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U.S. ARMY VIETNAM



COMBAT LESSONS BULLETIN

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SAPPER OPERATIONS (U)

(U) GENERAL (U)

Enemy sapper attacks are costly from two points of view; not only do they destroy essential and costly items of equipment and cause casualties, but they also provide the enemy with a powerful propaganda weapon. Sapper attacks have increased in frequency and effectiveness in recent months indicating that the enemy has decided to emphasize this means of operations. The purpose of this bulletin is to review briefly the sapper technique and to present lessons learned from a recent attack which was costly to US forces.

(U) THE SAPPER (U)

The sapper is a tough, well trained and highly motivated soldier. He is combat experienced, has received extensive specialized training and is a volunteer. His primary mission is to destroy equipment, weapons, installations and personnel. His primary weapons are determination and satchel charges augmented by the RPG. The sapper belongs to an elite group. He knows his job and has the morale and motivation required for his operations. He is a good soldier, but he can be beaten.

(U) THE SAPPER OPERATION (U)

Like most NVA/VC operations, the sapper attack is planned in detail, down to the most minute action of each individual.

a. Reconnaissance: The reconnaissance of a target, made in great detail, is critical to the success of the operation. All means available are used to gather information about the target and the area surrounding it. The reconnaissance may take from four to nine days depending on the terrain, size of the target, barriers

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and anti-intrusion devices encountered. Frequently, the installation will be penetrated during the day by personnel using false ID cards to gain a close-up view of the layout and locations of important targets. The thoroughness of the NVA/VC reconnaissance is illustrated in the following example extracted from a captured after action report.

"Defense System: There are three concertina fences around the post (with three rows of concertina, one placed on the other two). The inside barbed wire fence is five to ten meters away from the blockhouse line. The interval between fences depends on the terrain in each area. Close to the blockhouse line is a damaged barbed wire fence which has formerly been constructed by the puppet troops. Many flare mines are laid between the second and third fences. The blockhouse line contains 20 wooden blockhouses, which are 40 to 50 meters apart, and are covered with layers of sandbags, each one meter thick. Each blockhouse is equipped with one machine gun. In front of it there are 20 Claymore mines connected with electric wires which are slipped into the blockhouse.

"Operation methods:

Guarding: In fact, all blockhouses do not have guards; one has guards, the next none, and so forth alternately. When suspecting something, the enemy lights up his flashlights and sometimes fires on the suspected location using machine guns.

Patrol: There is no patrol on this post.

Activities: From about 2100 to 2200, the enemy's activities were very noisy.

"Conclusion on the Enemy: The enemy defense system on the outside is comparatively tight with heavy weapons and mines. His defense on the inside is weak. Therefore, when conducting a deep thrust into the post, if we make any mistakes enabling the enemy to detect us, we would be blocked by the firepower positioned on the outside. However, the enemy is easily isolated and his power is restricted by the rough terrain and clefts. If we succeed in penetrating deeply into the inner perimeter where the enemy defense system is weak, we will end the battle promptly. Moreover, enemy personnel since occupying this position have not yet

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participated in any battle; they are subjective and have low combat capability (because most of them are technical personnel). We can avail ourselves of these deficiencies to infiltrate their positions and suddenly attack them."

b. Attack Plan: After the reconnaissance has been completed, the information is assembled and diagrams and extensive plans are then made. Each man is given a specific task to accomplish and a specific target to destroy. Audible and visual signals are established. This is necessary due to the lack of radios and also the emphasis placed on communication security. When the entire plan has been drawn up and coordinated, it is then rehearsed.

c. The Rehearsal: Sketches and sand tables are used extensively in the rehearsal phase of the operation. No effort is spared in order to make the rehearsal as realistic as possible. The importance of the rehearsal is that every man is apprised of his job. He is able to trace his actions and possible reactions throughout the entire operation. There have been numerous sketches captured which show in minute detail the layout of an installation and its defensive positions. It is evident that the information available to each man makes his job easier because he knows what lies ahead. The details obtained through reconnaissance and the rehearsals using sand tables or sketches enable the sapper to understand his job and see the importance of his particular task in the overall scheme of the battle.

d. The Attack: NVA/VC attacks are characterized by speed and violence. However, considerable time and energy are expended making the approach and penetration of the position prior to the actual attack.

(1) The advance to the target area is started several hours prior to the designated time of attack along several preselected routes of movement. Many hours may be spent in moving the final few hundred meters through a target's wire barrier. Sappers are fully aware of the importance of surprise. To this end they move silently and slowly, often along the least likely avenue of approach. The sapper utilizes the skills attained during extensive training for locating and disarming anti-intrusion devices, Claymores, fougasse and other explosive devices. Diversionary attacks are frequently made by other enemy units to cover the movement and activities of the sapper as he moves to place himself in the best assault position. The diversionary attacks may be made on other installations close by or against another portion of the targeted area. These diversions may be attacks by fire or probing attacks. This tactic is used, of course, to distract the US soldier, take his mind off his job, and thereby give the sapper more freedom for rapid movement to his target.

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(2) Once the defenders are distracted, sappers complete their move through the perimeter wire using bamboo poles, mats, explosives, wire cutters or just human skill. When the actual assault begins, enemy indirect fires are lifted and sappers take up the tempo of the explosions within the target area using satchel charges, RPG's and grenades. This action is timed to give the defenders the impression that they are still under indirect fire attack, thus they are prone to keep their heads down and not be very observant. Once on the move inside the target area, the sapper moves directly to his assigned target(s). An element continues to deliver supporting fires, small arms, grenades and satchel charges throughout the attack to keep the defender occupied.

(3) After the targets have been destroyed the sappers withdraw quickly along preselected routes. The withdrawal routes used for exit may be the same as those used for entrance. They are prepared by another sapper or supporting element during the conduct of the assault to assure an avenue of escape.

(4) The following example illustrates the effectiveness of the sapper. It is readily apparent that this action, which was extremely costly to the US Army, was well planned and executed. Even with warning, the defense failed.

(C) SAPPER ATTACK OF A US INSTALLATION (U)

RESULTS:

FRIENDLY

1 US KIA
11 US WIA
19 HELICOPTERS DESTROYED
5 LOH
8 SLICKS
6 COBRAS
2 BUILDINGS DESTROYED
2 BUILDINGS DAMAGED

PROPERTY DAMAGE: IN EXCESS OF \$4,500,000

ENEMY

UNKNOWN CASUALTIES
2 SACHEL CHARGES CAPTURED

The above presents the results of an operation that was an outstanding success for the enemy. His plan was so well executed that it is unknown how he was able to penetrate the defense of the installation and withdraw undetected. An account of this enemy action which proved so costly follows:

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a. Intelligence: The period 14-15 November was expected to be an enemy highpoint to coincide with demonstrations conducted in the United States. No hard intelligence to indicate the installation would be attacked had been received. However, at 2130 hours on the night of the attack, a message was received stating increased enemy activity could be expected within 12 hours.

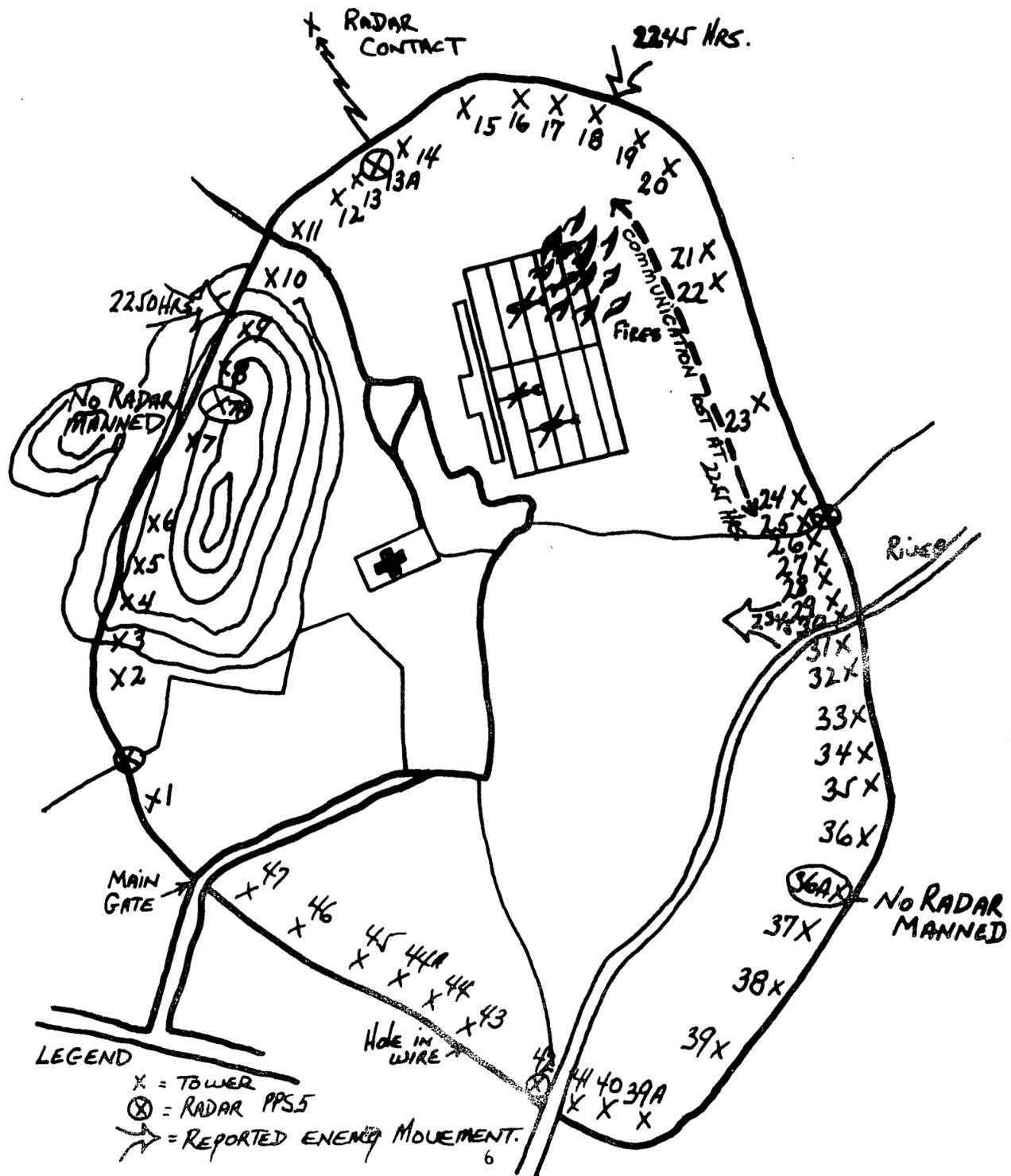
b. The Terrain: The terrain in and around the target area consists of grassy, rolling terrain to the north and east; a mountain in the west; and a waterway to the south. The mountain, which is inside the installation defense perimeter, commands the area. It is covered with thick brushy vegetation, while the surrounding terrain is fairly open and rolling with three foot high grass and numerous defiles. The river to the south provides two avenues of approach into the perimeter defense. The better avenues of approach into the installation are along the river and in the vicinity of the mountain. The weather on the night of the attack was clear with scattered clouds. Visibility was 31%.

c. The Target. The primary target was US Army helicopters located on a base camp installation (Figure 1). The base camp interior was 28 square kilometers enclosed by a 19 kilometer perimeter, manned for the most part by noncombatant forces consisting of US troops and Local National Hire guard personnel. On the perimeter there were 52 towers, 51 bunkers and 90 fighting positions. Three lines of concertina with trip flares and Claymore mines were emplaced around the perimeter. Each tower controlled from 12-20 Claymores, depending upon the distance between the bunkers. Bunkers were conex containers reinforced with sandbags. There was one AN/PPS-5 radar in operation on the northwest portion of the perimeter. Starlight scopes were used in the tower sensor devices were used. The perimeter was organized for defense into four sectors. Operations in the four sectors were coordinated through an installation TOC.

d. The Attack: At the time of the attack, the installation was on a condition GRAY alert status. At 152235 November, incoming fires were reported from the northern sector (Figure 1); alert status became RED at 2243 hours. At 2240 hours, tower 13A, located on the NW sector of the defense, detected movement; artillery fire was employed on the suspected enemy location (SEL). At 2245 hours, tower 18 reported seeing enemy personnel in the perimeter wire; small arms and M-79 fires were employed. At 2246 hours, the helicopter parking area came under heavy attack; aircraft were scrambled and sent aloft. At 2250 hours, tower 9 reported movement to the front; automatic weapons and M-79 fires were employed. At 2255 hours, land line communications between towers 19-25 were lost through friendly fires; no backup communications were available. At 2305 hours, 11-12 fires were observed to the east in the helicopter revetment area; a platoon size

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FIGURE 1

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reaction force was employed to sweep the area. At 2308 hours, attacks, possibly by sappers, were reported in the hospital area. At 2340 hours, Spooky and Cobra gunships were employed on the northern portion of the perimeter. At 2345 hours, movement was reported behind towers 29-31 inside the perimeter; a reaction force was sent to check out the reports. Sporadic reports of enemy movement within and outside the perimeter were received until about 0130 hours. At 0225 hours, the alert status became YELLOW.

All sectors were swept at first light. A hole in the third strand of wire vicinity tower 43 (not near the reported activity) was reported. It appeared to be an old hole. The search in the vicinity of the hospital revealed two locations where the internal defense wire around the hospital had been crushed - not cut. Three blood trails were found in the area, but could be followed for short distances only. All sweeps were completed by 1700 hours on 16 November. Casualty and damage reports were as indicated earlier.

(C) OBSERVATIONS (U)

- a. The enemy, probably sappers, gained undetected entrance into the installation, attacked preselected targets, caused significant destruction and escaped undetected and apparently unharmed.
- b. The enemy conducted a careful and thorough reconnaissance and operated according to a detailed plan.
- c. Inspection of the perimeter and internal defense wire revealed weaknesses which had not been detected prior to the attack.
- d. Three radar towers are installed around the perimeter - only one radar was in operation.
- e. Backup communications were nonexistent. Land lines became inoperable due to friendly fires.
- f. Internal security was inadequate.

(C) LESSONS LEARNED (U)

- a. Routine and static defenses with no nightly changes make the sapper's undetected entry possible.
- b. Guards must be constantly alert to the possibility of a sapper penetration.

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- c. Perimeter wire must be under observation and friendly fire must be available at all points.
- d. Sensitive areas and equipment must be defended by obstacles, fortifications, chain link fences, and guards. Internal defense plans should provide for patrols of critical areas within the perimeter.
- e. Security and defensive measures must be reviewed and inspected on a continuing basis. Laxity in either presents the enemy with opportunities for easy entrance into the installation.

(C) SUMMARY - CONCLUSION (U)

Captured documents and agent reports indicate the recent increase in sapper attacks against installations and troop concentrations will continue as the enemy seeks to exploit vulnerability and weakness of US and FWMAF. Surprise is the key to the sapper's operation. When the attacks begin, usually with indirect fires, the defender must realize that at some point the indirect fires will cease or be shifted to some other target, and that the sapper will pick up the momentum with satchel charges and RPG fires. Each time the enemy attacks by indirect fire it must be assumed that the sapper will follow. Heads up action on the part of all will prevent the successful entry into the position.

The key to an effective defense against sapper attacks is a well trained, alert and dedicated soldier. The enemy capitalizes on boredom, habit and complacency caused by routine and repetitious procedures. There is little that needs to be said at this point except that it is a command function to develop supervisory techniques designed to motivate the soldier. Practice alerts, inspections and continuous improvement of the physical defenses seem to produce the most favorable results.

FOR THE COMMANDER:



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