



THE JOINT STAFF

THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

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Dear Major Boles:

Reference your letter, the following report on the battle of Suoi Tre is submitted for your possible use. Sorry it has taken so long but tried to make it all inclusive.

The "Battle of Suoi Tre" was the culmination of eighteen months training and combat experience. In a way it was a graduation exercise. The battalion was never really the same thereafter. Not because of the battle, but because of certain administrative reassignments that were made shortly following the battle to preclude all personnel from rotating at the same time, thus decimating the battalion.

The Third Battalion of the 22nd Infantry was activated at Fort Lewis, Washington, on the 1st day of November 1965. It was a carefully planned activation with a fully manned cadre organized. A training program of the cadre was initiated to prepare for the receipt of the 1000 recruits from the reception centers. This was to be a unique experience for the battalion would be activated and go through its four basic phases of training prior to going overseas to enter into assured combat.

The recruits all arrived on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, 1966, and the following week. It was during this same period that a majority of the experienced squad leaders and platoon sergeants from the battalion were transferred to build up the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii. As a result, upon

organizing the companies of the battalion, Acting Jacks (acting NCOs) were selected based on appearance, intelligence and general skills to become unit leaders. These young soldiers were to serve as squad leaders and platoon sergeants to fill the vacancies of the departed. These actions proved to be of far reaching and significant value. Although prior to the battalion departing Fort Lewis, other sergeants would come and go, most of these Acting Jacks retained the moral and informal leadership which they had earned from their peers and their leaders during the early days of BIT: their first days in the battalion.

Training at Fort Lewis was rigerous and thorough. Acting NCO's soon became Privates First Class and Corporals. Certain selected individuals of the original 1000 were selected out during AIT and BUT for special training in skills in which they had special knowledge and for which Division had understandable requirements. Finally, when the battalion was almos/ ready for Vietnam, Department of Army responded to earlier frantic personnel requisitions by assigning a large quota of senior enlisted men to fill the many vacancies for squad and platoon leaders. Every effort was made to welcome these new/old recruits with welcome arms - but they had to first prove themselves. Some of these Sergeants did exceptionally well; some were never able to prove their ability; some did not really desire to go to Vietnam because of physical handicaps. By that time it didn't matter for the battalion was solid and had proven itself in training at Fort Lewis, and in the Rain Forests of the Olympic Penninsula. It had yet to prove itself in combat.

The Battle of Suoi Tre was preceded by two specific operations after the battalion arrived in Vietnam. These served as excellent training and shakedown experiences.

OPERATION BREMERTON

Operation Bremerton was the battle of the Saigon River. Not a glorious or enjoyable campaign, it was an outstanding way for the companies and men of the battalion to develop self confidence and to acclimatize to the climate of Vietnam. Fought in the infamous Rung Sat Special Zone south of Saigon, it was a campaign of attrition of the guerrillas. Their assignment was to stop the shipment of friendly supplies up the river to

Saigon. Fought under unbelievable conditions, the terrain helped the enemy, until the companies learned to adapt. It was in the Rung Sat where both the battalion amphibious and helicopter assault operation techniques were further developed and improved. It was in the Rung Sat where the battalion learned how to extract a wounded man through a double canopy. It was in the Rung Sat where men of the battalion learned how to get by on only a cup of water a day. It was in the Rung Sat where patience was developed while lying in ambush. It was in the Rung Sat where hardship became more a challenge than a disaster.

OPERATION FAIRFAX

Operation Fairfax, after the Rung Sat, was a piece of cake. Yet, lessons of a different nature were to be learned. This operation was to be the maiden effort of the war to pacify an area by integrating all of its military/civil assets. Hopefully, the battalion would be allowed to remain in the area long enough to become thoroughly familiar with the Province and its people. Fairfax, was the marrying of the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion, the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry, the District Chief with his police force, a National Intelligence Platoon, a platoon of national police, interpreters and finally the invaluable Regional and Popular Forces. Lasting for six weeks in the area southwest of Saigon, this operation gave the men of the battalion an appreciation of the more subtle objectives of the war. Working intimately with the Vietnamese in the hamlets, the Regulars learned that the pick and shovel might be mightier than the rifle - but keep it close. Working with the local populace they learned the language, the geography and the customs. Working with the Airborne Battalion, they provided resources to make the Airborne Battalion more effective, especially in helicopter operations, close air support and communication. The Regulars of the battalion by their example attempted to teach the ARVN soldiers on treating local civilians with respect, compassion, and understanding.

The Battalion's part in Operation Fairfax was terminated in January of 1967. Although it was good to regain the Brigade, much valuable impetus and know how in the pacification effort was lost. Subsequently, the II Field Force Commander remarked that although the Battle of Suoi Tre was a good fight, Operation Fairfax was the Battalion's Shining hour.

might have been more

THE BATTLE SUOI TRE

Phase I of Operation Junction City had not uncovered much in the way of Viet Cong troops or stores. The 3rd Battalion of the 22nd was used principally in a lengthy search and destroy mission along the Cambodian border west and north of the city of Tay Ninh. Several small base camps were located and some minor skirmishes were conducted. No friendly casualties were sustained but the Battalion had its first dry ground operation since arriving in country. From the swamps to the rice paddies to the forests along the border.

The Battalion had returned to Dau Tieng for one day when it was alerted to move to the vicinity of Nui Ba'Den in preparation for an assault landing to begin Phase II of Operation Junction City. We were to set up a fire base with the Battalion minus Company C (Brigade Security) plus the 2nd Battalion of the 77th Artillery. There were two battalions of artillery to provide direct support in softening up the landing zone, plus close air support. Even so, the landing was hot. Anti-tank mines laid along the dike of rice paddies were string detonated by Viet Cong in the surrounding trees. Artillery shells rigged as mines in the center of the LZ were also detonated to do their damage. Three helicopters were destroyed on landing; others were damaged to the point that they were forced to land on returning to make their second insertion. It was a successful landing but expensive in manpower and equipment.

Insertion moved smoothly once the area had been swept of VC and the landing area had been expanded sufficiently to begin work on the perimeter. By nightfall the positions were well on the way to being completed. Each position was carefully designated prior to work beginning. The last two items of relatively new equipment brought in - new to us - were two quad-50 machine guns. The crewmen could not believe that they were to be dug in also, but they made a valiant effort.

Positions were worked on steadily all night and on through the next day. In addition, artillery personnel were drilled in Infantry Squad tactics and rehearsed on where they might conduct counterattacks. LTC Jack Vassey, the recently assigned

Artillery Battalion Commander, quickly met his commanders and had them preparing for whatever might come.

By the evening of the 2nd day I personally felt that our position was secure. Patrols were conducting their sweeps. Outposts were in position some 250 meters forward of the perimeter. Each outpost consisted of three men with a machine gun, one per company front. Each outpost had communications to its Company Command Post. Because of the likely avenue of approaches in front of Company B, its outpost was especially strong and alert (11 men). Sp4 Virgil M. Ledford was the outpost leader and machine gunner. His early morning warning of what was to come reached the Company CP but never got to Battalion or to the other companies. The first warning of the attack received by Battalion was a massive indirect fire attack beginning at 0630. This attack was effective with early hits on Ammo bunkers and Command Posts - especially those areas around the Artillery Battalion Command Post marked by a high density of communications antennas indicating control areas. Although the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Command Post was utilizing an inconspicuous field expedient 292 type antenna for primary communications, it also received several direct hits.

The attack on Suoi Tre was a series of human wave attacks, starting from the south with the major thrust. Attacks were also launched from the northwest and northeast simultaneously. The attack by fire was accurate and alerted all soldiers to the ground attack that might, and did, follow. Early losses in artillery communication and general supplies led to concern. At that time, however, few within the two Battalions there at Landing Zone Gold appreciated the size of the attack to follow. The fires and explosions soon resulted in poor visibility and shortages in certain types ammo. The small size of the perimeter, coupled with its flat land layout meant that most bullets that passed a soldier coming into the perimeter also passed other soldiers or positions. Fortunately, all soldiers had good build-up positions with overhead cover. The most vulnerable were the two quad 50's machine guns. The one to the north was knocked out early by direct fire. The quad 50 to the south burned out all barrels in good service.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the battle of Suoi Tre after the preliminary preparation was the complete coordination and maximizing of all firepower available in a common effort. Infantry, Mech Infantry, Armor, Artillery and TAC Air all played essential and mutually supporting roles.

For the insertion and during the battle, artillery was employed in both a direct and indirect role. Artillery bases of battery to battalion strength had been established both west and south of Landing Zone Gold. These bases played an important role in both the assault phase and in the subsequent battle. This fire support was carefully coordinated with TAC Air and helicopter gunships to maximize close-in support of the Fire Support Base perimeter. The orchestration of TAC Air and Artillery was especially effective to take advantage of the strengths of each and to reinforce each for continuous support. TAC Air was highly effective until the Battalion air controller (1 LT Terry Forbes) was shot down. From then on, TAC Air was controlled by myself, but naturally, not as efficient as before. Artillery in a direct fire role within the perimeter was especially effective during the assault phase of the attack. Over 2000 rounds of 100mm artillery were expended of which 50 rounds were beehive, the first recorded use of this highly effective type of anti-personnel ammunition. Command and control arrangements had been established the preceding day to insure that friendly troops were not struck by beehive. This was essential as each round contained over 8000 metal darts or phlechettes, and was devastating at point blank range, in the vicinity of the friendly perimeter and beyond. Although some defending infantry received minor wounds, the overall effects on the VC were staggering.

The Mech Inf Battalion (2/22) Commanded by LTC Ralph Julian and the tank battalion each played significant roles. Attached is a rundown by LTC Julian on this attack. During the first two days of the operation they were used in conducting search and destroy operations at a distance from Suoi Tre - but with Suoi Tre as the eventual objective. As a result and due to their excellent location both battalions were in positions to reinforce each other, the fire support base and another Infantry Battalion, the 2nd of the 12th, which was also operating in the vicinity. It turned out that their services were most desirable that morning. There may be an argument as to whether or not Fire Support Base Gold could have withstood further attacks or whether or not the enemy had worn itself out in the attack. There was no question that the mech and tank battalions were warmly received upon arriving and that they played a key role in responding rapidly to their assigned mission. Their fire-power, speed, shock action and maneuverability played significant roles in knocking a crack VC regiment out of the war for an extended period of time. By arriving when they did at the critical time they hit the VC in the flanks and rear.

As the 34th Armor and 2/22nd Inf (Mech) arrived from the south and west, the 2nd of the 12th Inf reached the northwest boundary of the perimeter. Although less dramatic, the effort and overland forced march of this battalion was truly inspirational. As one Pfc told me shortly after breaking into the perimeter "we knew you were in trouble and we never stopped running to get here." Only those familiar with the terrain and where that Battalion started can appreciate the required effort. It is significant to note that the 2nd of the 12th had also had an indirect attack by fire during the early hours. This attack was a part of the diversionary attack by the VC, hoping to keep the 2nd of the 12th out of the ensuing battle.

The actions by the 3rd Bn of the 22nd have perhaps been underplayed because, so many units did so much. Magnificent and responsive action by the artillery, the armor and the mech should not detract from the Regulars of the 3rd Bn who were bearing the brunt of the attack. Penetrations were made but each company in turn recaptured its own territory and the perimeter was intact when the battle was over. Company B under the Command of Capt Shugart, the hardest hit company, lost and regained ground repeatedly. Understrength, but with the Battalion Recon Platoon attached, the company was in the direct line of three different attacks (it also absorbed the main attack). Under impossible conditions, individual, platoon, and company efforts were magnificent.

As the first man to see the attack, Sp4 Ledford and his outpost watched a story book picture of well trained, well equipped enemy soldiers rapidly engulf their position. Not being able to make contact with his company, Sp4 Ledford opened fire. This warning coincided with the first incoming indirect rounds on the base itself. Fighting until almost out of ammunition, the outpost members began to work their way back to the perimeter. Sp4 Ledford refused to leave the position and continued to bring machinegun fire on the enemy. By that time, his position was surrounded and he was not seen again.

1 LT John Andrews, 1st Platoon Leader Company B conducted three separate counterattacks to regain lost ground and reestablish the perimeter. LT Michael Kaul, Bn S-2, formerly of Company B led the reaction force made up primarily of artillery personnel and reestablished the area formerly held by the Recon Platoon, attached to Company B.

During this period infiltrators around the Company and Battalion Command Posts (both Infantry and Artillery) were being eliminated and ammunition was being air lifted into the base. The Brigade Commander Col Marshall Garth, was in constant contact with, and directing the efforts of the relieving battalions. Being airborne he was able to guide both the Mech Armor and Infantry Battalions through difficult terrain, in the minimum possible amount of time.

As these Battalions arrived they were quickly able to break the back of, and mop up the remaining enemy soldiers. They then spread out to a distance around Fire Support Base Gold to a distance of some 1000 meters to adequately secure all approaches. Except during this mopping up period, no further enemy contact was made.

Individual acts of heroism were the order of the day. Mutual respect and friendships were cemented for the participants as can only be established during periods of shared hardships or experiences. It had been a field manual execution of combined arms team work infrequently seen or experienced. The Battle of Suoi Tre was ended and two days later the Regulars worked their way back to Dan Tieng, searching and destroying along the way. Only three more significant contacts were made on the return but these had to be considered anti-climatic.

Very respectfully,

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