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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS 4TH INFANTRY DIVISION
APO San Francisco 96262

AVDDH-CS

14 March 1969

SUBJECT: Combat Operations After Action Report
(RCS: MACV J3-J2)

THRU: Commanding General
IFFORCEV
APO 96350

TO: Commander
United States Army Vietnam
ATTN: G3
APO US Forces 96375

1. NAME OR IDENTITY AND/OR TYPE OF OPERATION: Reconnaissance in force, Company A, 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry.
2. DATES OF OPERATION: 2 March 1969, through 4 March 1969.
3. LOCATION: PLEI TRAP, KONTUM Province (YA803879). Map 1:50,000 sheet 6537 IV, series L7014.
4. CONTROL OR COMMAND HEADQUARTERS: 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry.
5. REPORTING OFFICER: LTC Pennel J. Hickey.
6. TASK ORGANIZATION: Company A, 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry.
7. SUPPORTING FORCES:
 - a. B and C Btry, 6/29 Arty (105) DS.
 - b. C Btry, 1/92 Arty (155) GS.
 - c. A Troop 7/17 Cav.
 - d. 52d Aviation Bn.
 - e. 7th US Air Force.
8. INTELLIGENCE:
 - a. The 66th NVA Regiment was known to be in the general area of contact.

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AVDDH-CS

14 March 1969

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Several intelligence reports and heavy Snoop readings were plotted approximately five kilometers to the south of the contact.

b. After the battalion seized the ridgeline east of the contact, documents confirmed the presence of the K-25 Sapper Battalion and K-8 Infantry Battalion of the 66th Regiment.

c. The terrain in the area of contact (see sketch, Incl #1) was a north-south ridgeline extending east-west with fingers, and steep slopes on either side. The area was vegetated by triple-canopy jungle. Fields of Observation were limited to 25-30 meters. The weather was clear with afternoon temperatures in the 80's. At dusk visibility for aircraft was impaired by a haze of smoke and dust.

9. MISSION: The 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry had the mission of conducting combat assaults into the southern portion of the 1st Brigade area of operations, and conducting reconnaissance in force and ambush operations along main enemy infiltration routes and in known or suspected base areas.

10. CONCEPT OF OPERATION:

a. The 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry was directed to conduct combat assaults with three companies to YA784879 and conduct reconnaissance in force operations in respective areas of operation.

b. Company A was to combat assault to YA784879 following Company D, and conduct reconnaissance in force in the northern sector of the Battalion AO.

c. Company B was to combat assault to YA784879 following Company A and conduct reconnaissance in force in the southern sector of the Battalion AO.

d. Company C was to secure FB Pause and the Battalion CP.

e. Company D was to combat assault to YA784879 and conduct a reconnaissance in force in the center of the Battalion AO.

f. The Reconnaissance Platoon was to conduct a reconnaissance in force south of YA825895.

11. EXECUTION:

a. On 2 March at 1049H Company A combat assaulted from POLEI KIENG to YA784879. The assault was made without incident and the company began a reconnaissance in force sweep to the north east. A night location was established at YA793879.

b. On 3 March Company A was scheduled to continue the reconnaissance in force

Incl 4

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

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AVDDH-CS

14 March 1969

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(RCS: MACV J3-J2)

to YA812884 where they were to establish a night location. At 1200H the Company laged for the noon meal and then continued up the finger toward the crest of a north-south ridgeline. An eight-man ambush force was left for rear cover. At approximately 1530H the Company reached what they believed to be their night location. Actually they were at YA804878. Captain Isom, the Company Commander, who was new to VIETNAM, assuming command on 12 February, established a company perimeter, assigning the 3d Platoon the sector covering the portion of the trail leading up the finger of the ridgeline. Lieutenant Williams, the platoon leader, dispatched a two-man team to reconnoiter the trail running up the ridgeline. The team surprised a NVA soldier who ran up the hill. The two soldiers returned to the perimeter and reported the information to Lieutenant Williams. Lieutenant Williams conveyed the information to Captain Isom. Lieutenant Flannigan, the forward observer with the Company, recommended that the area be prepared with artillery before the Company investigated. Captain Isom elected to investigate immediately, and dispatched the 2d Platoon. Lieutenant Williams halted them in a clearing immediately behind a log across the trail. He had the squads set up a perimeter and moved on up the trail with three other men. They found an NVA OP with a cooking pot in it and continued a short distance up the trail. Suddenly, the point man saw a NVA soldier rise from behind a bush. The point man engaged and killed the NVA. Lieutenant Williams observed three other NVA and fired at them. A machine gun positioned behind some logs opened up and was silenced with three hand grenades. The element withdrew back to the platoon location. Lieutenant Williams called Captain Isom and reported that he was in contact with a platoon or company of NVA. The enemy started firing at the platoon from the front and gradually encroached on the sides. Some of the NVA were wearing fatigues, others shorts or black pajamas. The weapons squad located behind the log returned fire, as did the rest of the platoon.

c. Captain Isom, when he received word that the platoon was in contact, reported the contact to the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry CP at 1621H. Electing to reinforce Lieutenant Williams, Captain Isom left one squad from each platoon in the night location and proceeded up the trail. The Company was in a file with the Headquarters element leading, followed by the 2d, 4th, and 1st Platoons. The last two platoons received sniper fire from the left as they moved north-east up the finger. Captain Isom and the Headquarters element were able to join Lieutenant Williams behind the log, but the rest of the company had to take shelter at the rear or behind the 3d Platoon position. Lieutenant Griffith, the 2d Platoon leader, was killed shortly after reaching the 3d Platoon positions. The NVA forces pinned down the Company with machine gun fire from the front. Meanwhile, NVA soldiers climbed trees to the flanks and started shooting down at the US soldiers. The Company commenced taking casualties, and at 1635H, Captain Isom reported to the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry CP that he was in contact with a battalion-size force and was receiving casualties. A short time later the RIO was wounded, and Captain Isom, going to his aid, was killed. This left Lieutenant Williams and Lieutenant Flannigan, the FO, as the only surviving officers. The troops holding the left side of the perimeter were either dead or wounded, and the entire 3d Platoon Weapons Squad had been killed. Lieutenant Williams gave

Incl 4

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

AVDDH-CS

SUBJECT: Combat Operations After Action Report
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14 March 1969

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

the order to withdraw. Specialist Gwin, a squad leader of the 3d Platoon, pulled back to the rear of the clearing and turned to see if there were any remaining wounded. One man was crawling across the clearing to reach them. So Gwin and two others provided covering fire. Both of the men with Gwin were killed and when the wounded man crawling towards him was hit, Specialist Gwin withdrew. Later it was determined that the wounded man moving towards Specialist Gwin was Specialist Sowa.

add note

d. The Company reached their night location at approximately 1800H. They had suffered 17 KIA and 10WIA or MIA. The force heard firing in the contact area, but were receiving only sporadic sniper fire at the night location. The Company dug in and prepared for an expected enemy attack. Lieutenant Flannigan called in gunships and artillery around the contact area but not upon it. A resupply helicopter brought in ammunition, claymore mines, and trip flares, which were employed around the perimeter.

e. Later Specialist Four Sowa called the Company on the radio. He said he was lying wounded in the contact area and asked for help. An eight-man patrol moved to the contact area and recovered Sowa and another wounded man and returned to the night location. A dustoff helicopter was requested, and, after receiving enemy fire twice, it managed to evacuate three wounded. This left 68 men in the perimeter. AC-47 (Spooky) and artillery fired supporting fires all night. The Company remained on 75% alert for an anticipated enemy attack that did not materialize.

f. Early the next morning, Lieutenant Williams directed the clearing of a landing zone to evacuate the wounded. Lieutenant Williams received the order to secure the bodies left in the previous contact area. He requested an artillery preparation or gunship coverage, but his request was denied due to the possibility of friendly personnel remaining alive in the area of contact. Gunships were made available on call if needed. Sergeant Jones, the 4th Platoon Leader, organized a twenty-six man force and moved out of the perimeter at 0940H. The force had just cleared the perimeter when a NVA soldier stepped from behind a tree and engaged the point element. The first four men took cover and returned fire. The rest of the men ran back to the perimeter. Sergeant Jones, employing fire and maneuver, pulled his remaining elements back into the perimeter. The NVA initiated heavy fire from all around the US position. Small arms, grenades, satchel charges, M79, and M-60 fire from captured American weapons were employed. Lieutenant Flannigan called in artillery fire, but the enemy was too close to allow for effective fire. The claymore mines were triggered, but the ones on the north side of the perimeter had been disarmed. The remainder temporarily stopped the NVA attack. It quickly resumed as both sides exchanged heavy fire. Again enemy soldiers were observed in trees firing small arms and throwing grenades. The contact had continued for about thirty minutes, when some NVA soldiers on the north side of the perimeter yelled in English, "Hey Joe, don't shoot, its Bravo." The enemy soldiers had evidently learned from radios captured the previous afternoon that Company B was to reinforce Company A.

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AVDDH-CS
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(RCS: MACV J3-J2)

14 March 1969

g. The reaction by the US soldiers was almost instantaneous as they jumped out of their foxholes and yelled to Company B. It was not until they saw a NVA platoon emerge from the area to the north that they realized the use of a ruse de guerre. They returned to their foxholes and continued firing. Their fighting spirit seemed to break under the great pressure, and all they could think of was getting out of the area. One man bolted out of the perimeter, and was not again until two days later when he walked into a firebase. Lieutenant Williams passed the order around the perimeter to withdraw down the hill. Some of the personnel were carrying the wounded. A number of men were without weapons as a result of enemy action, and most were short of ammunition. Sergeant Jones, who temporarily lost his hearing, observed the withdrawal and was the last to leave the position. He became separated from the company during the withdrawal and evaded for ten days before he managed to reach a friendly fire base.

h. The Company withdrew off the ridgeline to a creek bed at the bottom of a draw, where it regrouped and proceeded in a westerly direction in a single file. The NVA continued to shoot at them from the top of the hill and sent a squad-size element to pursue them. Lieutenant Williams attempted to contact the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, but the batteries for the radio were too weak. NVA could be heard moving in the heavy undergrowth, so the Company moved on top of a small hill. A small enemy force was observed coming up behind them in the stream bed and was fired upon. The Company then moved into another stream bed and commenced moving west. Radio contact was finally established, and gunships covered the Company's withdrawal. A LOH guided the Company to a landing zone where it was extracted at 1525H.

12. RESULTS:

a. Company A sustained 20 infantry KIA, one artilleryman KIA, and one engineer KIA. One infantryman remains MIA. Fifty-two men were wounded, and three originally missing in action managed to evade to friendly positions. In addition, one man captured by the NVA was recovered on 6 March by Company D, 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry.

b. Enemy confirmed losses are 50 KIA by body count in the contact area. Further, the soldier captured by the NVA and subsequently recovered reported seeing a large number of NVA wounded along the top of the north-south ridgeline of the scene of action.

13. ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS:

a. An initial resupply of ammunition was accomplished at 031825 March by Alligator 108, a UH-1 aircraft. The helicopter received ground fire as it approached the position and gunships were employed. Ground fire and the lack of LZs dictated that this ammunition be "kicked out" at a low level above the company.

b. The wounded were treated by company medics. Three of the most serious

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AVDDH-CS

14 March 1969

SUBJECT: Combat Operations After Action Report
(RCS: MACV J3-J2)

were evacuated by Dustoff 32 by hoist at 032300 March. AC-47 (Spooky) 23 covered the evacuation.

c. The dense terrain and hill mass between Company A and the Battalion CP rendered constant communications difficult. During the initial contact, the battalion commander maintained radio contact by orbiting in an O6-A LOH. At night, communications were maintained by relay through Spooky aircraft and Head Hunter O-1 aircraft. From 2230-0030H the Battalion Commander remained overhead in a C&C ship to maintain communications.

14. COMMAND ANALYSIS:

a. Company A, 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry was a well-trained, combat-hardened unit. It had participated in the actions in the DAK PAYOU Valley and was adept at the type of warfare employed in VIETNAM. The Company Commander was not a combat veteran and had only commanded the Company for a short time. He was, however, assisted by two quite capable platoon leaders, Lieutenant Griffith and Williams. The Company executive officer and two platoon leaders were in base camp on administrative matters. The 1st Sergeant was on R&R. This left the Company Commander, two platoon leaders, and one staff sergeant to run the Company. The loss of the Company Commander and the most experienced platoon leader detracted from a strong chain of command and partially attributed to the loss of cohesiveness on the morning of 4 March.

b. Later intelligence has revealed that Company A probably encountered the K-8 Battalion, 66th Regiment. The statement of a US soldier captured by the NVA and recaptured by Company D, revealed that the 66th NVA Regimental Headquarters may have been in the area. The chain of events indicates that the NVA were surprised by the intrusion, but quickly reacted. Their size and close proximity of their base area gave the NVA a decided combat superiority.

c. Company A met a superior enemy force and aggressively engaged it. The numerically superior NVA force occupying the dominant terrain forced Company A to withdraw. US firepower was employed with unknown results during the night. The dense jungle aided the enemy by preventing either a reinforcement or withdrawal. It also provided excellent cover and concealment which was used by the enemy to surround the Company the morning of 4 March. Thus the NVA were able to employ devastating fires around the perimeter. The duress, combat fatigue, casualties, and weakened chain of command, compounded by the enemy ruse, combined to reduce combat effectiveness. The Company consequently withdrew under difficult conditions.

d. Casualty reporting was complicated by the loss of the Company headquarters element. No one else in the Company had a knowledge of the unit field strength or the whereabouts of the missing personnel. Consequently, Lieutenant Williams was unable to make an accurate account of his losses.

e. Smoke and haze conditions in the area presented a major obstacle to

Incl 4

6

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

14 March 1969

accomplishing resupply and medical evacuation. Poor visibility prevented pilots pinpointing Company A's location. The Dustoff helicopter, with flare ship assistance, spent about one and one-half hours trying to locate the Company at night.

15. LESSONS LEARNED:

a. Company A, 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry became involved in a contact with a larger enemy size force in dense double to triple canopy jungle. Because of the vegetation, the Company could not be reinforced or withdrawn prior to the major enemy contact. Had a landing zone been available, the results of the operation could have been very different. RECOMMEND: Landing zones be preselected or a rapid means to cut a landing zone be supplied to small units and this be undertaken as soon as an area is occupied.

b. The loss or absence of key Company personnel adversely influenced the action. The casualty reporting, chain of command, and company structure were impaired by the shortage of key company personnel. RECOMMEND: Battalions review any shortage of critical personnel prior to any major operations and make adjustments accordingly.

c. If another company-size unit could have reinforced Company A within a reasonable period of time the tide might have been turned. RECOMMEND: When units move into an area where contact with a superior force is probable, company-sized elements should operate within reasonable supporting distance.

16: SOURCES: This report is based on the after action report submitted by the Battalion Commander (Incl #2) and additional research and interviews conducted by the 29th Military History Detachment. There are some differences between the two as a result of the additional research accomplished after the Battalion Commander's report was submitted.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

HERBERT J. McCRYSTAL, JR.
Colonel, GS
Chief of Staff

Incl 4

7

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