AMBUSH
AT
XT 686576

SPECIAL REPORT

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AMBUSH AT XT 686576

29 December 1967

HQ PACAF

Directorate, Tactical Evaluation

CHECO Division

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S.E. Asia Team

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AMBUSH AT XT 686576

1. Introduction

On 17 October 1967, two companies of the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, were searching an area in the vicinity of the Long Nguyen Secret Base Area, a heavily jungled sector southeast of the Michelin Rubber Plantation in Binh Duong Province. The 1st Infantry had very reliable information that the 271st Main Force Regiment, 9th VC Division, was in the area. The 271st had been engaged by American forces in Operations EL PASO, ATTLEBORO, and JUNCTION CITY. It had a reputation for being especially adept at conducting double play ambushes, against an exposed force and against the reaction force sent out to assist. 1/

At 1015 hours on the morning of the 17th, the 271st, from preplanned and exceptionally well camouflaged jungle positions, savagely attacked searching columns of A and D Companies, 2d Battalion/28th at coordinates XT 686576. The attack, which lasted about two hours, resulted in 57 Americans killed, 63 wounded, and two missing. This classical enemy ambush emphasized one of the most difficult problems facing the U.S. in its war against the Viet Cong. How do you bring superior firepower to support friendlies in jungle areas which are suddenly hit from enemy positions only a few meters away?

Forty-five minutes had elapsed from the time air was requested until the aircraft expended their ordnance. It was very difficult for the FAC to identify friendly positions due to the confusion of battle communications and problems of identifying smoke. He had communications only with Army

Commanders in helicopters and not with the ground. After the initial airstrike was brought in, enemy fire did not cease, but became more intense. In fact, the bulk of the American casualties came right after the airstrike when artillery was still cut off. Airstrikes were made a few hundred meters south of the contact, although the enemy was striking with close-range weapons such as Claymore mines having a range of only a few meters.

A close look at the various elements which entered into the action of 17 October helps point out the problems involved. An investigation of the ambush by the U.S. Army, Vietnam, and CHECO interviews with FAC personnel involved, comprise the basic data for this study, along with scramble logs, intelligence estimates, and other data. Many of the details are not available due to casualties of key personnel involved, battle confusion, and diversion of activity to the Battle of Loc Ninh. SHENANDOAH II was the name of the overall operation which included the 17 October ambush of 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry.[2/]

2. Friendly Objectives and Tactics

SHENANDOAH II had begun on 8 October to search out the 271st Regiment, but there was relatively light contact until 17 October. The 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, employed four battalions in a pattern of search activity based on lessons learned in previous battles. A key principle was to become engaged with the smallest possible force, with supporting elements in readiness. No element, regardless of size, moved unless it was in a position to be supported by another element. The point squad, in a movement to contact, preceded the body by some 200 meters, and then "cloverleafed"

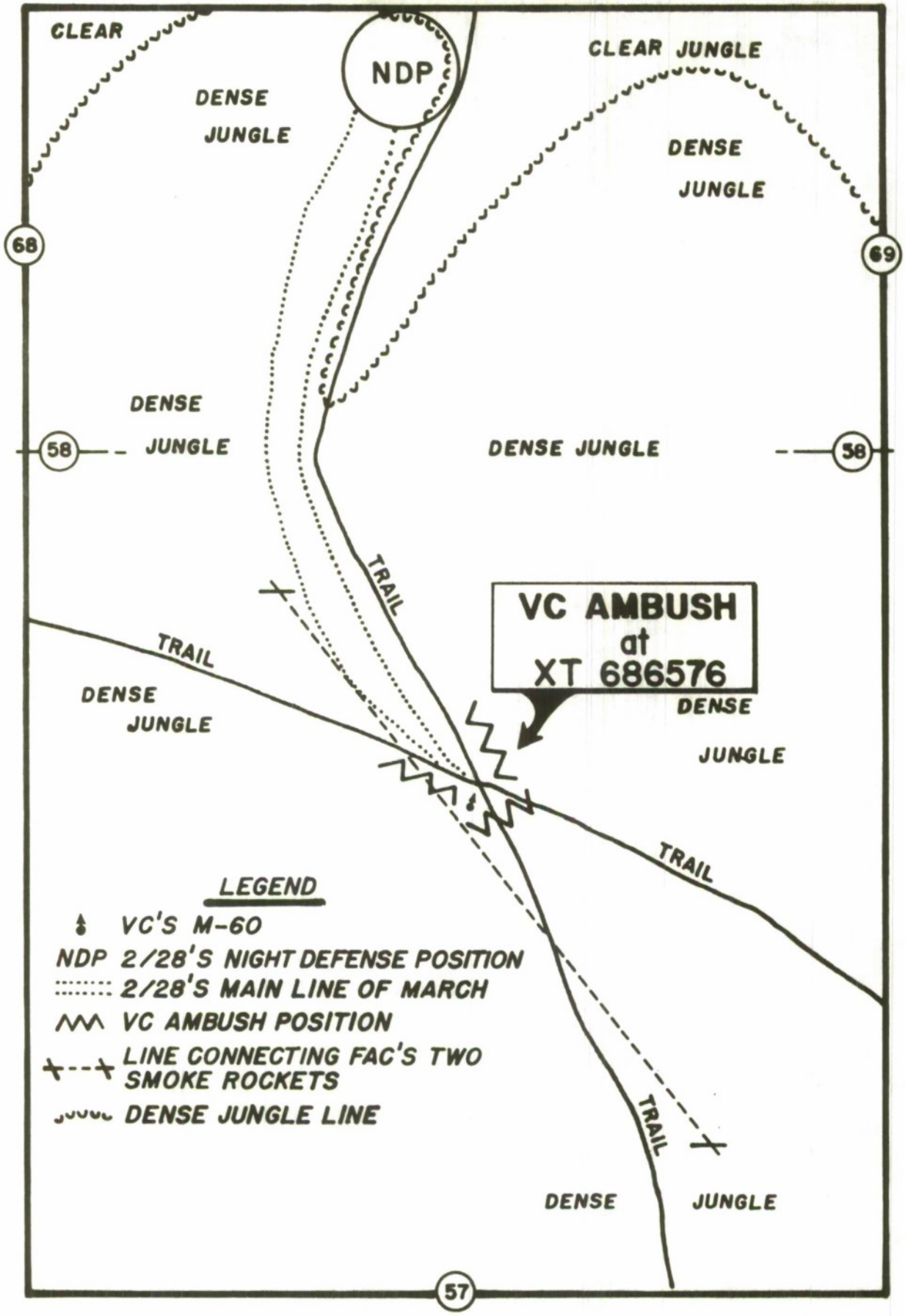
CLEAR
NDP
CLEAR JUNGLE
DENSE
JUNGLE
DENSE
JUNGLE
68
69
DENSE
JUNGLE
58
DENSE JUNGLE
58
TRAIL
VC AMBUSH
at
XT 686576
TRAIL
DENSE
JUNGLE
DENSE
JUNGLE
TRAIL
LEGEND
VC'S M-60
NDP 2/28'S NIGHT DEFENSE POSITION
2/28'S MAIN LINE OF MARCH
VC AMBUSH POSITION
LINE CONNECTING FAC'S TWO SMOKE ROCKETS
DENSE JUNGLE LINE
TRAIL
DENSE
JUNGLE
57

Figure 1

to both flanks. When sure the area was secure, it called for the remainder of the element to move forward. When the main body rejoined the point, it would "cloverleaf" to the flanks along its entire length and the point would move out another 200 meters. This was done until the assigned area was covered.[3/]

The second principle of operations, learned from previous battles, was that the infantry should find and fix the enemy, then let the air and artillery kill him. A unit moving to contact used marching fires and active recon by fire over the area to be covered. This cleared the way for the advancing element and allowed for immediate responsive firepower for the ground commander if a contact was made. In defensive positions, defensive concentrations were fired nightly. Blocking fires were used to funnel the enemy into killing zones or restrict his freedom for action. Air was used to a great extent and the 1st Infantry Division believed that air cap was required for offensive operations.

When contact was made, the lead element was to try to gain fire superiority over the enemy force. The element had to throw smoke immediately and report the azimuth and distance from the smoke to the enemy. If possible, a 50-meter gap between the element in contact and the enemy forces was to be maintained to allow for proper employment of supporting fires. Air and artillery would then be used in both a destruction and blocking role. After cessation of the contact, the infantry would sweep the area of contact.

The proper placement and timely commitment of rapid reaction forces were

imperative to influence the action. Their employment as an enveloping force had, on at least two occasions in the past, proved decisive in turning the enemy out of the ambushing positions, thereby freeing the trapped friendly force.

These proven tactics were guidelines to the commanders of SHENANDOAH II, as they prepared on 17 October to make contact with the 271st on the trail which was becoming progressively hotter.

During a previous encounter on 11 October, one of three VC dead found near XT 628511 carried documents identifying him as a member of the 2d Battalion of the 271st. On 12 October, another dead VC at XT 697553 had documents placing him with the same unit.

On 16 October, the 2/28th, operating from a Night Defensive Position (NDP) at XT 685586, moved southeast through fairly heavy jungle and made light contact at 1219 hours with an enemy force at XT 699570, resulting in one American wounded. Twenty-five minutes later in the same area, a cloverleaf patrol from B Company made contact resulting in one U.S. killed, nine wounded and 17 VC killed. Airstrikes supported these contacts. After these contacts, the battalion returned to its night defensive position.

The next day, it prepared to search southward again in hopes of finding an enemy base camp, with an additional mission of determining the effectiveness of a B-52 strike made in the area on 14 October.

To do this, the 2/28th planned to follow generally the same route used on

16 October, employing A Company with 65 men and D Company with 73 men. The move was to be backed by on-call air support and four 105-mm and one 155-mm artillery batteries, along with light fire team gunships as required. Reinforcements in readiness at the NDP and another rifle company nearby could be called in if necessary. With these preparations, and operating under the guidelines mentioned earlier, A and D Companies, with A Company in the lead, moved out of the NDP at 0802 hours. It was a bright, sunny day with the temperature in the mid-80s. The units, moving in column, with squads paced about ten meters apart, soon entered the moderate-to-heavy jungle vegetation where some of the trees reached up more than a hundred feet.

Flying overhead was the 1st Brigade ALO, Maj. Paul Murphy, whose FACs were supporting the operation even though it was in an area outside their normal TAOR. Also overhead were the Command and Control helicopter with the Division Commander aboard, another carrying the Brigade Commander, and another with the Battalion Operations Officer aboard. All these helicopters had communications with the ground force and each one of these helicopters could get in touch with Major Murphy in his O-1 immediately on his frequency.

At almost exactly the time the two companies started their southward march from the NDP, Major Murphy was putting in F-100 strikes on an enemy bunker area at XT 684528 to the southwest of the NDP. Four F-100s expended on this area between 0805 and 0835. Then two B-57s expended between 0850 and 0903 hours at XT 695567, less than 500 meters from the site of the previous day's contract. Between 0906 and 0914 hours, three more F-100s

dropped napalm and M-82 HDs on a bunker area at XT 695570, followed by two B-57s which dropped at XT 628527 on an enemy base camp. These last two strikes were from 1005 to 1020 hours. And it was ironic that these last two aircraft were the final ones committed to preplanned missions in support of SHENANDOAH II.

It was almost precisely when the last B-57 had completed its strike and Major Murphy was conducting BDA that the call came in on his radio that Dauntless was in contact at XT 686576. Major Murphy was not sure who called him but he was about five minutes away from the contact area, so he immediately headed for it. This was at 1020, exactly five minutes after the well-concealed enemy opened up on lead elements of A Company.

A Company, with D Company immediately behind it, had moved from the NDP without incident until 0956, when the point encountered a well-used northwest-southeast trail at XT 686576 which appeared to have been used within the hour. Fresh "Ho Chi Minh" sandal tracks led in either direction and there were newly cut trees in the vicinity. Sensing immediate contact with a VC base camp, the 1st Platoon Leader requested and received permission to "cloverleaf" east and west. The right (east) "cloverleaf" had moved about 50-75 meters when they heard movement and saw seven VC moving westward along the trail. The Company Commander told them to stop cloverleafing and set up a hasty ambush across the trail. The remaining elements, monitoring this conversation, pushed their flank security out further. Just as the patrol was preparing the ambush, an M-60 machine gun in a well-camouflaged bunker opened up at 15 meters, killing one man and wounding two others,

from the lead squad of the platoon. The other squad moved to the left of the one in contact and began returning fire. This was at 1015 hours.

The M-60 machine gun was joined by other enemy fire, including machine guns, AK-47s, and carbines. Within five minutes, friendly artillery was called in on the enemy position, which included the bunker and snipers in trees. The Company Commander sent the second platoon on line to the right with his third platoon of only 11 men as a reserve force. Then the Company Commander moved up with his two platoons and temporarily knocked out the M-60 machine gun with a hand grenade. A few moments later, he was wounded by a Claymore mine.

Almost simultaneously with the A Company contact, D Company began receiving sporadic fire from all flanks except the north and it was apparent that the enemy had prepared an ambush. Fire was coming from the A Company point and from both sides of the column. The Battalion CP was located to the north on a prominent anthill and much of the enemy fire was directed toward this point, which gave the VC a line of fire into the U.S. ranks without endangering their own forces.

Heavy artillery fire poured into the jungle area and in some instances was adjusted so closely that friendly casualties resulted. By 1023 hours, two light fire team UH-1Bs were also supporting the ground force with close-in fire.

As the fighting was going on, Major Murphy at 1020 hours had put in his request for airstrikes. The Battalion FAC, 1st Lt. Dennis Magnum, was in

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a chopper with the 1st Brigade Commander when notification of the contact was received. After being asked by the Commander, "How's the air?" Lieutenant Magnum notified Major Murphy and ordered an immediate airstrike.

Since all the preplanned aircraft had been expended, Major Murphy's request went to III Corps, DASC, as an immediate. The system for getting aircraft on the scene in this case was explained by Major Murphy:

> *"...Normally it takes about 25 minutes or 30 minutes to get a flight out of Bien Hoa to get up and be ready to go to work. And this is all I can tell you on that. I'm only saying this because this is the normal procedure and I do know that in this particular case, I had contact with the ground. Precisely who I was talking with I can't recall. I don't know if there was anything in the rest of III Corps that was available.*
>
> *"...What we have are preplanned flights. On our own, under our own control in the whole Division, we can swap them back and forth any time we want. If we don't have anything for immediate use, the Division Control Center, the ALO, knows about it and if he has any fighters, he immediately calls up and says, 'Hey, the 2d Brigade has these fighters with this ordnance. Do you want them?' But this did not happen this time, so I requested an immediate.*
>
> *"...When you request an immediate for troops in contact, he will tell you, OK, we've got some fighters we'll divert to you. But they didn't do it. They passed us on to III DASC and TACC and this thing went through the mill. Normally, III DASC has to call the whole III Corps area and if they have fighters close by, they'll say, 'Hey, send them over here for troops in contact.' This is normally how it works...."*

Major Murphy added that there were apparently no aircraft available in the air and that it took about 25 to 30 minutes for the aircraft (A-37s in this case) to get there from the alert pad at Bien Hoa. "By the time they

arrived and I got them briefed and got final coordination with the Army, it took another ten minutes to put them to work." He added:

> *"...The fighters got to be on station and ready to go to work at the time you get the final clearance and I know in this particular case that I had these guys already low. They saw the area, saw the different colored smoke that the troops were putting out, and saw my two marks...."*

Major Murphy fired two smoke rounds, one to the northwest (XT 683578) of where he wanted the ordnance and one to the southwest (XT 687572). This was on a northwest-southeast line about 200 meters south of the troops. At this distance, only soft ordnance could be used--napalm, CBUs, and 20-mm. According to Major Murphy, Maj. Gen. John H. Hay, Jr., Commanding General of the 1st Infantry Division, in the Command and Control chopper, heard him ask if this was where he wanted the strikes and General Hay replied, "Yeah, that's what we want."

Artillery fire was stopped for 15 minutes as the A-37s delivered their soft ordnance "a few hundred meters" south of the engagement. The A-37s also dropped four 750-pound and eight 500-pound fragmentation bombs.

Shortly after the airstrike, enemy fire increased in intensity, still coming from the ground and trees immediately surrounding the two companies and the Battalion Command Post. At this stage, the battalion situation deteriorated rapidly, as many of its members were casualties. The Battalion Command Post, set up on an anthill to the rear of the advancing column, was being hardest hit. At least four machine guns were firing from the east, four from the west, and six to ten from the south, including one .50 caliber

model. The machine guns were firing low (6-12 inches) grazing fire in 50-300 round bursts. RPG type rockets and Claymore mines were being fired in volleys, three to five at a time.

At the Battalion Command Post immediately after the airstrike, Lt. Col. Terry D. Allen, Jr., bleeding profusely from a head wound, yelled to those unit leaders within earshot to pull back on a 360° azimuth and then he called for artillery fire. A few minutes later, he was seen by a Company Platoon Sergeant, who was moving to the rear. With the help of the sergeant, Colonel Allen began removing the radio from the back of a wounded radioman in order to call in more artillery fire. A moment after they began removing the radio, a short burst of machine gun fire from the east grazed the colonel's helmet and knocked him down. Colonel Allen calmly told the platoon sergeant to forget the artillery and get his people "the hell out of there". Within minutes after the sergeant left, a Claymore or rocket detonated no more than 20 meters west of the CP location. Immediately after, a burst of machine gun fire raked the area, killing the colonel. 4/

From 1130 to 1145, artillery support was provided the badly-shattered American troops, who were on an "every man for himself" basis to get back to safety. The line of withdrawal ran through the Battalion CP area where the fire was heaviest and few made it without being killed or wounded. By 1145, two F-4Cs were striking, but again several hundred meters below the area of immediate contact. 5/

The problem of employing air in such a situation was explained by Major Murphy, when asked if there was a feeling of impatience on the ground with

the air support.[6/]

> *"...There is always a feeling of impatience. As soon as somebody gets shot at they want air right now, but they also understand that this isn't always the case. If there is nothing right up overhead, you can't do it. Another thing, it takes a minimum of ten minutes to get things coordinated with the ground.*
>
> *"Sure, they get out there and whomp, one of their soldiers gets fired at; they would love to have air right there, but if you have air ready to put in, the guy makes a dive, 'Hold them off. Hold them off until I can get my troops out of there.' So it takes them a while to get the troops out. This is when they make contact; this is what usually holds air off if we have them available right now.*
>
> *"It usually takes about 15 to 30 minutes to get troops out of the area enough to where we can put our air in. In this case, I don't feel that if we had it any sooner, we could have used it any sooner...."*

At 1220 hours, the 1st Brigade Commander landed his chopper at the NDP and directed that the Battalion S-3 assume command of the battalion; then a few moments later, he assumed command himself. Shortly after, the Assistant Division Commander took command of the brigade. Survivors coming in to the NDP indicated there were still wounded back at the point of contact. One of the wounded radioed for assistance, and the ADC in a chopper directed that he pop a grenade, which he did. Then the general passed on an azimuth from the NDP, giving first aid tips and instructions on setting up a defensive perimeter.[7/]

Maj. Donald W. Holleder, the Brigade S-3, had been in the NDP about 20 minutes when he organized a four-man team to go after the wounded. He was running about 50 meters ahead of the team through tall grass and knee-deep

water when he reached a draw. Shots, probably coming from a tree in the draw, mortally wounded Major Holleder. This was around 1230 hours, when, for all practical purposes, the major contact had ended. 8/

From 1110 hours, when the first airstrike was made, until 1720 hours in the evening, there was continuous air overhead, striking generally south of the contact area which was believed to be the VC "pull-out route". Maj. R. J. Olsen, another of the 1st Brigade FACs, indicated the confusion as to friendly positions, when he said there was some doubt as to the forward location of friendly troops, even though their mark was visible. He added, "The closest friendlies I saw during the engagement were about 700 meters to the north and slightly to the west of where our strikes were going in." We kept our air sufficiently south of the area to insure that none of the friendlies would be endangered. 9/

The 1st Brigade FACs were new to the operation area, having moved over to support SHENANDOAH II from their usual TAOR. They had done no visual recon of the area before the operation and even during it. According to Maj. R. J. Olsen, there was no time for visual recon. He said: 10/

> *"...We were kept very busy just putting in air strikes. In the first four days of the operation, we averaged about 20 air strikes a day. This keeps the FAC pretty busy during his flight time which averages, from Phuoc Vinh (the FAC base) over to the area and back, about two and a half hours per mission. We would probably get from three to four flights to put into an area, usually in support of a particular battalion that was in camp.*
>
> *"...However, the Army does deploy H-13s and has them deployed out to the Battalions for their own use and to VR in advance of their troops. As they move out, they*

have the helicopters out ahead with the operations officer, usually, or one of the staff officers, and they will be looking down in the jungle. They usually fly at lot lower altitudes and much lower speeds than the FAC can fly and are much better equipped to provide a detailed VR."

Major Olsen said that in a situation like the ambush at XT 686576, the FAC did not always have direct communication with the ground. Although Dauntless 30 (the air operations officer for the 2/28th) was airborne in the LOH, the FAC did not have extensive communications with him because Danger 79 (Deputy Division Commander) was directing everything with which he had direct communications on the ground. Major Olsen added that Danger 79 was telling the FACs where the strikes should go, where the friendlies were, and giving advice on the artillery fire coordination line, which, according to Olsen "is all we need to know" to put in the strikes. 11/

Danger 79 said that on several occasions, strikes were going in just where he wanted them, according to Major Olsen and Major Murphy. He said the strikes were effective and were killing people on the ground. The Brigade Commander, Col. Newman, later told Major Murphy, "You guys did one of the finest jobs I've ever seen." 12/

Once air started going in at 1110 hours, there was a continuous series of strikes, with the only lag being the time required for each individual flight to get oriented. Although contact had slackened somewhat after the initial two hours, airstrikes and artillery provided cover for a Recon Platoon C Company, and B Company, which at 1400 hours, were ordered to march the same route to the contact site. They arrived at the point of contact at

1500 hours to help evacuate casualties. A landing zone was also established about 20 meters from where the majority of the casualties were located. Most of the wounded were evacuated by helicopter, however, some of them, with assistance, walked back. 13/

During its sweep of the action area, the Battalion Recon Platoon reported seeing 22 VC bodies. This was included in the report submitted by the platoon leader to the Battalion S-3. However, only two enemy bodies were found the next day. The brigade, based on various reports it received, claimed that 103 enemy had been killed. Two machine guns, an RPG-2 rocket launcher with rocket, and a diary, were captured. 14/ By 1810 hours, the last chopper load of wounded was airlifted out and by 1910 hours, the relief column had returned to the NDP. Total friendly casualties were 57 KIA, 63 WIA, and 2 MIA. A total of 55 tactical air sorties were put into the area along with 5,733 rounds of 105 and 155 artillery.

3. Summary

There were many interesting aspects to The Ambush which illustrates graphically certain lessons that should be learned. Unfortunately, many of the principals involved in the operation were killed which restricts the source of information. For example, Maj. John A. Cash, U.S. Army, who conducted a study of the operation for the Office of the Chief of Military History, DA, and who interviewed many of the surviving personnel, said he could not learn who had called in the airstrikes. He said that survivors closest to Colonel Allen indicated that the Battalion Commander was very concerned about the lack of air at the critical stage of the attack and also over their lack of impact on the immediate battle area when they finally

arrived.[15/] The Brigade Commander and the Assistant Division Commander, however, indicated they were pleased with the performance of air.[16/]

Another interesting aspect was the apparent duplication and overlap of control over the ground activity. The Assistant Division Commander, the 1st Brigade Commander, and the Battalion Operations Officer, were all airborne in helicopters during the movement of the two companies southward, and all had contact with the ground. These airborne command personnel were relaying directives to the FAC, who also was getting instructions from a person on the ground. The FAC stated that he did not know from whom he was getting his instructions.

A third interesting point was that the 2d Battalion moved into an area where contact with the VC had been made the previous day and hostile activity could be expected. It was for this reason the Division Commander and the Brigade Commander were overhead in the control helicopters. Yet, the only USAF FAC in the area was busy during the first two hours of the friendly movement putting in the eight preplanned missions on suspected base camps and bunkers several miles away. When the ambush was sprung, he was expending his last preplanned fighter strike elsewhere and had to fly back to the contact area. Unfortunately, there were no airborne strike planes in the area that could be diverted, and the alert flight at Bien Hoa had to be scrambled. This use of preplanned strikes indicates lack of planning and coordination between the division staff and ALO as to the requirements for FACs and tactical airpower in support of the operation.

Some of the other Division FACs interviewed commented about the fact that the fighters were expending up to 1,000 meters away from the contact area where they could have little effect upon the line of march where enemy fire was being received from a distance of ten meters in some cases. Although the Airborne Brigade Commander and Assistant Division Commander approved strikes in this area, the Battalion Commander on the ground apparently had no part in this decision. Due to the duplication of control over ground forces by the ground forces airborne command element, the FAC never was in direct contact with the commander on the ground. He was, therefore, unable to effect the close coordination necessary to insure that strikes were placed exactly where they were needed. To do his job effectively, the FAC must have direct contact with the ground forces to effect timely ordnance delivery corrections.

There are, undoubtedly, explanations for these apparent problem areas which should be further researched. Identification of troops under thick jungle conditions was a problem, especially when the friendly forces were under ambush attack. It was almost impossible to see through the dense foliage. The inevitable confusion of battle also must have had some influence upon decisions and actions.

The performance of air was praised, however, by the Brigade Commander, and Major Murphy was told that all the FACs involved would be recommended for the Bronze Star.

FOOTNOTES

1. (C) Extract, MACV, CICV, Intelligence on CT-9VC Div, Undated; Extract, MACV, CICV, Intelligence on 271st VC Regt, Oct 67, Doc. 1.

2. (C) Notes, Interview w/Lt Col Quigley, USARV, Cmd Historian, and Maj John A. Cash, OCMH, 15 Nov 67, Doc. 2. (Hereafter cited: Interview with Major Cash.)

3. Ibid.

4. (U) Ltr, Hq 1st Inf Div to CINC, USARPAC, subj: Narrative Account, Deaths of LTC Terry B. Allen Jr., 066606 and Maj Donald W. Holleder, 073723, 25 Oct 67, Doc. 3.

5. (U) ALO Strike Logs, 1st Inf Div, 17 Oct 67, Doc. 4.

6. (C) Interview, Maj Paul Murphy, ALO, 1st Bde, and 1st Lt Dennis Magnum, FAC, Phuc Vinh, RVN, 31 Oct 67, Doc. 5. (Hereafter cited: Interview with Major Murphy.)

7. (U) ALO Strike Logs, 1st Inf Div, 17 Oct 67, Doc. 4.

8. (U) Narrative Account, 1st Inf Div, Death of Maj Donald W. Holleder, 17th Military History Det, 25 Oct 67, Doc. 6.

9. (C) Interview, Maj R. J. Olsen, FAC 25th Inf Div, Lai Khe, RVN, 31 Oct 67, Doc. 7.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. (C) Interview with Major Murphy.

13. Narrative Account of Contact, 1st Inf Div.

14. Ibid.

15. (C) Interview with Major Cash.

16. (C) Interview with Major Murphy.

GLOSSARY

ALO	Air Liaison Officer
DASC	Direct Air Support Center
Div	Division
FAC	Forward Air Controller
Inf	Infantry
NDP	Night Defensive Position
TACC	Tactical Air Control Center
TAOR	Tactical Area of Operational Responsibility