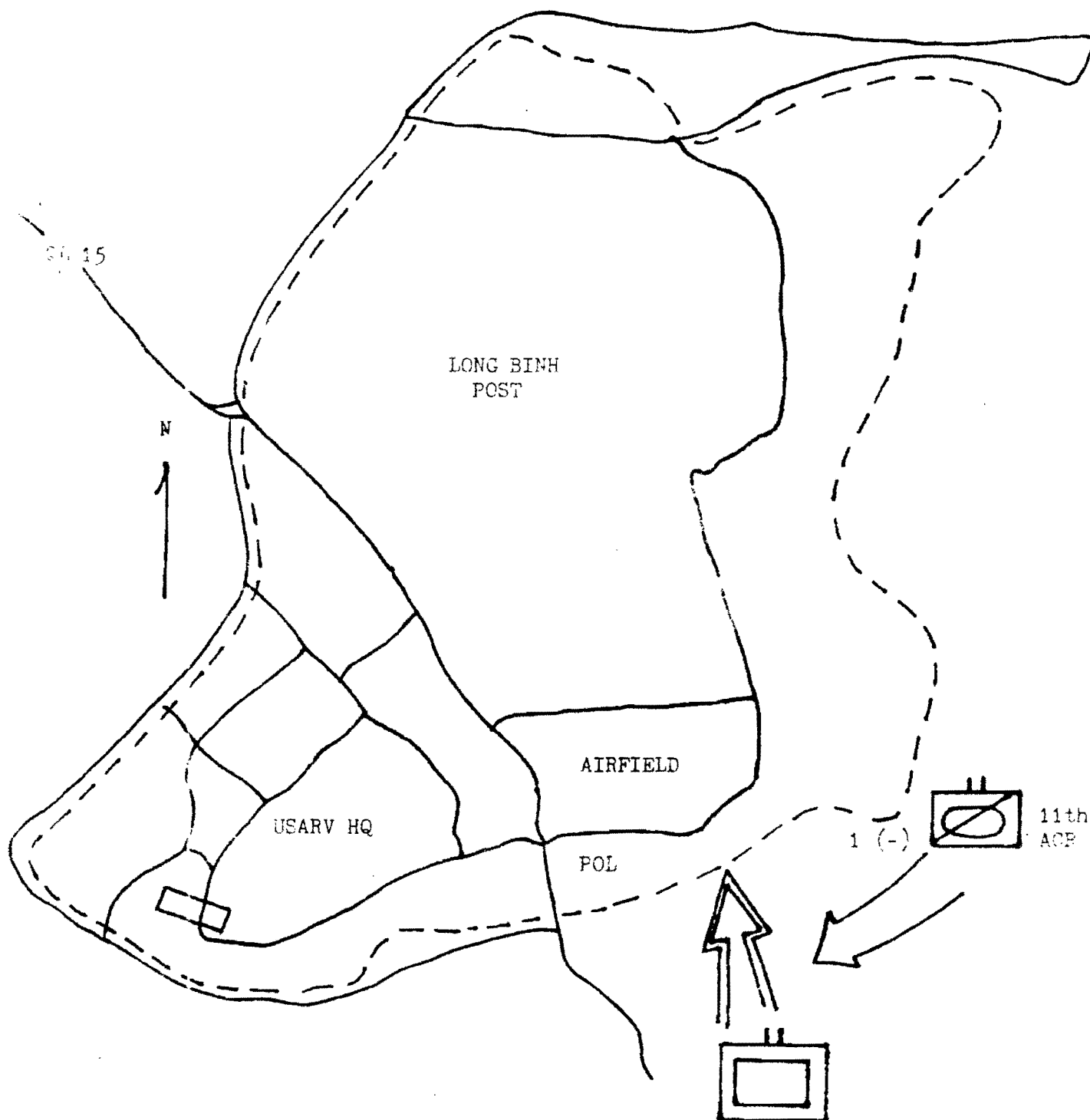


Figure 5: Sweep conducted by elements of 1st Squadron, 11th ACR against the flank of enemy force attacking Long Binh Post on 23 Feb 1969.

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Convoy Security. Internal Defense Operations are characterized by long and vulnerable routes of communication. In order to move much needed supplies along these routes it is necessary that they be swept and secured on a daily basis. The speed and maneuverability of armor makes it ideally suited for this type of operation. Armor units, with their mobility and fire power, can rapidly clear roads and use reconnaissance by fire to neutralize possible ambush positions. Once the road has been swept and cleared, armor units can be effectively employed in keeping the road open and reacting aggressively to an ambush should one be sprung. Seldom are there enough forces to completely cover a route to maintain its security once it has been opened. Armor operating from outposts along the road and by moving frequently from point to point can systematically prevent the enemy from establishing an ambush or mining a road after it has been swept. In this type of operation, the use of air cavalry scout teams enhances the effectiveness of armor both in reconnaissance and in reaction to convoy ambushing. The gunships of the scout team can be immediately employed against the enemy ambush site while armor can move parallel to the road and strike the ambush on the flank with the inherent fire power and shock action of armor. On 2 December 1966, a small resupply convoy consisting of two trucks, two tanks and three M113's was ambushed in the vicinity of Suoi Cat (Figure 6). The enemy force was estimated as two VC battalions with local guerrilla forces attached. As the VC forces opened fire, the convoy reacted violently in accordance with Squadron SOP; the armored vehicles continued to move, escorting the trucks through the ambush positions while pouring a heavy volume of accurate fire into the brush on both sides of the road. The tanks and the M113's then returned to the fight and again raked the area with 90mm cannister, caliber .50 and 7.62mm machinegun fire and hand grenades. Elements of three troops of the 1st Squadron, 11th ACR, including the tank company, were ordered to move to the site. Artillery and tactical aircraft provided support within ten minutes after being called, although the employment of neither had been preplanned (Figure 7). In this operation, the two tanks and three M113's were able to maintain the fire fight until the arrival of reinforcements. Ninety-nine VC were killed and three were captured; American losses were one killed and 22 wounded.

Rome Plows. The Rome Plow has effectively destroyed many VC/NVA sanctuaries in Vietnam by removing the jungle and the thick underbrush. The enemy's base camps and caches have been uncovered and the terrain has been improved so that armor may be effectively employed in areas that were once prohibitive. Armor has, in turn, assisted the Rome Plow operation by providing for the defense of the Rome Plows during their cutting operations and in their night laagers. Armor with its cross-country mobility can move with the Rome Plow and provide security to the cutting effort. Frequently Rome Plow operations have turned into effective offensive operations which have destroyed not only the NVA/VC base camps but also the enemy forces that are left to protect them.

Urban Combat. Armor has been effectively used in urban combat in Vietnam. Normally the house to house fighting, limited fields of fire and lack of maneuvering space dictate fighting for which the infantry is best suited. However, armor with its mobility can rapidly seal off an area of urban enemy activity. By doing so, the enemy is prevented from spreading his influence to other parts of the city. The contained enemy can then be attacked using all fire support means available.

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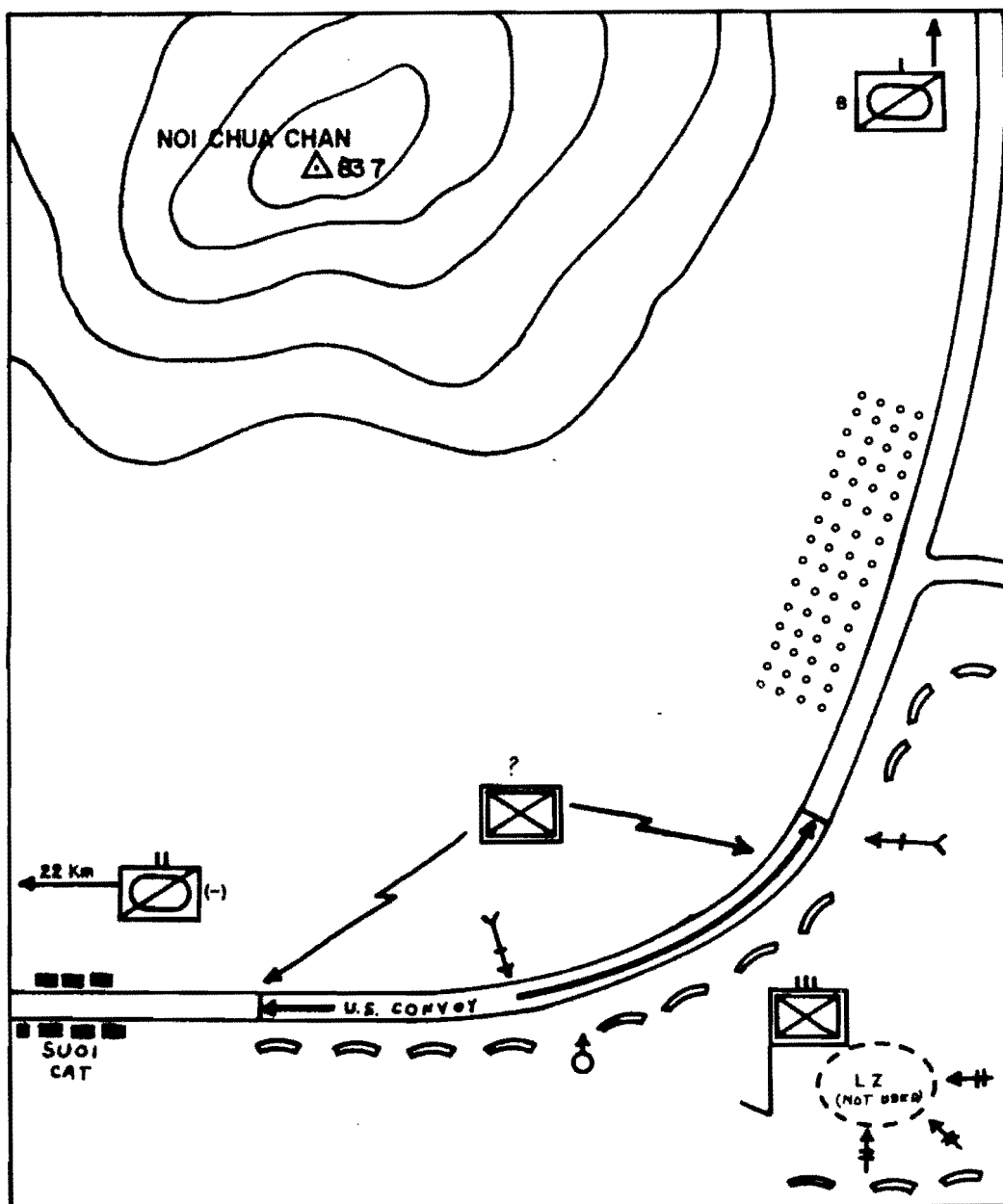


Figure 6: Enemy and Friendly Dispositions for 2 December 1966 Ambush. Vehicles of U.S. convoy traveling north were arranged in this order: lead M48A3 tank, two M113's (ACAV), two trucks, one M113 (ACAV), and the trail M48A3 tank. Road in this area has elephant grass on both sides for about 60 meters and secondary timber beyond.

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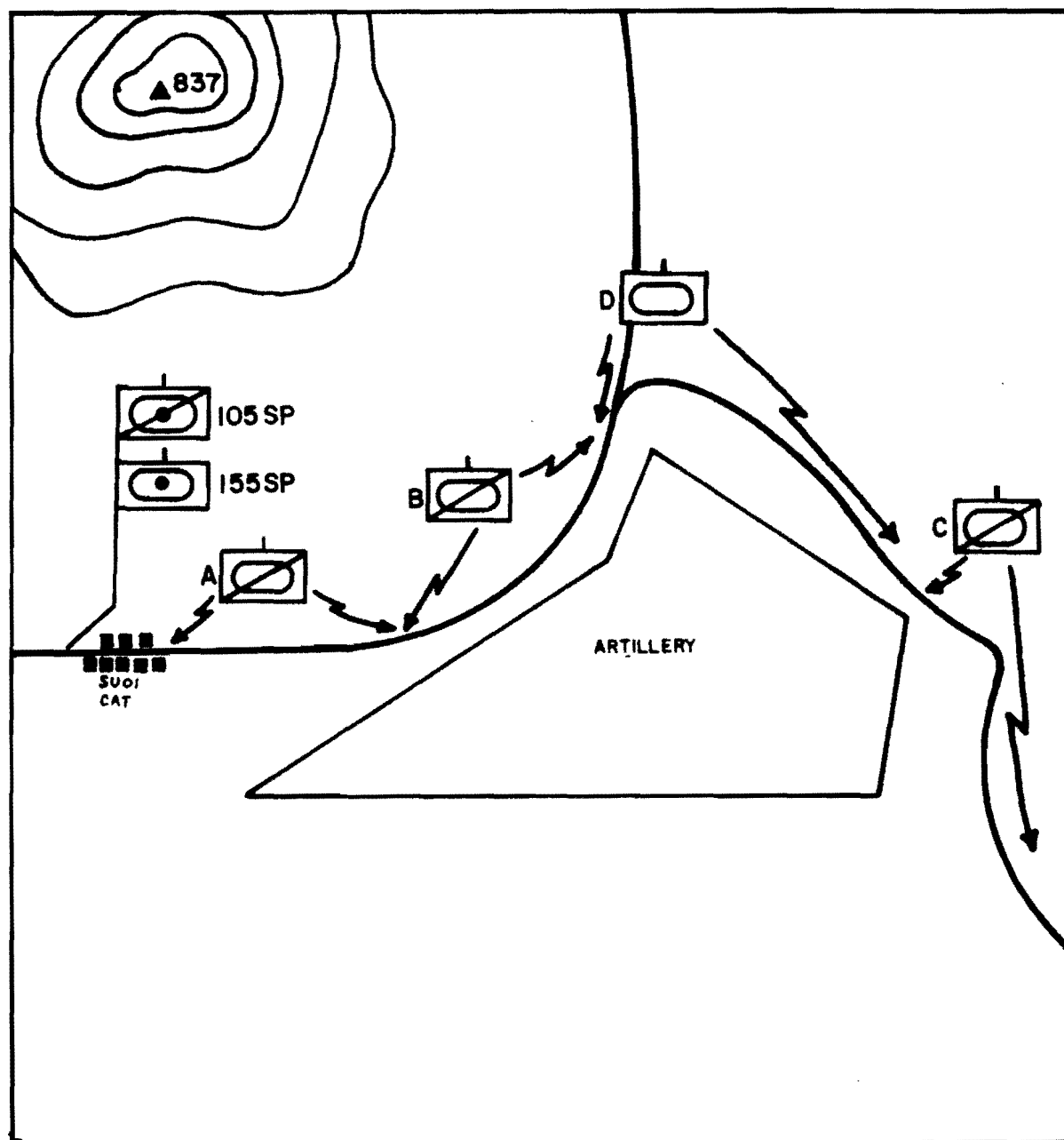


Figure 7: Friendly Dispositions Following Concentration of Armored Cavalry Squadron to Reduce the Ambush. Initially, air strikes were conducted in area south of the road, and artillery fires were restricted to area north of the road. Subsequently, upon completion of air strikes, artillery fires were shifted to main enemy positions south of the road.

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Although some destruction of dwellings results, the damage is confined to the area of influence and prevents needless destruction of property and loss of civilian lives. On the night of 18-19 June 1969, elements of the 88th NVA Regiment infiltrated into the northern part of Tay Ninh city under the cover of a supporting attack on FSB Washington. The force was discovered one block from the Cao Dai Temple at first light. The 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry (Mech) moved rapidly into the northern suburbs at 0630 and by 0745 had completely sealed the enemy and prevented his intended takeover of the Cao Dai Temple. Once the areas had been sealed, air and artillery were directed against the enemy's strong points within the cordon. Following the air and artillery preparation, the southern side of the cordon, supported by flame tracks, moved through and destroyed the remaining enemy force. By 1330, the battle was over and 33 enemy bodies and numerous individual and crew served weapons were found in the rubble. The armor protected mobility and aggressiveness displayed by the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry (Mech) prevented the enemy from obtaining a psychological advantage by capturing the Cao Dai Temple and destroyed an enemy force within the city with minimum damage to civilian property and loss of civilian lives.

SUMMARY

Armor remains one of the most valuable weapons in the arsenal of modern warfare and has proved itself to be effective in operations in Vietnam. The tremendous firepower and mobility of armor provides the aggressive and imaginative commander with means to engage and destroy the enemy at any place and any time. Doctrine changes as a result of advances in technology, tactics and the determination of the enemy. The tactics in the Vietnam war have been modified by the degree of emphasis that has been placed on finding and fixing the objective--the mass of enemy. Each war teaches new do's and don't's, many being variations of lessons learned in the past. The following are some learned in this war which, when remembered and applied will decrease damage and destruction of our equipment and personnel:

1. Reconnaissance should be thorough and continuous. A thorough map, ground and aerial reconnaissance should be made on a continuing basis to assist units in locating enemy forces and avoiding difficult terrain within the area. Upon moving into a position, a thorough reconnaissance of the surrounding area will reveal any possible enemy positions and avenues of approach or movements into the position.
2. Unrestrictive employment of vehicular weapon systems must be considered at all times. All vehicular mounted weapons must be employed in maintaining all-around security and when engaging the enemy.
3. Make maximum use of all available resources to aid in maneuver, fire direction, and control. The difficulty in negotiating the terrain and maintaining proper orientation necessitates assistance from aerial observers in maintaining direction and control.
4. Always consider the unlikely. Look at things from the enemies' view. The cunning enemy utilizes all the tricks available to gain the initiative and inflict casualties. He will usually strike when and where it is considered most unlikely.

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5. Speed has inherent danger. A reaction which is made too quickly and without knowledge of the enemy and terrain can lead unknowingly into destruction. The enemy always plans for a rapid reaction force to move to the assistance of a unit under attack and will establish a plan to interdict this force.

6. Orient all efforts on the destruction or neutralization of the enemy force rather than on terrain. The enemy is difficult to locate and must be destroyed whenever and wherever he is located.

7. Small units should not be deployed in tactical operations without adequate fire support and available reinforcements. To do so will only invite defeat.

8. Front and rear lines normally do not exist; therefore, units must always remain vigilant and ready for any contingency. The enemy is ever present and will strike whenever he thinks he can inflict casualties or damage.

9. Armor units must be trained to operate as dismounted forces whenever necessary. There can be no hesitancy on the part of crew members to dismount and search an area or to engage the enemy in close combat when the vehicular weapons system proves ineffective. Dismounted crew members must be used to check the trafficability of difficult terrain and to provide security for the vehicles whenever they are halted.

10. Always remain flexible. Armor units with their inherent capabilities of rapid movement, superior fire power and flexible means of communications must plan thoroughly and be able to react rapidly to any changes in the enemy situation.

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