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AGO D/A ltr, 29 1980 Apr

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AGAM-P (M) (6 Dec 67) FOR OT RD 67X076

12 December 1967

SUBJECT: Combat After Action Report - Operation Ambush "Killer" Patrol,
Headquarters, 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, Period 16 August 1967

TO: SEE DISTRIBUTION

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2. Information contained in this report is provided to insure appropriate benefits in the future from Lessons Learned during current operations, and may be adapted for use in developing training material.

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Kenneth G. Wickham

KENNETH G. WICKHAM
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(Continued on page 2)

FOR OT RD
67X076

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3

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS, 9TH INFANTRY DIVISION
APO San Francisco 96370

AVDE-MH

17. November 1967

SUBJECT: Combat After Action Interview 5-67

TO: To All 9th Division Unit Commanders and Chiefs of General and Special Staff Sections

1. Name and Type of Operation: Ambush "Killer" Patrol
2. Date of Action: 16 August 1967
3. Location: Vicinity, Rach Kien, Long An Province (XS 733697)
4. Control or Command Headquarters: Headquarters, 3-39 Infantry
5. Reporting Officer: Battalion Commander (LTC R.L. Anderson), Commanding Officer, Company A, 3-39 Infantry (Capt Donald A. Price) as told to 1st Lt Boyd Harris, 9th Infantry Division Historian.
6. Supporting Forces: C/2-4 Artillery

7. Intelligence: The 3-39 Inf was the first 9th Infantry Division unit to move into Long An Province when Operation Enterprise was initiated in mid-February 1967. At that time the Viet Cong controlled slightly over 75% of the total population and only 4% of the villages and hamlets were considered secure. During the initial weeks in Rach Kien the 3-39 Inf was under harassing fire while within its own base camp. A platoon or company could travel 300 meters from Rach Kien and get in a good sized fight. However, after six months of offensive search and destroy missions and saturation patrolling, finding the Viet Cong became an increasing problem. Although the Viet Cong were hard to find, it was a well known fact that their infrastructure still existed and functioned. Small groups of Viet Cong felt at liberty to travel through the district when their intelligence net indicated that certain areas were safe. The openness of the terrain allowed the VC to observe US units on operations. The large density of the population helped the VC gain information as to location and activity of US units. Due to their intelligence system, the VC were able to avoid contact with US units and carry out their missions of taxing, recruiting, indoctrinating villagers and harassing US units with sniping and small ambushes. Also the VC were able to mass to platoon and company size to attack vulnerable US units.

Viet Cong base camps were known to be located in the thickly vegetated areas bordering the rivers and streams that saturate the district. However, the VC did not remain overnight in these base camps. because they feared harassing and interdiction artillery fires and they needed to resupply. In order to avoid the artillery fires in the vegetated areas, to obtain resupply of

FOR OT RD
67X076

SUBJECT: Combat After Action Interview 5-67

food and equipment, and to enjoy female companionship, the VC would move during the early evening hours to the nearby populated areas. This movement was normally done after US and ARVN units had left the area, but before Early Evening Nautical Twilight.

8. Mission: Company A, 3-39 Inf conduct a six man ambush "Killer" patrol to interdict VC movement through territory considered safe by the VC.

9. Personnel Interviewed: LTC R.L. Anderson, Battalion Commander 3-39 Infantry, Cpt Donald Price, Commanding Officer, A Co 3-39 Infantry, 2d Lt Elwood R. Hendrix, Platoon Leader 1st platoon, SSG E-6 James A. Swearingen, Squad Leader, Sgt E-5 Jack Applegate, Fire Team Leader, Sgt E-5 Robert P. Hatch, Fire Team Leader, Sgt E-5 John J. Blaha, Fire Team Leader.

10. Concept: In order to interdict and deny free movement of the VC between VC base areas and populated areas, LTC Anderson developed a plan to secretly insert a small, highly motivated, combat experienced, well led ambush patrol in an area considered safe for movement by the VC. LTC Anderson referred to this patrol as a killer patrol. Several reasons led to this concept. LTC Anderson knew that in order to be effective, the patrol would have to be far enough from a company base camp and a reinforcing element to deceive the VC into thinking that there would be no US units in the area. The patrol would have to be small in order to minimize the possibility of detection. The distance from a reinforcing element and the smallness of the patrol would involve the risk of the patrol being annihilated before a rapid reaction force could arrive. However, this could only happen if the deception of the patrol failed, the VC discovered their presence, and were able to mass their squad sized units and launch an attack against the killer patrol. However, if deception was complete, the killer patrol could kill several small groups of VC and withdraw before the VC could launch an attack against the patrol. This then is the situation that LTC Anderson faced, the reasoning behind his concept of a killer patrol, and the risks that his patrol would face. Due to the risks faced and the fact that this patrol was an experimental concept to the 3-39th Inf, men of high rank were chosen for the patrol to give it a greater chance for success and to study methods to use as guidance for future patrols. Following is the story of the first killer patrol employed by LTC Anderson's Battalion.

11. Execution: Cpt Price - "Company A was conducting a search and destroy mission in the area that we wanted to place our ambush. We planned to pick our exact position and set up our claymores and team killing zones when we joined A Company. All this was to be done under the cover of Company A searching the area to give the impression to any observer that this was a normal search and destroy mission, and there was no reason to think that we would not completely leave the area as we had always done in the past."

"I gave the warning order to the men I had selected for the patrol at 0730, 16 August. I organized the patrol into three two man teams. Each

5
AVDE-MH

SUBJECT: Combat After Action Interview 5-67

17 November 1967

team had a team leader. Sgt Applegate and I were Team One, Lt. Hendrix and Sgt Swearingen were Team Two, and Sgt Hatch and Sgt. Blaha were Team Three. The weapons and equipment that I required for the patrol were: One AR15 or M16 per man, one .45 caliber pistol per team, three claymore mines per team, four hand grenades per man, 280 rounds of M16 ammunition per man, one PRC 9 helmet radio transmitter and receiver per man and sufficient rations and water per man to last two nights."

"We departed Rach Kien at 1300 hours instead of 1100 hours as planned due to difficulty in obtaining an aircraft. We landed in the middle of A Company. They were searching the area where we later placed the ambush. The area we picked for the ambush was a small piece of dry ground about 100 meters on a side. (See Inclosure) The ambush area was surrounded by wet rice paddies. It had two hooches in it and several small, well prepared bunkers. The bunkers were old but the foot paths were well worn and showed recent use."

"The site was about 2700 meters west of Rach Kien. To the north of us 500 meters, the Rach Doi Ma River ran southeast to northwest. Along this river was thick vegetation and it was likely that the VC had hidden bases there. To the north of us 200 meters was a small populated area where the VC may have been getting resupplied. The area of the ambush site was a likely place for the VC to pass through on their way to their source of resupply, food and feminine companionship."

"Under the cover of Alpha Company searching the area, we picked out positions, and improved them so that we would be perfectly camouflaged. We placed our claymores and camouflaged them and their wires using the vegetation growing in the places the claymores and wires were placed. At 1630 hours everyone was down, camouflaged and in place. All gear was under cover and placed for ready access. All patrol members had on soft caps at that time. Alpha Company departed the area at 1715 hours."

"Everything was quiet until 1830 hours when about six men and women started working in the rice paddies 400 meters to the north. We think that this was sign that it was safe for the VC to start moving about in the area. About 1930 hours we spotted eight VC 500 meters east of us moving south toward the river. We could see that one had a weapon. About 15 minutes later we saw what we believed to be the same eight VC, 400 meters north of us, moving west. At 1945 hours we saw two VC 300 meters to the east moving towards our positions. Sgt Applegate saw them exchange a few words, then one turned and headed north. The other VC walked into the complex that we were in. We believe that he was a squad leader and was checking out the area. Sgt Applegate saw him walk across the bridge, squat down and look right at our position. (See Inclosure) Sgt Applegate and I were standing in the corner of the hooch. I believe that he saw us as we exchanged stares. However, I think that he thought we were VC as it was fairly dark and Sgt Applegate was wearing a beret. The VC was 15 meters away from us. After about half a minute of staring at us, he rose and walked into the hooch with us and squatted down again, in the corner across from Sgt Applegate and me. Once again we swapped stares for about 20 seconds."

SUBJECT: Combat After Action Report Interview 5-67

"From the time that I first saw the VC my M16 was laying beside me. The VC had his weapon at the ready and I was afraid to go for mine for fear that the VC would fire a round from his M79 grenade launcher before I could fire. Sgt Applegate had his AR15 in his hands and I was counting on him to shoot the VC when it came to that. After 20 seconds the VC realized we weren't VC and with lightning speed fired a round at us and ran for the door of the hooch. The round bounced off Sgt Applegate's leg as it hadn't had time to arm. The round pierced the wall of the hooch and went off outside injuring no one. Sgt Applegate recovered from a state of semi-shock after the round bounced off his leg, leaped behind the running VC and shot him twice in the back."

Sgt Applegate: "I was shaking so bad when the VC came in that I didn't know what to do. The round bouncing off my leg was what brought me back to reality. After we killed that first VC I was awfully nervous."

Cpt Price: "The VC moaned for 10 minutes after being shot and then died. We pulled him into a corner of the hooch."

Sgt Hatch: "I heard the M79 go off, followed by the two shots and the moaning. The moaning gave me a sickening feeling that one of our men had been hit. I called softly to Jack (Sgt Applegate) but received no answer. I called again, still no answer, so I crawled over towards their position. I saw Jack, he whispered to me what had happened. I crawled back to my position."

Cpt Price: "Everyone was set for more VC. Fifteen minutes later two VC came down the eastern dike of the complex. Sgt Applegate asked for permission to blow the claymore when they were in the killing zone. I said 'no.' I was hoping that they would come inside the complex and into the main hooch where we had planted the bait of a GI rucksack and a couple of playboy magazines. My hope was that one or two VC would find it and call in several more. Then we would have had them all in a claymore killing zone. However, the VC did not enter the complex. They proceeded south on the dike past Team Two's killing zone."

Lt Hendrix: "When I first saw the VC they were about 15 feet from us. One had an M1 and one had a carbine. We could see the features on their faces by the light of the moon. I picked up my .45 and followed them for about 5 feet, then I decided, naw, I can't hit the broad side of a barn with a .45. I put it down and picked up my M16, and followed him with it for another 5 feet, then decided to wait until they got in our claymore killing zone. That was a mistake as in the dark I couldn't see for sure when they were in the killing zone. I waited until I thought they were in the killing zone, then detonated the claymore. By that time they had stepped off the dike and were out of the killing zone. The blast may have wounded them. They jabbered loudly and I could hear them running."

Cpt Price: "We expected more VC but none came. The rest of the night was filled only with familiar night noises of the Delta, frogs croaking, crickets, and rats moving about in the rice paddies."

7
AVDE-MH
SUBJECT: Combat After Action Interview 5-67

17 November 1967

Results: Capt Price - "The VC that we killed had a wallet on him. It had "Good Luck" written on it. In it were several pictures of his friends, girl friends and family. He was the biggest VC we had ever seen, about 5'10" tall and 160 lbs. He had huge muscles in his legs, and good sized arms. He had a certificate of commendation honoring him for killing nine American soldiers."

Patrol members' comments on the activity of the patrol: Cpt Price - "We had only planned for them to enter one way. We should have planned for every approach route and every alternative open to them upon entrance into the area."

Sgt Hatch: "We set up in the daytime. After dark the whole thing was different. I wasn't sure I could see everything necessary. Position is extremely important. They could have crawled right up on our position (Team Three) without us seeing them since we were laying down and couldn't see over the tall grass."

Lt Harris (Interviewer): At the close of the interview I said that I thought the killer patrol which they had developed was good and that other units would get a lot out of their experience. Sgt Applegate replied, "I hope so, it took a lot out of me."

Observations and Recommendations on the organization and execution of future "Killer Patrols." Cpt Price:

1. General Observations

A. "Selection of Personnel and Organization - Leaders should have had experience on a successful patrol, and should never be forced to take the job. Recommended approach is "You can do it, it's your turn, will you take the patrol?" Other patrol members should be encouraged to volunteer also. Most will if the leader is good and if every effort is made to support the patrol and insure that it is successful. Many potential members will not volunteer but must be encouraged by telling them how good they are and how much they are needed. Out-and-out volunteers are frequently the least desirable. This is due to the fact that they are sometimes the type of men that are apt to make rash decisions that could endanger the whole patrol. The three two-man teams were ideal for the initial patrol. More experience may lead to a different organization but I recommend this set up. One man in each team is designated as a leader and must be capable of and prepared to make quick and sound decisions when time is too critical to consult the patrol leader. The two men in each team should know each other and be willing to work as a team. I recommend that a two-man team be taken from each rifle platoon to form a patrol. This would give equal distribution of requirements, and rewards based on results. Good hiding places are rare in most complexes, therefore the total number of men in the patrol should not be greater than six."

SUBJECT: Combat After Action Interview 5-67

B. "Advance Preparation - Plenty of sleep prior to the mission is essential. Every member must be at maximum efficiency and alert during the critical hours and hours of darkness. The following time schedule is recommended:

D-Day D-1 Afternoon - Issue order, inspect, make all preparations

D-1 Evening - Sleep

D-Day Morning - Sleep, Final preparations, inspection

D-Day Late Afternoon - Insertion

C. "Selection of Site - The best sites are (1) freshly constructed base camps and hiding areas and (2) along routes between the VC favorite hiding area and their source of food or possibly female companionship. They know H & I fires may hit their hideout at night. Movement from the hiding areas (example: Thick vegetation along streams) to the source of food and females usually takes place after US and ARVN troops leave the area and before EENT. The more permanent rest areas for the VC are also good ambush sites and are usually located along the above mentioned routes at a desirable place as near to their hiding place as possible."

D. "Concept of Positioning Teams - Teams should be in well-concealed positions adjacent to trails, hooches or other areas of VC activity. Position should be selected so that VC could use the entire area without being aware of the patrol's presence. Claymores and personal gear must be well concealed and located in convenient but out-of-the-way places to prevent detection."

E. "Fire Discipline - Noise and light discipline are well known prerequisites, however fire discipline needs considerable explanation. The minimum amount of fire (SA, Claymores, grenades) to incapacitate the VC is the desired amount. This is not consistent with the normal US reaction to a target and therefore would draw minimum attention of other VC in the vicinity. A single shot from SA or a single explosion can easily be interpreted as an accidental firing of a weapon, a signal, or tripping a booby trap by other VC. On the other hand, a "Mad-Minute" on the part of six individuals will seldom leave any doubt. The first rule of engagement is to kill at the first opportunity whether it is by SA, claymore, or hand grenade. The second rule is to use claymore, hand grenades, and SA in that order. Indirect fire support should be used only to cover movement to a rallying point after heavy contact or expected heavy contact."

F. "Rallying Points - Should be selected in advance and should have good observation and fields of fire (360 degrees). Have defensive concentrations planned for rallying points. If possible a recon should be made of rallying points. Movement to rallying points should be by teams, unless casualties dictate patrol move together. If time permits, an indirect fire prep of rallying point is desirable. If serious casualties result from contact, the patrol must remain in position, use indirect fire and request dispatch of a relief force."

9 AVDE-MH

SUBJECT: Combat After Action Interview 5-67

17 November 1967

G. "Weapons - Weapons selected are those most effective for close in fighting. Once in position, the .45 cal pistol must be positioned so that targets can be engaged without movement of anything except the arm. Rifles (with white paint on sights to aid in sight alignment during darkness) must also be positioned ready to fire with minimum movement. The M-79's (HE) minimum arming range and sensitivity to vegetation make it undesirable for use on killer patrols. The M-79 (cannister) or a shotgun would be ideal. When available I recommend one per team along with one M16 and one .45 cal pistol per team."

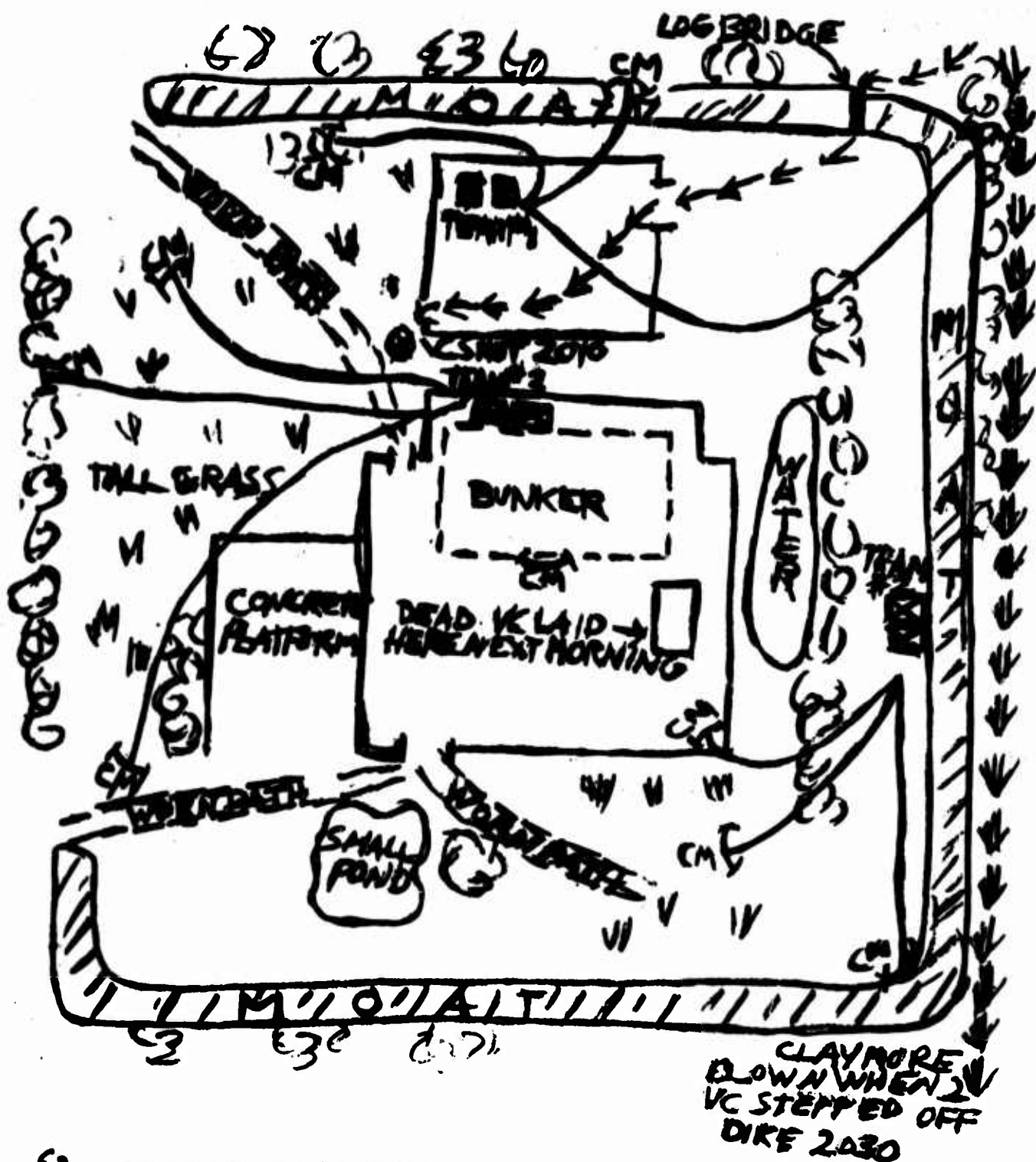
H. "Communications - One helmet radio per man and two PRC-25 radios per patrol is ideal. The helmet radios are outstanding: Transmissions are readable and clear at a whisper and preclude the necessity of movement to communicate. Signals can also be arranged using the tone capabilities of the PRC-9. Situation Reports from the patrol to battalion should be made by squelch breaks. Spot reports can be made at the discretion of the patrol leader."

I. "First Aid - Planning and selection of personnel must include preparation for the care of casualties. At least one of the two team members must be knowledgeable of first aid measures."

J. "Frequency of Patrols - Recommend one patrol per week per company is a maximum. The patrol must be prepared to stay two nights. The patrol should not be sent out as a matter of routine but always based on good intelligence. Consistent successful contact will be the best motivation to keep the standard of performance high and the men fighting for a chance to participate."

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BOYD HARRIS
1Lt, Infantry
Division Historian



- E3 - THICK BUSHY TREES
- M - TALL HIGH GRASS
- - WORN PATH
- - ROUTE OF PT VC
- - ROUTE OF THE 2 VC
- CM - CLAYMORE & WIRE