MEMORANDUM
RM-5941-ARPA
DECEMBER 1969

THE ENCLAVE: SOME U. S. MILITARY EFFORTS IN LY TIN DISTRICT, QUANG TIN PROVINCE 1966-1968

F. J. West, Jr.

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The RAND Corporation
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PREFACE

This Memorandum presents a narrative account of tactical incidents involving U.S. troops in a heavily populated Vietnamese district. The research upon which this narrative is based was conducted by the author before he joined the Staff of The Rand Corporation. An earlier version of a portion of this report was published by the U.S. Marine Corps as a historical monograph entitled, Small Unit Action--Vietnam.

The author has been to Vietnam on numerous assignments, first as an infantry platoon commander, then as a tactical analyst, and later as a pacification analyst, all while on active duty with the U.S. Marine Corps. He subsequently returned to Vietnam as a civilian correspondent before joining the Rand Staff, and has since made three additional field trips there. The most recent of these field trips was made in the summer and fall of 1968, after this Memorandum was written but before it was published.

This Memorandum is based on the assumption that in 1969 a substantial portion of U.S. forces will be deployed within the populated areas of South Vietnam. This study deals with the author's observations about the operations of American units in one district in central Vietnam from June 1966 through June 1968. It is not an exhaustive or even comprehensive picture, although in the process of its compilation, the author served with some of the units mentioned, interviewed hundreds of Americans on what whey were doing or had done, and questioned the Viet Cong captured after the fire fights described. The style is narrative, rather than analytical. The accent is on tactics; many of the conclusions are assertions. The study lacks a set of comparative statistics or a plausible causality thread of theory to place the events into a neat perspective. It is perhaps best described as one man's view.

Since the Vietnam conflict is ongoing, the Memorandum is being published in its present form in the hope that some of its tactical descriptions or strategic frameworks may be of aid to those who have operational or decisionmaking responsibilities. It is the author's intention that the ideas and concepts presented here be taken as an attempt to establish a meaningful dialogue, not dogma.

SUMMARY

Lacking a doctrine for area security in Vietnam, American troops deployed in the populated areas "in support of pacification" have devised various methods of operation. The enclave deployments of battalions in the Ly Tin district of Quang Tin Province may be considered typical of those deployments in I Corps between 1966 and 1968. This Memorandum is a narrative account of some of the salient events that took place in Ly Tin district during that time.

It was necessary to hold the district because the airfield and division headquarters at Chulai lay only 2 miles to the southeast. The district had to be outguarded to secure the northwest flank of the airfield. The district chief had under his control two Regional Forces (RF) companies and twenty Popular Force (PF) militia platoons, totaling approximately 800 men. These forces he kept mainly along Rte. 1 and around the district headquarters. Several miles west of the district headquarters were two Viet Cong (VC) district companies, the 706th and the 74th, having 50 men each; and a few miles farther back in the mountains was the 250-man 409th VC Sapper Battalion.

By spring 1966 the U.S. presence was well established in Ly Tin along Rte. 1, and with additional U.S. forces available, the decision was made to push out into the western half of the district. A regimental headquarters and artillery battalion were established on Hill 22, plus two battalions assigned to clear and hold the district, for a total of 2,300 Americans in a district holding 60,000 people and in an area of 300 square kilometers, half mountains and half rice-paddy and scrub-growth lowlands.

The tactical pattern was to deploy the battalions and sometimes companies on separate hills. Each company had a tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) of about 25 square kilometers to patrol day and night. At first most patrolling was done in platoon size and most contacts occurred during the day. These contacts were usually fleeting fights against guerrilla (as opposed to main-force) bands, who skillfully used the tree lines and hamlets for protection but who were

not capable of engaging superior forces. Gradually the enemy was diminished, by casualties and evacuation.

By May 1966 there were very few fire fights. The American patrols continued. The PFs would join the Marines on joint patrols in their home villages but were very reluctant to patrol outside their narrow limits. The district chief stayed to his compound and visited only those prosperous shanty towns along Rte. 1 which catered to the Americans.

In June a VC sapper battalion came down from the mountains and attacked the artillery battalion on Hill 22, destroying a howitzer. In December a VC company hit a U.S./PF platoon outpost on Hill 76, killing ten Marines and no PFs. In January 1967 the VC sapper battalion again attacked the artillery battalion. In this six-month period the continual patrols rarely had an enemy contact. But several Marines were struck down by mines.

In April 1967 the Marines left and the Army came in. The soldiers followed the same pattern of outposting and patrolling for the next five months. No contacts were made. Five men were killed by mines. The PFs stayed to their own villages, the district chief to his section of the district.

In the fall of 1967 the bulk of the U.S. battalions left Ly Tin to the PFs and went into search-and-destroy operations in the hills. Viet Cong activity picked up in the district and the district headquarters eventually was attacked. The Tet offensive shook the morale of the Government of Vietnam (GVN) officials in Ly Tin. Although they did manage to beat off two enemy attacks, they had not been protected against the attacks by the U.S. battalion along Rte. 1, upon whom they had come to rely.

It is the author's belief that when battalions are located among the populated areas, regular VC units leave the area but return often enough (once or twice a year) to keep their power recognized by the villagers. Although the GVN were given time during the presence of the battalions to improve, they did not. The PFs stayed in their own villages, and the district chief did not substantially expand his area of influence. The people were no safer for the presence of U.S.

battalions on nearby hills. The psychological influence held by the VC over the people prevented the people from cooperating with the PFs who did occasionally pass through the outlying villages, even when VC units were not in those villages.

The enclave deployment, as detailed in the case study of Ly Tin, indicates that when American large units stay separate from the people and the GVN officials, they can by their presence deter gatherings of large enemy forces and consistent control by the enemy over the population; but they seem to influence only peripherally the local balance of power.

CONTENTS

PREFACE iii

SUMMARY v

Section

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. PATROL DEPLOYMENT 3

III. CONTACT WITH THE PEOPLE 22

IV. VIET CONG RESPONSE: SUCCESS 29

V. VIET CONG RESPONSE: FAILURE 42

VI. THE STAGNATION OF STRATEGY 59

VII. TET 1968 62

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS 68

I. INTRODUCTION

Ly Tin district of Quang Tin Province is an average district, physically speaking, in the coastal-lowlands plain of I Corps. The South China Sea forms the eastern border and the Annamite Mountain chain the western border. Bisecting the district north and south is the main (and only) highway, Rte. 1. The district headquarters (referred to as 1 on Frontispiece) is located in the center of the district on the eastern side of Rte. 1.

In 1966 Ly Tin district contained eight villages divided into 60 hamlets holding 60,000 people. Although the district encompassed 300 square kilometers, 60 percent of the area was mountainous and 80 percent of the people lived in a 100-square-kilometer area of rice-paddy flatlands along the coast.

During 1966 and 1967 the author participated in a series of combat actions and pacification efforts within the district of Ly Tin. This narrative draws together the salient events of that period in the struggle for Ly Tin. In any large reporting system, the actions described herein would be labeled "minor skirmishes" and recorded only for the sake of the number of occurrences, as if that were their inherent value. But considered in relation to one another, these skirmishes formed a pattern that characterized the fighting in and around the district. This description of the struggle for Ly Tin specifies one form of the deployment popularly called "enclave" and details the tactics used, allowing an observer to inspect their interrelated construction.

When the Marines first landed in Vietnam in March 1965, Lt. Gen. Lewis Walt assigned them the primary tasks of providing security for the Vietnamese villagers and of eliminating the Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas. He placed several regiments around the outskirts of Da Nang and sent several more south to the seacoast airbase of Chulai. The battalions of these regiments were each assigned a Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) of 20 to 30 square kilometers around Da Nang

and Chulai. The battalions were to patrol their TAORs constantly until enemy resistance* was largely broken and Government of Vietnam (GVN) forces and officials could reestablish control without the probability of violent disruption or could cope with such disruption of it did occur. This done, the battalions could move out in an ever-widening circle, each time leaving behind relatively stable areas or capable GVN forces under the supervision of the South Vietnamese government. The patrol deployment in Ly Tin provides an illustration of how the Americans set about that task.

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*Exactly what this enemy resistance would consist of or how it would manifest itself was left for the battalions to discover and to handle.

II. PATROL DEPLOYMENT

The Marines' standard procedure of deployment was to establish a strong battalion fire base on a hill and from there send out dozens of patrols each day and night. Patrol size was dictated by the intuition of the commanders as to enemy force size and movement. A company- or squad-size enemy force might be encountered anywhere; but since the enemy preferred to avoid random contacts and had a superior intelligence net and the ability to move clandestinely, there was little chance that he would be encountered.

The 1st Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment (1/5), for instance, was stationed on Hill 69 (referred to as 2 on Frontispiece) in Ly Tin from 13 May 1966 through 3 May 1967. Each month during that time, the 1,100-man battalion conducted 600 day patrols and 400 night patrols and ambushes, plus several company-size sweeps. Only 1 out of 30 day patrols and 1 out of 60 night ambushes made contact.* Although the total enemy strength in the district was estimated at less than 200, there was always the chance a main-force unit might be in the area to get supplies or for rest and relaxation. Thus, constant patrolling was necessary, but the patrols were generally hot, exposed, and dull.

Typical in tactics, frustrations, and style were those patrols run by platoon commander 1st Lt. A. A. "Tony" Monroe during the spring and summer of 1966. The following is the author's account of the operations of Lt. Monroe's platoon during the week of 19 - 26 June. (The area patrolled by his platoon is shown as 3 on Frontispiece.)

On the evening of 19 June 1966, Lt. Monroe's platoon set out from Hill 69 on an extended patrol in search of the guerrilla bands that were roaming Ly Tin and were evading contact. It was an ordinary enough mission and it began quietly.

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*This rate of contact is in keeping with the Marine overall statistics for small-unit patrolling in the populated areas during 1966; 10,000 out of 140,000 patrols and ambushes generated reported contacts which accounted for 7,500 enemy and 800 Marine fatalities.

Lieutenant Monroe knew the area of operations thoroughly, having led many such patrols out. He was deceptive. His dry sense of humor and easy manner masked a toughness in tactics which emphasized endurance. Platoon replacements were always surprised and often unsettled by the pace he could set on the darkest nights.

The patrol filed out through the battalion's defensive wire at 2030. The assistant platoon leader and the guide from the company on the defensive perimeter counted each man. They checked figures. "Thirty-eight?"

"Thirty-eight."

"See you."

"Good luck. Remember we have a listening post out about 200 meters."

The platoon started across an area of small paddies and burnt underbrush. The column twisted and stumbled forward. There was no moon.

Whispers.

"Hold it up. Pass the word."

"What's wrong? Pass it back."

"One of Kohlbuss' men has sprained his ankle so badly he can't walk. Did it crossing the dike."

"Nuts. O.K. Tell him to go back to the wire himself," Lt. Monroe said. "Have him crawl back if he has to. It's only a few yards. Bielecki, call battalion and tell them an injured Marine is coming back in. Don't shoot him."

Lieutenant Monroe signaled the point to move out again. They walked 20 yards. More whispering.

"Hold it up."

"Now what's the matter?"

"Mills has a toothache. It's killing him."

Staff Sergeant Albert Ellis, the platoon guide, walked up to the lieutenant.

"It's true, sir. You know he should have gone to the dentist last week. After three days out there he will really be in pain."

"Great. Just great. Bielecki, call battalion and tell them not to shoot Mills either. He'll be coming in. Shall we leave before everybody goes back?"

The platoon moved forward. The point squad avoided the trails and stream beds. Across gullies, along the edges of the rice paddies, through whipsaw grass and scrub growth, the Marines trudged in single file.

An hour passed.

"Bielecki, tell battalion we've passed check-point one."

Three hours passed.

"Bielecki, tell them we've passed check-point two."

The Marines twisted and wound their way toward an ambush site in the mountains 7 miles to the west. The night was muggy and the Marines sweated freely. But it was not hot and little water was drunk.

The point squad came to a break in the undergrowth and the column stopped while scouts moved ahead. Having crossed a large rice paddy, they entered and searched a distant tree line. Finding the way clear, they waved the main body on. The platoon walked across this paddy, keeping well spread out even in the dark and moving rapidly. The undergrowth that the platoon had just left suddenly glowed with red lights which winked on and off. Three sharp explosions followed and the ground shook. The platoon sergeant, SSgt. Berton Robinson, ran up from the tail end of the platoon.

"Sir, those artillery people just missed us!"

"Glad to hear they did, Robbie." The Marines listening chuckled. "Let's get up that mountain before they try again. I told them we were coming out here tonight. They should have stopped those harassing and interdiction [H&I] fires in our vicinity altogether."

The point squad started clambering up over rocks in a westerly direction. Illumination flares burst silently a few miles to the south. They seemed to be bursting either over a Popular Forces (PF) outpost or over the 5th Marines regimental headquarters (referred to as 4 on Frontispiece) where an artillery battalion was dug in.

Any moving figure could be seen in clear outline against the landscape. The Marines crouched down in the bushes and waited. The first

parachute flares flickered out, but fresh ones opened and swung gently downward.

"Those PFs are putting on their nightly show," growled one Marine. "The record is eight flares at one time. This show might top them all."

It did. The platoon commander waited patiently. Flares were expensive and not that plentiful. He was sure darkness would fall again soon.

The platoon was grateful for the break. They had been pushing steadily for four hours. The hill they faced was 195 meters high.

The flares did not cease. Lieutenant Monroe was amazed and angered. He did not like the idea of climbing a hill when anyone at the top could see him coming. But he had no choice if he wanted to reach the ambush site before dawn.

The Marines got to their feet. Corporal Charles Washington led his point squad ahead of the main body. The Marines used their hands, knees, and feet to climb. They traversed the slope back and forth, grasping for holds and pulling themselves upward.

"I don't like this," the lieutenant whispered. "A few grenades would be very damaging to us. And we couldn't throw any; they'd bounce right back on our heads."

They reached the top. Monroe had his squads spread out. The Marines flopped down gasping. No one moved for many minutes. A few men threw up. Finally, Monroe called for his squad leaders and two staff sergeants. He outlined simply the plan they had discussed before leaving the battalion area. The platoon would split into two groups and set up separate ambush and reconnaissance sites on the north and south sides of Hill 176, a mile to the south. Monroe would take one group, having two squads and the artillery forward observer; SSgt. Ellis would lead the second group, having one squad and the 60-mm mortar. They would communicate by radio.

Lieutenant Monroe motioned. It was time to start out, Washington's squad still in front, Ellis' group falling in at the rear. The last

mile would be easy, since they could follow the ridgelines southwest until they arrived at Hill 176. Monroe planned to place his ambush along a trail where it crossed a low saddle; Ellis would climb the hill and set in on the other side. The Marines walked against the skyline with unconcern. The ridge was steep and thick, preventing effective ambush from the flanks. The Marines to the front and rear treaded cautiously.

The subdued sound of static from the radio stopped, indicating that someone was trying to contact the platoon. So PFC William Bielecki, the platoon radioman, stopped to listen. "Roger. Out." "Sir, battalion says the artillery battalion was hit at 2400 by what was estimated to be a company of VC and to look out. They're headed our way and might try to cross the saddle on 176 to get into the mountains."

Monroe checked his watch--0300.

"O.K. Pass the word. Make sure every man knows they're coming."

Since the chances of an encounter were high, the usual night sounds of a tired Marine patrol faded away. No canteen cups rattled, no one at the rear of the column coughed, no loose sling clattered against a rifle stock. The Marines climbed over the crest of a small rise and began walking downward. The platoon was strung out on the northern side of Hill 176. Small clumps of scrub growth dotted the slope.

It was 0400 when the point squad reached the saddle on Hill 176, a deep gully, thick with secondary jungle growth. Through that tangle twisted a dry-stream-bed trail which led to the mountain to the west.

The Marines heard high-pitched, distinct voices nearby. The guerrillas were taking a break near the top of the stream-bed trail and were jabbering freely. They were tired and, being so close to the sanctuary of the mountains, not alert.

The Marines stopped but did not deploy. They waited for the platoon commander's decision. Monroe gambled. Hoping to catch the VC in a crossfire, he sent Washington's squad down to cross the trail and take the high ground on the other side.

Five minutes passed. In the gully, shots were exchanged. "Wash, get on that high ground," Monroe yelled. "Get out of there!"

Washington's men scrambled out of the gully on the far side.

"Fire a flare."

From the rear of the column a hand flare went up--in the wrong direction.

"No, stupid, down in the draw!"

Another flare popped. Thirty Marines fanned out and peered down in the gully, shading their eyes against the glare of the flares still bursting to the south. On the far side six more Marines did the same. The gully was filled with the weird flickering shadows of trees and bushes.

"There's one! Right across from us--up high--in front of Wash's people." The Marine fired his M-14 three times. The figure disappeared.

Monroe was on the radio. "Enemy troops in draw. Request high explosive [HE] and illumination. Also request illumination at regiment be ceased immediately. It is lighting us up. Over."

The two requests concerning illumination were refused. This refusal was a mistake, although an understandable one in the face of the excitement and confusion which then prevailed back at regimental headquarters. The illumination was being used by those in the rear to keep their barbed wire lit up, for on the wire were a few bodies the guerrillas were trying to retrieve. But it is doubtful that there were many enemy still in the vicinity of the regimental headquarters at 0400, with dawn only an hour away. The main group was scampering down the trail that Monroe had interdicted.

The request for an HE concentration was approved. While Monroe was explaining his situation over the radio, Sgts. Robinson and Ellis swung the squads into a perimeter defense. Most weapons were pointed down toward the gully, but a machine-gun section climbed to the top of the hill and a fire team was sent out to listen to the rear. Washington's squad climbed to the peak of Hill 176 and set in there. The

Marines could hear the VC, who had not returned fire, crashing through the bush below. Since there were no visible targets and Monroe did not want to expose the exact position and size of his force, the Marines did not fire at the sounds. They waited for the artillery.

Forty minutes passed. The Marines could still hear noises, but only very faintly. The radio crackled, "On the way." "Thanks a lot," Monroe answered sarcastically, angered over a rare opportunity gone to waste.

A sharp explosion was heard out in the rice paddies to the east of the hill.

"Left 100, drop 200. Fire three rounds."

Five minutes later the rounds smashed in.

"Drop 50, fire for effect." Two minutes later the hill shook. The Marines lay low as fragments hummed in flight up the hillside. Robinson yelled at the lieutenant over the noise, "That's right down there!"

"Yes, but they're long gone by now," Monroe replied.

Silence.

"All right--everyone lie still and listen," Monroe shouted.

A Marine on the forward listening post shouted back, "I can hear them splashing through the paddies, sir. They're running away."

"Left 200, add 400, fire for effect."

Three minutes later the shells landed.

"Right in there. Cannot survey results. Thank you. Out."

It was getting light. Ellis gathered his group and set out for the far side of the hill. Washington stayed in position, while Monroe put his men in the draw along the trail to shield them from the coming sun. He doubted that anyone else would use the trail during the day.

A sharp tactician, Monroe often moved his platoon at night to the line of hills ringing the western limit of Ly Tin, 3 miles in from the coast. Several times he caught porters moving into the hills from the many hamlets on the flat paddy land along the coast. These porters, who were mostly women heavily laden with supplies, even including cooked rice, would deny they were delivering to the guerrillas. However, Monroe would send them back home.

With two radio operators, his platoon sergeant, and the artillery forward observer, Monroe crawled into the bushes above the trail to observe the scattered hamlets to the east. At dawn, he scanned with binoculars the flatlands below him. "There they are, just like last time," he said. In a grove of trees a half-mile away, two figures stood close together. Both were wearing dark-green uniforms and carrying rifles.

"When you try to get close to that village, they fire three warning shots and escape," Robinson explained to the forward observer.

Monroe was busy plotting coordinates. The forward observer did the same and they compared the results, then called for a fire mission and requested a volley of six rounds without adjustment.

The rounds crashed into the trees. One figure fell. The other disappeared from sight. The Marines at the observation post exchanged grins.

The sun rose high and the heat was smothering. By noon not even an insect flew to inspect or bite the sweating Marines. Each man had left base camp with three full canteens. Most had drunk two; the third had to last until the next day. The Marines sat and watched. They talked and moved little.

Occasionally they saw the VC. Some VC were carrying weapons, some wore packs, some were dressed in black peasant shirts and shorts, some in green uniforms. They traveled freely in small groups of from two to eight men. They crossed the rice paddies, chatted with the women hoeing or the boys herding cows, and entered various hamlets, without any apparent military pattern or plan to their movements. The enemy seemed unaware that the shells which fell sporadically near them were observed fire missions, although some VC were hit and dragged away.

Monroe requested that a Marine company sweep the area. From his observation post, he could direct their movements. Charlie company arrived by foot two hours later and the platoons spread out on line to sweep the hamlets.

A quarter of a mile in front of the company, Robinson saw a group of armed VC in uniforms run across a rice paddy and enter a large house.

They reappeared moments later, wearing black pajamas and conical straw hats and carrying hoes. They split up and waded into the rice paddies.

"Look at them--the innocent farmers. They're going to get the surprise of their lives in a few minutes," Monroe said. (It was Monroe who was to be surprised; the company was ordered back to base camp to perform another mission. Monroe was never told why.)

The guerrillas were more than a mile away from his outpost. The platoon could not get off the hill and close on them without being spotted. He tried with artillery, but the rounds bounced around the large paddy with the erratic motion of the lights on a pinball machine. When the guerrillas strolled off unhurt and unconcerned, the infuriated Monroe called in fire to destroy the house. The shells hit everywhere but on the target and after an hour Monroe gave up.

"We'll get that house ourselves on our way in tomorrow morning," he said.

The platoon passed a quiet night. After the action of the night before, no one walked up the draw. The Marines rested and thought of water. It was a starry night, cool and without many mosquitos. A few miles to the northeast, Bravo company, heavily engaged with a VC company, called for 155-mm artillery support. Monroe's platoon listened to the situation reports over the radio and watched the bright, quick flashes of the big shells as they smashed in.

At dawn, the Marines left their ambush positions and filed down the trail. Monroe left Ellis on the high ground with a machine-gun team and a radio to cover the platoon and alert them of enemy movements. The Marines skirted the rice paddies, staying in the tree lines and heading for the house where the VC had changed clothes the day before. They passed a pool of water and slowed down, each man pausing to dunk one canteen, watchful lest a leech swim into the open top. They passed a dozen men and women working in a rice paddy. The Vietnamese ignored them.

Ellis' voice came over the radio. "You're being followed. Two men with weapons are in the brush behind your rear man."

"Fudge and Bailey, drop off and get the guys coming up behind us," Monroe said.

The two Marines had scarcely turned around when Ellis' machine gun fired one burst, then another. Again his voice came over the radio. "They were closing on your right flank. Watch it. The people who were working in the paddy are running away."

"Corporal Figgins, move your squad out into the paddy to our right. Stop those people trying to get away. Don't shoot if you can help it, just grab them."

The Marines broke from the tree line at a dead run. The second squad and mortar crew set up along the tree line in support.

Three Vietnamese were in the field.

"Halt!" Lance Corporal George Armstrong yelled. "Dung lai!"

The Vietnamese split up and ran faster.

Two ran east directly toward the house that the platoon intended to search, with several Marines in close pursuit. One Vietnamese stumbled and fell. The other turned to help. They were trapped.

One turned to the west. He ran swiftly and the angle of his flight put him farther and farther from the Marines. A rifleman stepped up on a rice-paddy dike and snapped two warning shots high in the air. The figure ran even faster. The rifleman dropped to his right knee, placed his left elbow on his left knee, and fitted his cheek along the stock of his rifle. His movements were deliberate, not hurried. He fired once. The figure fell.

The lieutenant led the second squad forward and set them in near the VC house. The corpsman trotted past the rifleman.

"Take your time, doc. I shot him in the leg."

A helicopter evacuation was called and the wounded Vietnamese was flown to a hospital. The two other fugitives were women, indistinguishable from men at a distance. They were sullen and stolid and ignored their Marine captors.

Marines searched the house, a two-room dwelling made of thatch
o. It was empty, as they had expected it to be after the fir-
ed. A squad split into fire teams and prodded the thickets
house.
e's an entrance to one tunnel in this briar patch."
e's another near the gate."
't touch that gate or the fence. It may be booby-trapped."
, Corporal Figgins, I'm no boot. I'm walking all the way
ee?"
., big mouth, let's see how loud you can shout for somebody
ut."
ietnamese, the Marine yelled several times and kicked dirt
tunnel opening. "Lai dai. Lai dai."
hing. I hear nothing. And it sure isn't a family bomb

ht. Blow them both. And get back in case there's a secondary
. Milton, you check for other entrances. Now blow it."
e in the hole!" The muffled sound of grenade explosions fol-
shout.
Marines waited for the smoke to clear, explored the tunnels,
ng only a paper VC flag and a bag of cement mix, they burned
. The women began to cry, having finally realized that the
ad not come on a random search. They knew they were suspect
be taken in for questioning.
Marines ignored their tears. If the women had not run across
rice paddies, the Marines might have taken the VC men by sur-
hey had wounded or killed several VC by artillery but only
all-arms fire. The fact irritated them. They spread out
ed back to base camp.
oe, still disgruntled by the lack of illumination when he
ountered the guerrilla band, reported for a debriefing to
tions officer, Maj. Pickett.

"What was that fiasco all about, sir?" he asked. "I'd like to be able to give my men some rational explanation. If we had been alerted right away that first night, we'd have destroyed that group of VC."

"Come on, Tony," Pickett replied. "The artillery battalion had a bad situation of their own."

Pickett related the events that had taken place.

An enemy force of about 100 had hit the artillery battalion, 2/11, at midnight. Two VC had slipped through three strands of coiled concertina wire without setting off any of the numerous trip flares; they dropped a satchel charge down the tube of a howitzer, fired automatic weapons and threw grenades as they ran between the gun pits, and escaped because the Marines dared not return the fire within their crowded perimeter. The remaining VC were stopped by the wire.

The enemy unit was later identified as the 409th VC Sapper Battalion, guided in the area by local guerrillas. The heavy fighting was over within 15 minutes and a dozen enemy were down, some draped on the wire. Four Marines were killed.

There had been ample time to reorganize before Monroe's call for illumination. But no one had realized that Monroe's report of enemy troops might have related to the main attack on and probable route of withdrawal from the artillery battalion. The actions were considered to be separate, although they took place within the same district in the same night. This lack of coordination was to continually plague those engaged in the pacification of Ly Tin.

In military terms, the attack on the battalion could be written off as inconclusive and undistinguished. However, the villagers had been profoundly impressed. Naturally, the guerrillas greatly exaggerated the extent of the damage they had inflicted. They pointed out the one howitzer tube--the symbol of American power and awesome technology--which was now destroyed. And most of the enemy sapper company had been able to escape back to the mountains.

Not one to brood over lost opportunities, Monroe went over plans for the next patrol with his noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Monroe had a solid rapport with them. Although Monroe was the undisputed leader, he did not hesitate to ask the others what they thought.

Sergeants Robinson and Ellis considered themselves fortunate to have Monroe as platoon commander.

At 1800 on 26 June, they blackened their faces, rechecked their ammunition, and replotted compass courses on the maps. At 1900, Monroe inspected them and reviewed with the squad leaders the route, length, and mission of the patrol. "O.K. We have to serve as a combination ambush/observation/blocking force for the sweep tomorrow morning. The last time out it took eight hours to get to that hill. This march will last even longer. Any questions?"

There were none. They were an old platoon, used to each other and to the war, secretly proud of their ability to make long, silent, night marches. Within the battalion they were known as "Monroe's Nightcrawlers."

At 2000, the platoon approached the battalion's defensive wire. The guide called softly to Lt. Monroe.

"How many?"

"Thirty-eight."

"O.K. Follow me."

"No."

"Huh?"

"You heard me. I'm not going to parade my people over that skyline just before I leave the position. Go around the shoulder of the hill."

"Oh, sure, right."

The platoon started forward. A few hours earlier it had rained, a short, thick torrent. The damp ground and sopping bushes muffled the sounds of the passing men. Someone belched loudly as the men cleared the wire. Robinson groaned. Monroe shook his head.

The footing was treacherous and the cleats on the jungle boots clogged with mud. After walking for 40 minutes, the point man waded across a swollen stream and slipped twice scrambling up the far bank.

The bank became more slippery with the passage of every man. The crossing proved costly. Two Marines near the end of the column twisted their ankles.

"From now on I'm going to have all men with weak ankles tape them before night patrols," said Monroe. "This happens every time out."

"Sergeant Robinson, take a man from each squad and stay here with them. Keep your radio on all night, but don't speak unless it's an emergency. Fire the red flare if you get in trouble. You've got a good defensive position in the brush with your backs to the paddy, and I don't think you'll be spotted. I'll have a medevac* pick you up in the morning. See you."

"Sure, sir. Good hunting."

The point Marine avoided the trails and hamlets, setting a course through scrub brush and around rice paddies. At the edge of one open field, he heard a snorting noise. Lying down, he bobbed his head back and forth, trying to silhouette some object against the skyline. He succeeded and whispered, "Water buffaloes. Watch yourselves."

The Marines cautiously filed around the side of the field opposite the powerful, horned animals, taking care not to disturb them, lest they charge.

The undergrowth became thicker, reaching shoulder height. Near the middle of the column there was a sudden thrashing in the bushes. The Marines stopped. The bushes danced wildly as some animal wheeled back and forth beside the motionless column of men. A low growl was heard, followed by a short burst from an automatic rifle.

A Marine spoke, lowly but distinctly. "No, don't shoot. If that was a tiger, he was just trying to get away."

Since his position had been compromised, Monroe changed the patrol route, and the point set off at a fast pace in another direction. The platoon followed. The brush thickened into heavy secondary jungle growth. Those who had thought to bring them put on gloves, since many trees and vines were covered with thorns. The leaves and thickets cut off all light, and the Marines closed completely the intervals between

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*Medical evacuation team.

them. The vines and thorns formed solid fences and forced the men to grope for any small openings. Often they crawled on their hands and knees. Sometimes they doubled back or cut at right angles to their compass heading. In one hour they moved 200 yards.

Upon emerging from the jungle they were faced by a river. The point squad located a fording place, across which a fire team waded neck-deep and entered the tree line on the other side. Ten minutes later, one Marine waded back across and reported the way clear. The platoon crossed, two men at a time.

At 0500, the platoon arrived at the objective. Monroe sent one squad with Ellis to a hill overlooking the flat land to the north. He set the rest of the platoon in an L-shaped ambush along the main trail leading from the village which was to be searched at 0600 by Bravo and Charlie companies.

By 0545, there was enough light to recognize a man at 20 meters. The platoon moved north down the trail. Monroe received orders to proceed to a hill selected by map reconnaissance. He radioed back that the hill provided no observation of the village and requested permission to move forward to a better vantage point. Permission was granted.

Ten minutes later, while the platoon was still on the move, a jet screamed in from the south and passed low over the selected landing zone, an open rice paddy 400 meters northeast of the village. As the Marines watched, the bright orange of napalm was splashed against the red dawn. In common fascination, the entire column halted and stared. "Almost makes you forget you're fighting a war," murmured one Marine.

"Sir, there they are!"

A half mile away to the Marines' left front, a group of 30 Vietnamese was crossing a rice paddy.

"Are they carrying weapons?" The binoculars were uncased. "There's not enough light to see, sir. But they have kids walking on their flanks."

The Marines were reasonably sure it was a band of fleeing VC. But they were not positive. And there were children.

In a few minutes, the band would be on the other side of a hill to the Marines' left.

"Let's get up that hill to get a better look."

"Sir, there are two more on the hill."

Peering down over the tops of the bushes were two Vietnamese. The Marines could see no weapons.

"Should we shoot them?"

"No, they might be just some scared farmers--though I doubt it. Figgins, get your squad up that hill on the double."

The Vietnamese ducked from view. Forming a skirmish line, the squad raced up the hill and peered down into the draw on the other side.

"There they go, three of them, around the side of the next hill. One of them is carrying a rifle."

The squad leader estimated the range at 600 yards. The Marines adjusted their sights, knelt down, and began firing.

Corporal Bierwirth brought up his squad. He adjusted the sights on his stubby M-70 grenade launcher, pointed the muzzle high, and fired. A burst of smoke appeared in front of one of the VC and the man fell. His two companions ducked into the brush. It was an incredible shot.

Lieutenant Monroe checked the terrain. "Bierwirth, you stay here. Figgins, your squad comes with me up the next hill. That band might be hiding on the other side. Bielecki, tell Ellis to come down by the trail."

The lieutenant left and Bierwirth put lookouts on each side of the hill.

"Corporal, one of them's circled behind us and is escaping across the paddy."

The squad leader called for two riflemen. The fleeing VC could be seen clearly through binoculars, 1,000 yards away. The riflemen raised their sights as high as they could and sat down where they

could see over the brush. They began firing, every fifth round a tracer. The Marine with the binoculars watched the strike of the bullets and called corrections.

The VC zigzagged, running as fast as he could. Through the binoculars could be seen the fear and strain on his face. He had shucked off all his equipment, and his bare feet kicked up a trail of dust as he ran. Seeing a clump of bushes, he changed course and ducked behind it. His head popped up above the branches and he peered at the far hills, trying to see where the snipers were.

"In those bushes out in the middle," the Marine with the binoculars said. "Bring it up some more clicks and omit the tracers; they're not hitting anywhere near the other rounds."

The firing started again and the VC burst away. Before he could hit full stride, a bullet struck him and he went down into the dust, only to instantly pop up and tear away faster than he had been sprinting before, blood and dirt caked on his left shoulder. He was not hit again.

"Probably only grazed him. Lucky to do that at that distance," said one Marine.

Another lookout ran up to Bierwirth.

"They're behind us, where we just came from. A whole squad of 'em."

"Sure it's not Sergeant Ellis' squad?"

"No. They're too well camouflaged to be Marines."

Bierwirth looked down through the binoculars. On the trail heading south he saw a line of figures in khaki uniforms, covered with leaves and branches. In the lead was a VC dressed in black peasant garb and wearing a straw hat. All were carrying weapons.

As Bierwirth watched, they ducked into the bushes. "Must have seen Ellis coming. Quick, slam them with a LAAW* and get that gun working."

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*Light Anti-Armor Weapon, weighing about 4 pounds and firing a 40-mm explosive shell.

A machine gunner started firing from the hip. The bullets sprayed the area. "No. Get down and use it."

"I can't see down there."

"Clear a field of fire and use your tripod."

"I don't have a machete or entrenching tool. And we didn't bring the pod."

"They're gonna make it if Ellis doesn't nail them. Fire that LAAW."

The high-explosive shell burst short of the brush.

"Missed. But Ellis will know where they are."

The Marines heard a slight swishing sound above their heads. Three pounding flashes erupted on the hill behind them where Monroe was, watching the enemy and radioing instructions to Ellis.

The heavy bursts shook the hill and Bierwirth was afraid his platoon commander had been killed. At first the squad leader thought a jet might have loosed rockets at them. But they could not see planes, so he concluded it was artillery. He kept his eyes on the place where the shells landed.

Fifty meters to the right of the artillery bursts, a group of Marines jumped out of the brush and waved their arms frantically. Monroe was roaring into the radio, his voice carrying distinctly to Bierwirth's hill. The Marines laughed nervously with relief.

"Boy, Monroe is really mad. It'll be a long time before that artillery observer shoots at an unidentified target again."

Sergeant Ellis came up the trail. Over the radio Monroe directed him to fire into the brush to his right and then search it for the enemy squad. Ellis did so, but his men found only trails of flattened grass; the VC had slipped away in the confusion which followed the misdirected artillery fire.

A fire team moved down the draw to recover the body of the VC that Bierwirth had killed with his grenade launcher. The body was gone.

Another fire team checked the trail that the first large group of Vietnamese followed. It was plainly marked every 10 or 20 meters by

three stones set like triangles with the point toward the trail--VC markings for an unmined path.

Monroe gathered his force and reluctantly headed back to the base camp. As they walked tiredly along, two Marines looked at each other.

"Next time," said one.

"Yeah."

The platoon went out again the next day.

In the district of Ly Tin during June and July, the 5th Marine Regiment conducted hundreds of patrols such as the one just described. Although a few were spectacular successes, most were like Monroe's--brief encounters with the enemy, inconclusive in themselves but having an effect in the aggregate. The strength and morale of the guerrillas were dwindling. They received orders to withdraw into the mountains, leaving a few guerrillas in the hamlets to act as spies and keep the people aware of the VC.

III. CONTACT WITH THE PEOPLE

With the Americans present in the district, the PFs roamed parts of the district freely during the day, but at night they returned to the safety of their forts. To prevent the guerrillas from thus moving freely under cover of darkness, Gen. Walt had issued a standing order that all Marine commands conduct vigorous patrols and ambushes from sundown to sunup.

The next step in developing a strategy of counterinsurgency was taken by an independent-minded captain. Captain Jim Cooper had not been advised by commanding officers to take such a step, nor had he read books on revolutionary warfare. But he had had considerable experience as a private in World War II, as a member of the occupation force in China afterward, and as a gunnery sergeant in Korea, directing a platoon.

Captain Cooper had a strong feeling for the Vietnamese villagers who he thought were being neglected. There were no South Vietnamese Army forces in Ly Tin district, and the PFs seemed more concerned with staying alive than with affording protection. The people, left to shift for themselves, were fearful, as evidenced by faint faces and fleeting movements.

His command, Echo company of the 5th Marines, had established a combat outpost on Hill 76 (referred to as 5 on Frontispiece), the dominating terrain feature in the center of a large valley 10 miles west of Chulai. Each day the Marines sallied forth in platoon strength. The patrols passed through the hamlets and villages, clusters of wooden huts surrounded by trees and thickets. Between the hamlets stretched acres of rice paddies, stagnant fields without shade. The hills bordering the valley were covered by thick brush and dry grass which trapped the heat and stopped any breeze.

The day patrols rarely encountered any VC. The Marines would climb slowly back up Hill 76 at dusk to man the perimeter and sleep. The hill was bare of trees, and the Marines joked that there was more dust than air.

Night ambushes went out, stationing themselves along the main trails leading from the mountains into the hamlets. Contact was infrequent and few enemy were killed. The VC moved in small groups and when fired upon, dispersed instantly.

The presence of the Marines did deny large main-force enemy units free access to the valley. Their presence did not, however, prevent the VC local and political forces from maintaining surveillance and control of the villagers.

It was obvious to the Marines that the enemy controlled several hamlets in Cooper's patrol area, for when a patrol passed one of these hamlets, the children rarely waved and the villagers stayed in their houses. Scattered along the trails newly printed leaflets were often found showing pictures of wounded Americans and messages saying, "Protest the war before this happens to you." Occasionally, the enemy tried to ambush the Marines as they left the tree line bordering a hamlet. This tactic was not successful because each patrol left a machine-gun team behind as security when the patrol had to cross the rice paddies. The local Vietnamese PF company, never venturing from their fort at night, were of no help.

The enemy's choice to avoid the Marines made Cooper's position all the more vexing. Nothing was happening and the outlook was for more of the same. By June rifle contacts had become rare occurrences for most platoons throughout the battalion's TAOR. The exceptions were Lt. Boone's combined platoons of Marines and new PFs, who killed a few guerrillas each week in one or the other of the several hamlets they patrolled.

Cooper was tired of the negative aspect of the operation--of climbing to the high ground, sitting in the hot sun, skirmishing inconclusively with guerrillas in the valley, and then returning to defend bare ridgelines, while the guerrillas controlled the villagers. After a few weeks of fruitless forays and grimy living, Capt. Cooper ordered Echo company off Hill 76 and into the hamlet of Thanh My Trung at the southern end of his patrol area (referred to as 6 on Frontispiece). He arranged his defensive positions with care. They did not infringe

on the villagers' houses or property, although they were well within the hamlet itself. The Marines now had shade, water, and level sleeping ground.

The villagers were flabbergasted. Cooper called a meeting of the entire hamlet. Over 250 men, women, and children gathered to hear what he had to say. He told the villagers that he had come to Vietnam to fight, not to pamper people. They would no longer have to fear the VC, for he had come to stay. The VC should be told that he had come, so they would have time to run away, since they were afraid to fight. Cooper also told them they would be dealing with the most severe man alive, if they helped the VC fight one of his Marines.

The company established a routine. Patrols became more frequent but of shorter duration. Each platoon was responsible for its own security. The number of night ambushes was increased, and the number of contacts gradually diminished until, during July, the company's TAOR quieted completely; no large fire fights were recorded. Even snipers were very rare, and although difficulties with mines persisted, no booby trap was ever found in Thanh My Trung.

It was a different story at the northern end of Cooper's patrol area, in a hamlet called Ky Long, 1 mile north of Hill 76. Those villagers actively supported and shielded the enemy, who had learned the futility of determined engagements against the Americans. The enemy sniped and ran and left behind mines to cause casualties. On the trails outside the hamlet and on the slopes of Hill 80 (referred to as 7 on Frontispiece) which rose directly behind it, the Marines uncovered mines about once a week. But they shrugged them off as a nuisance rather than a persistent threat. Cooper's men were fortunate. Only three were stuck down by mines in the course of as many months. Other units subsequently patrolling Ky Long were not as lucky.

The Marines at Thanh My Trung enjoyed being able to bathe daily in the ample water. Soap was given to the villagers, who were urged to use it. At first, the adult villagers scrubbed their clothes but not themselves. The children, however, being natural mimics and completely unafraid of the Marines, swarmed to the wells each morning and evening, anxious to show the Marines they could bathe too.

Since Hospitalman 3d Class Louis I. Piatetsky, the chief corpsman in the company, insisted that any villager who asked for medical aid had to wash before he would be treated, the children were the first to receive medical treatment. They ran to the Marines for comfort and help with skinned knees, cut feet, and scraped elbows. Seeing the attention and care their children received, the villagers came forward. Their diseases and wounds were more serious. Medical evacuations for Vietnamese civilians from Thanh My Trung became a daily occurrence. Piatetsky's knowledge of the language allowed him to communicate with the Vietnamese and thus maintain order where chaos might have existed otherwise. Piatetsky himself treated over 500 Vietnamese in one month. Each week a doctor and a dentist visited the hamlet. During July they recorded 480 cases in their logs.

The Marines were amazed at how quickly news of their medical program traveled from the valley, and they were sure that many of those treated were not local villagers. The success of the medical program pleased the battalion's civil-affairs officer, who felt that the more help could be given the villagers in a given area with the problems that affected them most, the less could be the appeal and authority of the VC infrastructure in that same area.

However, the officer did not realize the extent to which the ubiquitous threat of betrayal of VC undercover agents influenced many of the actions of defenseless villagers. Marines from Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) learned of the people's fears through interpreters and close contact with the people, but men from line companies like Cooper's without the advantage of such contact were unaware of these fears.

The social life of Thanh My Trung revolved around the daily hot meal of the Marines. The Marines always saved a little of their food for the children. After finishing their meal the Marines would line up at the concertina wire to watch Gunnery Sgt. Jack R. Montera set up a chow line. The children would giggle and swarm around him, intent only on the food. The cooks would try to dole out equal helpings to

all. But so many small hands holding palm leaves would thrust forward that soon the entire affair was chaos.

After a week Montera was finally successful in enforcing discipline, and the children got into line under the watchful eyes of their parents. The Marines were vaguely disappointed; they had enjoyed the entertainment.

The gunnery sergeant had an easier time enforcing clean-up. When the children saw the Marines picking up each scrap of paper and empty tin can, they too joined in. The project spread from the perimeter of the hamlet to the adjoining trails, which were widened and swept clean. Not to be outdone, the villagers spruced up their backyards, picking them clean of twigs and leaves.

The Vietnamese PFs ventured farther and farther from their fortified hill. For the first time, they came forth at night. Their commander, Capt. Nghoto, checked with Cooper each day and gradually assumed some responsibility for patrols and ambushes. His soldiers gained confidence and visited freely around the village. Nghoto himself, a former VC, gradually lost his skepticism and dislike of the Marines when he saw Cooper did not want to usurp his stature and authority among the PFs and villagers. By their presence, the Marines gave to those already committed against the VC a lease on life. The GVN officials responded by assuming responsibilities they had previously neglected because they could not stay in the hamlet and reasonably expect to remain alive.

The hamlet chief moved from the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) fort back into his own home. He arrived each day at the Marines' "social" meal, accompanied by the village elders. With dignity and a touch of aloofness, they would pass through a crowd of villagers on the outside of the barbed wire and enter the chow line with the Marines. Occasionally, they brought guests and made a great show of standing beside Cooper. The Marine company commander would respond by offering each a cigar and bending down to light it. The council of elders regained prestige in the hamlet of Thanh My Trung.

The hamlet chief showed the Marines the favorite ambush and hiding places of the VC. One day he came running to Cooper, followed by a trembling Vietnamese farmer. Through Piatetsky's patient questioning, Cooper learned that a squad of VC had captured the farmer while he was fishing at a nearby stream. They had taken him into the mountains and questioned him intensively about the Marines: how many there were, what they were doing in the hamlet, how long they intended to stay. They threatened to kill him if he told the Marines.

The farmer pointed to a rock outcropping on a mountain slope 2 miles from the hamlet. He had been held there overnight. Cooper knew the enemy had probably left the area hours earlier. But it was obvious that these Vietnamese needed reassurance of protection and power.

He took the farmer and the hamlet chief to his mortar emplacement and had the farmer point to the rocks. Two 81-mm mortars and a 106-mm recoilless rifle fired at the target and the rocks were splintered apart. The farmer and the hamlet chief looked at each other and grinned. Cooper then brought the two Vietnamese to a nearby hillside where one of his platoons was firing its biweekly familiarization course. From the array of weapons, he chose a 12-guage shotgun and a LAAW and handed them to his guests to fire. The Vietnamese returned to their hamlet reassured.

Cooper did not trust the villagers easily. He decided to see whether the villagers were playing a two-sided game. Deliberately, he spread a false rumor that the Marines were leaving the next day. The next morning a Marine walking alone down the main trail was stopped by two girls who warned him that it was not safe because the VC were coming. Other Marines strolling alone or in pairs were given similar warnings. Cooper was satisfied. He had found out two things: that the VC still had informers within the hamlet and that some villagers were willing to risk death by warning the Americans.

Less than a month after their arrival, the Marines did leave to go on an operation. They left behind evidence of their influence in the village and especially in the hamlet. The Vietnamese had reopened two schools and a pagoda. They were washing. Their medical ills had

been treated. A Vietnamese public-health nurse and two schoolteachers had come to the village. The hamlet and village chiefs had returned.

When Cooper gathered his company and marched out of Thanh My Trung, the people lined the trail to shout goodbye. Some cried. Cooper and his men did not want to leave.

At this point the enclave deployment was not a strategy, since strategy is the planned and comprehensive application of resources as the means to attain desired policy ends. Cooper's original strategy in Ly Tin district was attrition of the enemy. But he soon sensed that using his resources--the men in his infantry company--for that end was not a satisfactory solution to the problem. He went to Thanh My Trung looking for a plan. Things went well in Thanh My Trung, as long as the Americans were the guardians.

The continuous presence of his armed men allowed the agents of the GVN--the village elders, the schoolteachers, the hamlet chief--to return and resume their duties. This was no mean accomplishment. Still, Thanh My Trung's progress was dependent upon the presence of a capable armed force at the hamlet level. The American forces could at best be only temporary, and Cooper had not worked out a strategy for improving the GVN agents, especially the PFs of Capt. Nghoto, so that when he left there was no assurance that a Vietnamese security system would endure.

IV. VIET CONG RESPONSE: SUCCESS

Captain Cooper was called away from Thanh My Trung in September. To the north a battle was stirring as the North Vietnamese swept down in division strength across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in challenge for control of I Corps. The battle turned into a long-term campaign and as Marine casualties mounted, shifts in units and missions became necessary. By rotating units Gen. Walt sought to ensure that the populated areas were never left unprotected and that no unit suffered proportionately higher casualties than any other because of extended duty against main-force units. When Cooper was pulled out with his battalion for duty in the DMZ, another battalion, 3/5, was sent from the DMZ to the district.

Echo company never returned to Thanh My Trung hamlet or to the Ly Tin district. Mike company of battalion 3/4 took their place in the hamlet and for a while it looked as if there would be a continuity of deployment, since before he left, Cooper had been congratulated by several generals upon his energy and imaginative deployment.* But the continuous deployment was not to be.

In another district many miles away from Thanh My Trung, a Marine unit settled in a hamlet was caught off guard by an enemy infiltration company. The guerrilla sappers managed to crawl between the guard posts and attack the Marines from the flanks, inflicting heavy casualties. In response to this isolated incident, the high command ordered Marine units out of all hamlets or villages forthwith.

Mike company moved from Thanh My Trung to Hill 76, Cooper's barren outpost. One platoon was sent 1 mile north to set up another combat base on top of Hill 80, and from these two posts the company sent out patrols and ambushes. Through November into December, Mike company made no

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*Cooper's bivouac within a hamlet was exceptional, as was the daily contact his men had with the villagers. Although civic action was stressed in all units in I Corps, such close contacts were rare, with the exception of the CAPs which were then just being organized.

enemy contacts and received no information from the villagers, including those in the hamlet of Thanh My Trung.

The situation seemed static. In actuality the guerrillas were reinfiltrating the area and sizing up the strengths and weaknesses of this new Marine strategy. The Marines appeared vulnerable to them. The Marines had lost contact with the villagers. While their patrols still roamed the area, the level of aggressiveness and zest for contact seemed to have slipped. They were going through the motions, while lacking the motivation.

It was easy to understand why this was so. Mike company was new at this kind of war. Its Marines were oriented toward a more traditional type of fighting. When they had first landed in Vietnam, they were called upon to fight North Vietnamese regulars at the northern border and had distinguished themselves in a series of actions involving hundreds of infantrymen, supported by air and artillery. After that beginning, patrolling in the Ly Tin district in search of poorly armed rice-paddy farmers or small guerrilla bands lacked the excitement of heavy, head-on encounters. The lack of enemy contact and the lack of opportunity to know and like the people caused them to become bored with their work and haphazard in their habits.

The guerrilla spies in Ky Long watched the Marine activity on Hill 80 settle into a set routine. Having checked the defensive position carefully and judged it vulnerable, they decided to strike. It had been fully half a year since the guerrillas had been forced to flee to the far mountains, and since then their prestige with the villagers had been steadily dwindling. They already had a large force assembled four days' march away in the hills, but to ensure that their effort received the proper attention and dissemination throughout the district, they recruited from among the youths of the hamlets at the foot of Hill 80. By 1 December, a dozen volunteers had been rounded up and were on their way to a training camp. (Among them was 19-year-old Bui Nhu An, who was later captured by the Marines and who told the story from the VC side.)

These volunteer recruits were trained in tactics and weapons handling for one and one-half weeks. At night they practiced running assaults on a hill very similar to Hill 80. Each man was given a specific

assignment and briefed repeatedly on his particular mission. There were 60 men in the 714th Company when they left their lair on 10 December, and each man knew exactly what to do.

Outpost duty such as that described herein is dull, unrewarding work, and the ennui which came to lull Mike company also affected other units. On 7 December Mike company was sent on an operation back in the hills, and a platoon from battalion 1/5 (Monroe's battalion) was sent to relieve them.

Most battalions deployed in the populated areas ran a large-unit operation about once every two months. The reconnaissance teams out in the hills tracking every enemy movement kept files on the "hot areas," and periodically battalions would sally forward to cool them off. These operations were strictly temporary, generally lasting one to two weeks, with the exception of those in the DMZ.

The platoon leaders of 1/5 (referred to as 8 on Frontispiece) assigned to replace Mike company on Hills 76 and 80 made scout preparation for the assignment. The officer from Mike company who briefed them was not exactly specific in his instructions. He simply told them that there was little possibility of contact, since not even a sniper had fired at them in four months. "Have nothing to do with the PFs on both hills," the briefing officer said. "Just feed them. They're useless." He further explained that the PFs had refused to provide aid when a Marine had been injured by a mine.

Staff Sergeant Johnny Gall led 24 men up Hill 80 to spend what seemed like six very dull days in the rain. Since he was under no instructions to do so, he sent out no night patrols. Nothing happened during the day. The 10 PFs stayed to themselves and performed their one daily chore of carrying water from Ky Long.

When the Mike troops returned to the top of Hills 76 and 80, after being recalled from the hamlets, those uncomfortable and isolated positions on the hills were given the name "combat outposts," whose mission was the conducting of offensive patrols and ambushes. The older officers and NCOs, who were familiar with similar outposts set up during certain phases of the Korean War, attempted to have bunkers and barbed wire installed around the outposts.

If properly installed, both bunkers and wire are excellent defensive aids. On Hill 80, the barbed wire was never strung and the bunkers were a tragic caricature of their Korean counterparts. Bunkers in Korea were built into the ground, heavily sandbagged, and supported by thick timbers. The six bunkers on Hill 80 jutted out of the ground, were lightly sandbagged, and were supported by boards. The purpose of a bunker is to protect its occupants against artillery; enemy infantry attacks are repulsed by forces fighting from adjoining trench lines. The bunkers on Hill 80 had to serve as protection not only from small-arms fire but also from enemy ground attacks. The men stood their watches inside the bunkers, which were divided into a forward gun parapet and rear sleeping quarters. Thus, a sentry's field of vision and acoustic ability were limited by his bunker's enclosures. Mobility was nil and fields of fire, with bushes growing within 15 feet of each bunker, were scanty.

An incident occurred, however, on the night of 11 December. At about 2100, the Marines heard a dog barking persistently at the northern foot of the hill, a good indication that a man or animal foreign to the dog was moving in the vicinity. An hour later, PFC Charles Deeder, the man on watch in the bunker on the northern side of the hill, heard some bushes rustling downslope. "Hey," he whispered to his two sleeping companions, at the same time nudging them awake, "you guys listen up--someone's out there." Although chest-high scrub brush extended all the way up to the bunker itself, this platoon had been practicing guerrilla tactics for several months and had scattered dozens of empty C-ration cans 50 feet downslope, knowing that they would rattle if stepped on. Some moments after Deeder had whispered his warning, all three Marines heard the cans rattle.

They did not fire their weapons or throw fragmentation grenades in the direction of the sound. This reluctance on the part of men of their experience was explainable for several reasons. They were not working in their own territory; their mission was as a temporary replacement; two weeks before, a rifleman in Mike company had been fined $50 for shooting a cow at night by mistake; and, most important of all, they were not expecting any sort of probe. Lacking instructions to cover this vague situation, they hesitated to take positive, perhaps irredeemable,

action. They knew there were no friendly patrols out. Still, they might make a mistake, and that had happened in other units. They were cautious and threw an illumination grenade. In its fizzling light they saw nothing in the thick brush.

Seeking reassurance, Deeder sent PFC Edward Dinkins to the southern top of the hill to confer with PFC Paul Desrochers, who was standing watch in another bunker. Dinkins found a group of PFs clustered around the bunker jabbering excitedly. Desrochers said they swore there were VC in the saddle at the western top of the hill. When Dinkins explained his uneasiness, Desrochers walked several yards north to the canvas squad tent, reported the situation to Sgt. Gall, and asked permission to fire an illumination flare. Receiving permission, he did so, but the Marines saw nothing. The PFs, however, swore they saw a trail of flattened grass. A second flare was fired and this time the Marines saw it too.

Gall sent one PFC to investigate. He walked 10 yards downslope and returned, reporting that he could see a cow at the bottom. This action concluded the investigation and the rest of the night passed uneventfully. No further action was taken in regard to the incident the next day, despite the fact that the PFs left and a new group took their place on the hill.

Having concluded their thorough reconnaissance of the Marines' positions, the enemy scouts withdrew to await the arrival of their main force, which was pushing swiftly southeast through the mountain passes.

The men of Mike company were flown back to their base camp at dusk on 12 December. They were dirty, tired from constant patrolling, and discouraged from having had few enemy contacts. The next day one 38-man platoon commanded by SSgt. Douglas W. Wilcox tramped or rode the muddy mile out to Hill 80. It had been raining off and on for weeks; they were bone-chilled and their skin was wrinkling. The ill effects from constant immersion of the feet in water were common.

The weather was a boon to the enemy. With the low clouds and heavy ground mist, it was difficult for helicopters to insert reconnaissance teams and for jets to fly support on interdiction missions. Thus, with the rains, the enemy were able to mass and move more freely.

Wilcox arrived at Hill 80, which was then held only by 10 lackadaisical PFs. Gall had been relieved of responsibility by a radio message. He had not seen or talked to an officer in six days. When he left, no one debriefed him; nor did he think to mention the events of 11 December, having given them no further thought himself.

Between 1600 and 1700, PFC Weekly, on radio watch in the tent, received a message in Vietnamese. He shouted down the hill for the PF commander, who came and talked excitedly on the phone until Weekly, thinking he had talked long enough, told him to ring off. Leaving the tent, the PF commander gathered his force and began to supervise the construction of a bunker. Several Marines commented on this sudden surge of activity, since the PFs had never dug a defensive position before.

At dusk, Wilcox called his squad leaders together and issued his night orders. They were brief and perfunctory. Because his men were exhausted, Lt. Murray, the acting company commander, had arranged with the battalion that Wilcox's platoon would have to send out no night activities. Thus Wilcox ensured that all six bunkers would be manned, and dismissed his NCOs.

The night was overcast and it was drizzling. A slight wind was blowing and the air was chilly. The squad leaders split up the assignments. No one coordinated with the PF commander. The 3rd Squad, under Cpl. Copeland, had the night duty, aided by one fire team from the 1st Squad. Corporal Conn took this fire team 15 yards downslope to bunker 2, a machine-gun bunker, facing west toward the saddle where the PFs had heard noises on 11 December. Copeland set his men in the other three bunkers surrounding the tent, while Lance Cpl. Johnson led three men west past bunker 2, through the saddle, to bunker 1, an observation post 250 yards from the tent. The locations of the bunkers and routes of enemy attack and withdrawal are shown in Fig. 1.

According to the battalion standard operating procedure, 50 percent of the men should have been awake all night. Since this order was thought to be unnecessary under the circumstances, the watches were set so that one man would be awake at all times in each bunker. All three of the

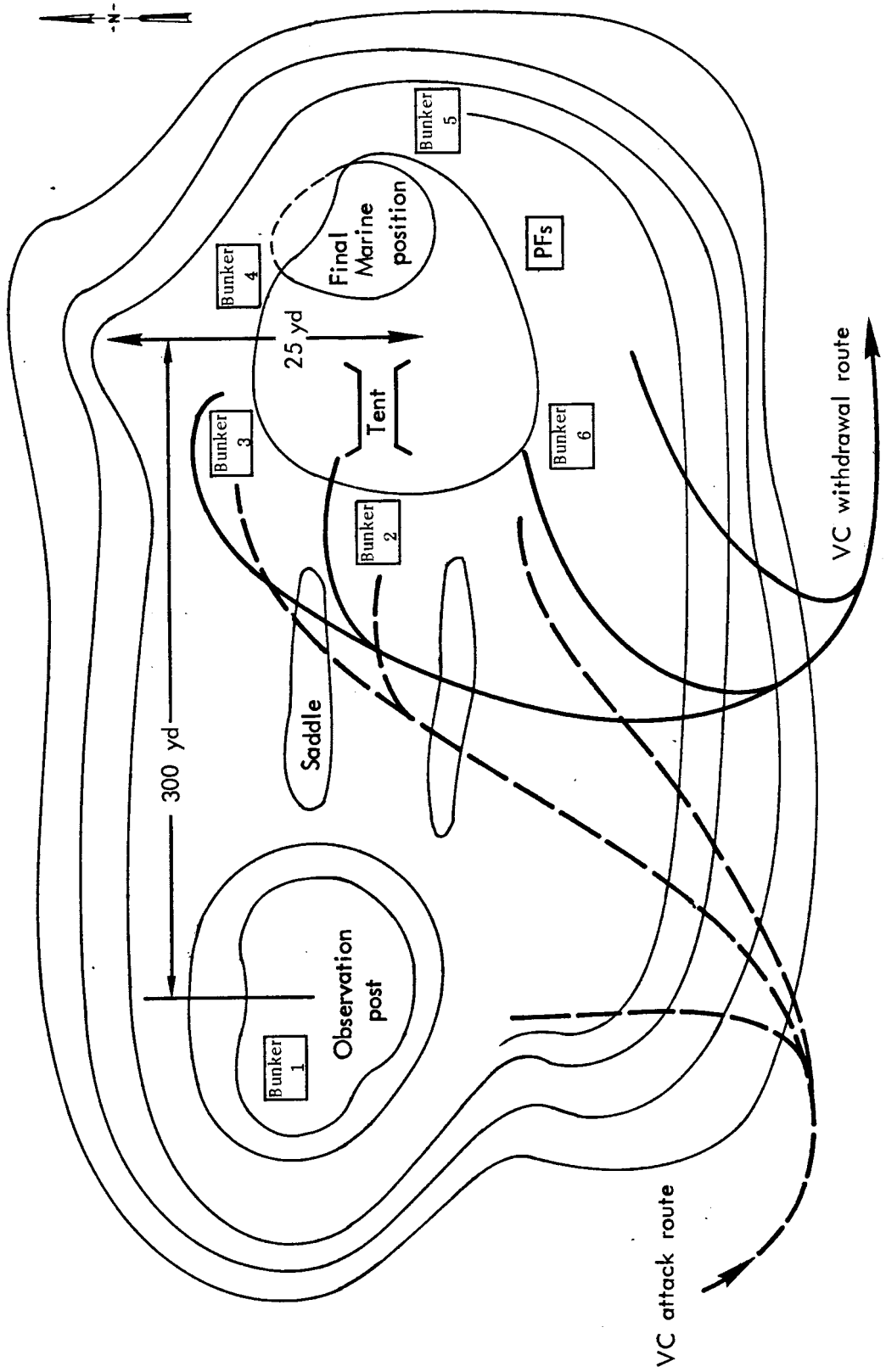

Fig. 1—VC attack, 13 December 1966

platoon's radios were stored in the tent, where a watch was to keep contact with company headquarters every 15 minutes. The flaps to the tent were closed. The hours of darkness slipped by placidly. No NCO checked the lines.

The guerrillas of the 714th slipped into position at the foot of the southwest slope and lay flat in the bushes while their scouts, by grasping the vines, pulled themselves up the steep slope to the top of the hill to serve as guides. Progress was slow when the company moved up the hill, since each man was burdened with five stick grenades and at least 200 rounds of ammunition. Fully one-third of the 60-man company carried automatic weapons. Many hauled high-explosive satchel charges weighing 10 pounds each and a few carried Chinese bazookas--long, ungainly tubes which are difficult to balance.

The VC were not entirely successful in their efforts to avoid making noise. Sixty men do not gain a hill in the brush without a sound. An alert sentry can distinguish the unusual from the ordinary night sounds, and PFC Jackson heard them coming. He was on watch in bunker 6, which overlooked the southwest slope. In early morning on 14 December, he heard some rustlings in the brush to his right flank. But his reaction was similar to that of Gall's men three nights earlier.

"Hey," he whispered to his fire-team leader who lay behind him sleeping, "I think I hear something out there."

And that was all. Corporal Richardson rolled over, fought his drowsiness for a moment, and when nothing happened, went back to sleep. Jackson said nothing more.

It was the last warning.

The enemy attack started well. Upon reaching the saddle, the company dispersed into assault teams and waited for the signal. Machine-gun bunker 2, which guarded the tent, had to be eliminated first. One assault team crawled through the bushes to a firing position 15 yards from the gun. They might even have gotten closer, had PFC Hasreitter not heard them.

His reaction was immediate. He started firing the machine gun. But it was too late. A Chinese rocket slammed into the parapet. A second chased the first one home. Hasreitter's crushed body was blown out of the bunker.

The successive blasts knocked the four Marines dozing in the sleeping quarters into a dazed consciousness. Corporal Conn, in charge of the bunker, groped for his rifle in the dark as PFC Vanatta began screaming, "My eyes, my eyes--they hurt."

Conn, not sure of what to do, reacted by instinct, shouting, "Shut up, Vanatta. Grab your weapon and get outside. You other guys do the same thing." The order could hardly have been followed. Ladd was dead, Vanatta dying, and Suzuki seriously wounded. In the darkness, Conn was unable to find his own rifle. Grenades were thudding on the roof, so he scrambled out to the parapet seeking Hasreitter. He ran straight into two VC. Without breaking stride he raced by them before they could fire and dived into the brush on the side of the saddle.

At the same time, Suzuki had ducked out the back of the bunker and staggered to the squad tent. The VC beat him there by a few seconds, long enough to hurl two grenades at the flapped opening nearest bunker 2. Lance Cpl. Sepulveda was on radio watch, and when the first grenade exploded against the tent, he dropped the radio handset and bent over to pick up his rifle. As shrapnel from the second grenade whizzed over his head, Wilcox yelled at him, "Sepulveda, give me that radio."

The reactions of the 20 men in that tent were remarkable. Had they hesitated, most, if not all, would have perished in the next few seconds. Had they not instinctively grasped many of their weapons when shocked awake, they would have been at the mercy of their enemies when they tumbled outside.

While Wilcox was reaching for the radio, Suzuki reeled through the west opening of the tent groaning, "They are all around us. Help me. Help me." Then he collapsed.

Less than a yard away from Suzuki, PFC Elledge was crying out, "Oh my God, I'm hit. Get me a doctor." Then he too succumbed.

The western end of the tent was now in flames, and grenades were exploding continuously under the floorboards.

The Marines cleared the tent by its eastern flap, dragging all their wounded with them. Wilcox was yelling into the radio, "Mike, this is Mike One. We are under attack. I'm going to check it out."

It was 0314; a grenade went off near him, knocking out the radio. There was no chance to reach the two other radios in the burning tent.

But Corpsman Jones gave it a tragic try. Wilcox yelled, "Someone get a radio," and Jones raced back in the tent by the eastern opening. Several Marines saw him enter, stop suddenly when he saw something within, and turn to come back out. At that moment, silhouetted against the flames, he was shot in the back and killed. A Marine rushed forward to help him and collided with Wilcox in the dark. For several grim seconds they struggled to kill one another before each realized the other was a Marine.

Wilcox tried to lead a counterattack in the direction of bunker 2, but the hail of grenades and small-arms fire he encountered forced him to abandon the attempt. In the try he was badly mauled by two grenades.

The attack was less than two minutes old. Although the Marines were to fight for another two hours, they had already taken all their casualties. Their fighting qualities, once engaged, were superb. But by then it was too late for ten of their number--four of the five Marines in bunker 2, two from the tent, and three in bunker 3, which was torn to bits in a roar of satchel charges. One other, Cpl. Copeland, was cut down when he ran from the tent to bunker 6, intent on checking his men.

Bunker 5 had not been touched in the first furious burst of firing, and PFC Crump, hearing Wilcox bellow, "Machine gun up," responded. He carried his gun 30 yards upslope and aimed it toward the tent. Around its firepower the Marines set up a defensive position. To attack this perimeter, the VC would have had to circle the burning tent, exposing themselves to the light from the flames and thus to danger of attack. They contented themselves with pitching grenades from the thick brush along the slopes. That technique was in keeping with standard VC tactics, since it is very rare that they are willing to press an attack against a set Marine position to its final, hand-to-hand conclusion.

The enemy sent a force of reluctant probers to the lonely observation post. Bui Nhu An was among them. The VC cautiously moved upslope and attacked when they heard the bazooka rockets hitting bunker 2. They rushed the observation post, throwing grenades and firing their

weapons. They were neither determined nor capable. Few Vietnamese can throw a hand grenade 20 yards on level ground, let alone upslope. Not one grenade reached its target, and they received a fierce response.

So isolated was the outpost that its occupants had no feeling of security. Consequently, Cpl. Johnson and his three men were not sleeping soundly. As a matter of fact, at 0300, no one was asleep. They felt uneasy. When the explosions ripped the main perimeter, they did not bustle around feverishly. It was as if some intuitive group suspicion had been confirmed. They gripped their rifles and grenades more tightly and waited for their turn to come.

They gave their probers a sound tactical welcome. Not one Marine fired his weapon. Instead, each gauged the distance to the sounds in the bushes, then threw two grenades three seconds apart. If a prober had time enough to avoid the first grenade the chances were that he would run straight into the path of the second. Bui Nhu An never heard the grenade that blasted him. He was convinced that he had been hit by an artillery shell. He lost consciousness almost immediately after being struck and, along with several others, was dragged from the hill by the Marines.

Johnson could hear the groans of the wounded. Having fought off their attackers, the Marines on the observation post crept several yards upslope to a position from which they could see the main positions. They wanted to be of help but dared not fire their rifles for fear of hitting other Marines. So there they waited for the dawn.

While the guerrillas ebbed and flowed around the Marine perimeter like a wave around a boulder on the shore, the PF positions remained untouched. The PFs huddled in their newly dug bunker or in the few fighting holes around it and did not move. They were spectators, not participants, in the fight. Not one was killed or wounded. Private First Class King did see one fire his rifle, however, and throw a grenade. But they refused to give PFC Jones any grenades when he requested them. This refusal infuriated the men in bunker 5, and in their rage they considered shooting some of the PFs. They were convinced that the PFs had betrayed them. King learned otherwise when the others from the bunker were called forward to fill in the main perimeter and he was left alone

to guard the rear. Hearing some movement in the bushes near the bunker, he shouted to the PFs, "You all set?"

"OK," "OK," came several replies, while the PFs gestured in the direction of the noise.

Misunderstanding the implication, King took no action, whereupon the PFs called to him. That time he said, "VC?"

"Yes, VC, VC."

King threw the two grenades in succession, then swept the suspect area with his automatic rifle. Neither he nor the PFs heard any more rustlings in the bushes.

The situation had become fairly stable. The Marines held a firm perimeter, and the guerrillas had lost the momentum of their assault. The two sides skirmished inconclusively back and forth, throwing grenades and ducking back, firing and rolling to a new position. The radio message from Wilcox had alerted battalion, although it was an hour before steady illumination was lighting up the perimeter. Once the area was lit, the VC began to pull back. When a Marine relief force arrived at 0500 on armored amtracs (amphibious tractors), they encountered no opposition. The ten dead Marines were placed on one amtrac and the wounded on another and were driven off. The perimeter was policed, loose gear picked up, and arrangements made to leave.

This took some time and it was fully light before the Marines were ready to move. In the meantime, Capt. Nghoto had come to the hill, bringing with him hundreds of PFs. But they were ignored or treated harshly, since the Marines were embittered at the conduct of the PFs during the attack and were very doubtful about their loyalty. Nghoto tried to explain that he had warned of such an attack, but the Marines did not believe him.

The surviving Marines trudged away from Hill 80 toward base camp, a mile to the east. (The hill had been judged by military logic not worth holding, after it had been held.) The Marines passed hundreds and hundreds of villagers, young and old, friendly and hostile, lining the way. The guerrillas had passed that way a few hours before. They had not fled back into the mountains as the Marines had expected but had split up to harbor among the people. The people were now watching

the Marines, whom the guerrillas said had been defeated, returning from the hill.

Word of the battle spread quickly among the villagers. For the next few days, when Marines from Wilcox's platoon met villagers they knew, the tale was the same: "We thought you dead; VC say they killed all Marines on hill." The rumor spread from the villages to the little thatch shops along Rte. 1, and many of the returning Marines were greeted as if they had been resurrected. Vietnamese whom the Marines did not even know came forward to tell them that they were glad the Marines were alive.

There was an indication that the people were again falling under control of the VC. Not only was Hill 80 abandoned, so was Hill 76. Now there were no Marines on the hills, let alone in the hamlets. The PFs went back into their forts. The Marines continued to patrol and ambush, but that pervasive aura of security which had embraced Thanh My Trung and other hamlets in the district of Ly Tin was gone. In a matter of weeks the guerrillas would return to control the villagers. Fearing reprisals, those villagers who had been most openly friendly with the Marines had to leave their homes and move in closer to the base camp.

The gaiety, the hope, the life went out of Thanh My Trung. The budding merchants who had sold Cokes to the Marines left. The farmers who had invited the Marines to their homes and had been nicknamed Water Buffalo or Charlie or Peanuts left their lands. The population dropped from 360 to 170.

Where in November 1966 the Marines had seen 12 women toiling in the rice paddies, in January 1967 they saw 4. Thanh My Trung became a ghost town, and a patrol could walk through and hear only the scuffle of their own feet, when once their ears would have rung with the shouts of the children. Lieutenant Cooper would not have been pleased.

V. VIET CONG RESPONSE: FAILURE

General Walt flew to Ly Tin from Da Nang to find out from the battalion leaders how the attack occurred. A major on the battalion staff replied that the fault lay partially with the PFs, whom he did not trust.

Angered by deaths resulting from carelessness and by lame excuses, Gen. Walt ordered the immediate relief of a series of officers, not all of them junior officers. He considered two facts to be of paramount importance and impressed them upon Marines at every level of command throughout I Corps: Marines had died. The guerrillas had gained face and prestige among the villagers.

General Walt was not the only leader influencing others because of what had happened on Hill 80. Captain Nguyen Uoc, the 40-year-old political officer of the 70th Company, 409th VC Sapper Battalion, from whom 714th received much of its training and equipment, judged the time and level of training of 714th right to wrest Ly Tin district from the control of the Marines. It was time to strike the center of the Marine stronghold in the district, the artillery battalion emplaced at the 5th Marine Regiment headquarters, 3,000 yards northeast of Hill 80.

But this time the battle would not be inconclusive and undistinguished. The preparations and attitudes of both sides promised that.

The 714th Company was well trained but not elite; the 70th Company was. However, the 70th Company had been in action only once since the previous June, when they had struck the artillery battalion and narrowly escaped destruction at the hand of Lt. Monroe's platoon. Their status was endangered by the success of the less professional 714th Company, who were credited by many villagers around Hill 80 with killing 30 Marines and wounding 10 more.

Captain Uoc selected the target for political--or more precisely, psychological--reasons. His coleader, Capt. Am, also 40 years old, was responsible for the tactical employment of the company. In case of a disagreement between the two, Uoc had final authority.

Years earlier, both had trained in North Vietnam for their roles, as had all the other officers in the battalion, and each knew that

political necessity overruled tactical misgivings. But in this instance Am shared Uoc's enthusiastic drive to hit Marine artillery battalion 2/11. Uoc might have been thinking of the psychological effect on the people; Am had his professional pride and the reputation of the company to uphold.

Captain Am had drilled his men hard in the past six months and was looking forward to a big return. His job had not been easy. Over half the men in the company had been taken out of villages at gunpoint. The weaker of those draftees he had sent into production work in the rice paddies around Nghia Lam village, nestled back in the hills west of Chulai.

The company had stayed in Nghia Lam village for several months. Captain Uoc was glad when fully half the villagers asked permission to leave; that meant he could expropriate their lands to feed his men without taxing the remaining villagers too heavily. But things got more difficult as 1966 wore on. Many of the draftees had to be taken out of the fields and fitted into combat roles, as casualties mounted in scattered skirmishes. Artillery often came out of nowhere to strike the men when they crossed the paddies with packs or rifles. Uoc had to use fewer and fewer of his men for paddy work. With the rise in the food tax, the villagers started to complain. The lack of even one victory drove spirits lower and lower, until only 20 percent of the villagers freely supported the company. The others wished only to be left alone.

By fall, the village was no longer a safe VC haven. The food was poor, the people were discontented, one-third of the company had fever, sudden artillery strikes were a recurrent hazard, and the danger of a disillusioned person turning informer was distinct; so the company pulled out, striking north and slightly west. The company had a vast area in which to roam, so long as Uoc kept contact with the battalion and Am could gather his forces quickly.

Am and Uoc worked hard to train the draftees and mold them to the desired image. Am's formal military training course was rather short and ragged: a little bayonet practice; some dry firing to learn how to aim a weapon; rudimentary individual, cell, and squad combat drill. The men learned from each other, the old teaching the young, the experienced leading the callow.

Uoc's schooling was more vigorous. Political lessons were taught, with heavy emphasis on the history of the National Liberation Front, enlivened by exciting stories of successful terrorists, whose killings were to be emulated. Uoc stressed the need for right conduct toward the people. Discipline for infractions, such as sleeping on post or discourtesy toward a farmer, was severe. The offender would be berated in front of his fellow soldiers and often forced into a public confession of his shortcomings, a punishment for the face-conscious Vietnamese far worse than a beating. This cathartic device drew the participants closer together, however, and helped weld them into a cohesive unit.

It was this encadrement system which allowed the VC to turn reluctant draftees into capable fighters. There was one set of ideal rules, political and military, toward which everyone strove. Deviation from the party line brought public disgrace; exceptional acts drew public approval, increasing the individual's eminence in his own eyes and in the eyes of others.

The 70th Company was distinguished in military matters by its cunning and an ability to move quietly and quickly. Here again it was a skill taught not in mass training but by the squad leaders watching and guiding their men. While on the march, those with experience demonstrated how to cross silently through sugar-cane fields, swamps, thick brush, and open paddies. Concealment techniques to avoid detection from flares and searchlights were demonstrated. Special emphasis was placed on the ease with which bamboo fences and barbed wire could be parted by small men moving slowly.

For forage and concealment reasons, the company moved and harbored in small groups of 10 and 20, waiting to be guided by their officers to preattack assembly points. Early in the first week of January 1966, the 70th Company reassembled in the village of Hau Duc, a stronghold of the 3rd North Vietnamese Regiment, some 20 miles northwest of Chulai. The men were told they were to undergo intensive preparation prior to striking a decisive blow against the Americans. They were not told the

name or the location of the objective but were provided with exact details of the defensive perimeter they were to penetrate.

The 70th Company was a special sapper unit of North and South Vietnamese, trained to infiltrate into large defensive positions and destroy prominent targets, such as artillery pieces, tanks, and planes. Tactics were soundly wedded to strategy, since if the operation were successful, Marine infantry units would be forced into static defensive roles, and the people would be greatly impressed. Following upon the heels of the attack on Hill 80, a blow at the artillery battalion in Ly Tin would shift the opinion of many uncertain villagers to the side of the VC.

The 52-man company trained hard. Meticulous plans were formulated and rehearsed, again and again. A dummy model of the artillery battalion's perimeter was prepared in the mountains. Eight three-man attack teams would crawl through the wire and destroy ten bunkers, five troop billets, and as many guns as possible. Each team would be armed with two automatic weapons, two Molotov cocktails, and ten grenades, plus shape charges to stuff down the barrels of the howitzers. Ten men would remain near the wire to drag out any casualties while the three-man headquarters group and a six-man mortar crew stayed in the shelter of a nearby tree line. No identification cards were to be carried. Suicide should be preferred to capture or failure, but if any men were captured by chance, they should lie to confuse the Americans. Each man was given 15 anti-American propaganda leaflets to drop inside the battery.

The day before the attack, the reconnaissance teams reported back to the company, bringing with them local guerrillas who would guide them to and from the wire. The team leader announced that the artillery battalion would be fast asleep and that the going looked easy. He himself had had no trouble.

The men of the attack teams were not convinced. In fact, they were impressed beyond reassurance by the defenses they had studied. Small, soft-looking, 18-year-old Nguyen Phong and his companions

trekked out of the mountains, depressed by their sense of disaster.* Although their political officer dwelt long on the success of the 714th in capturing Hill 80 and killing 30 Marines, Nguyen Phong was troubled. While he believed his political officer, he had seen the Marines' work during his year with the company, and he and his companions had come to accept the Marines' strength in a fire fight as the reality; he began to think his leaders were out of touch with reality when they considered the success of the attack on Hill 80 to be the rule rather than the exception. But the VC movement rests upon a tightly organized and highly disciplined structure, and Phong knew that any doubts he had, while they might be shared by all his companions in the ranks, would be regarded by their leaders as cowardly.

Captain Am had sent his special reconnaissance teams to scout the artillery battalion in late December, after Capt. Uoc had decided on the target. The teams encountered difficulties, but these troubles did not abort plans for the assault.

Artillery battalion 2/11 was set in next to the 5th Marine Regiment headquarters. Security for the headquarters perimeter was provided by Item company of battalion 3/5. The positions of the artillery battalion and Item company, as well as the 70th Company route of attack, are shown on Fig. 2. The Item company commander was Capt. Jim Sims, a big man who knew his business and paid attention to details. Every day he held a security meeting with Maj. Joseph Marron from 2/11 and Capt. Ron Babich, a capable intelligence officer given the additional duty of regimental security officer. Together, the three would plan their nightly defensive arrangements, communications, and patrols.

The units were all on the same hill but not tied in to one another. At the bottom of the slope, on flat ground, the artillery battalion was dug in and encircled by barbed wire. A few hundred meters west on the slope of the hill stood the scattered board-and-canvas dwellings of

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*These details of the enemy's planning were learned by the author while questioning Phong and other prisoners at Chulai during January 1967.

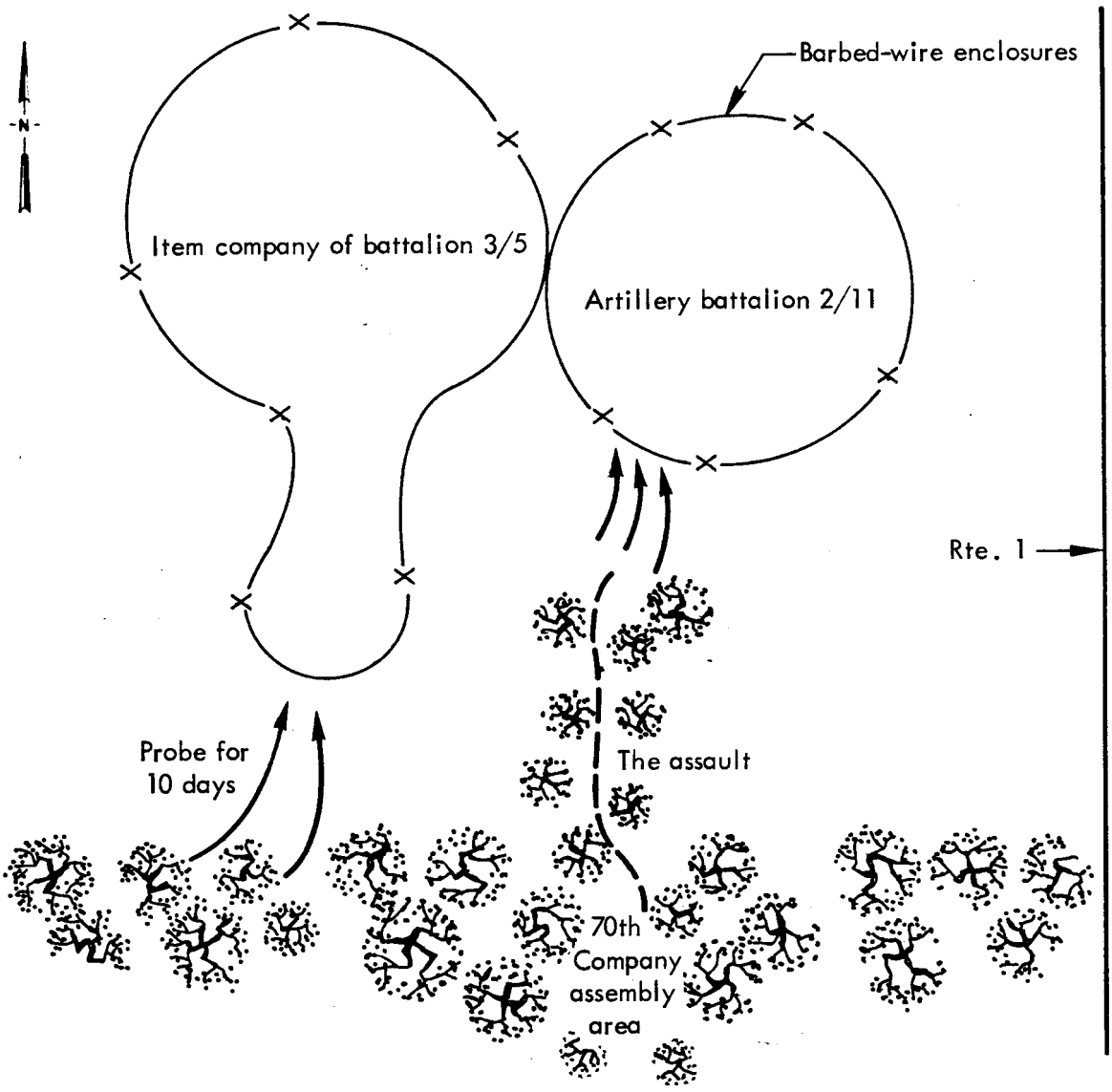

Fig. 2—VC attack, 12 January 1967

the regimental headquarters, also surrounded by wire. Most of Sims's company held the southern sector of the regimental perimeter, but they also did almost all the offensive patrolling in the area.

Beginning in January 1967, Sims's men reported scattered nightly readings from the south on their seismic intrusion devices (SIDs).* The movement of the enemy puzzled Sims. The SID operators picked up readings of only two or three enemy a night, and the enemy pattern of movement stayed the same. They would wait until the small night patrols had gone out, then sneak right up to the wire and crawl along the outside of it for several dozen yards, then make their way back to the bushes and leave.

Neither Babich nor Marron reported any enemy near their sectors, so Sims concluded that the probers were looking for a weak spot through which to hit him, as they had done to Mike company on Hill 80. At first Sims's men fired at the probers, but in the dark that action had no recognizable effect. Sims next tried illumination to expose the enemy. The first time his mortar chief, SSgt. Lee Oliver, told his crew to adjust and fire, there was a lapse of 10 minutes before the flare was on its way. Sims was furious at the time lag, and Oliver set to drilling his crew steadily through the night and into the next day. The next night a flare popped 4 minutes after Sims's command; the night after that it took 80 seconds. Still, the enemy was not seen; when the mortar fired with its distinct pinging sound, the enemy would scurry to concealment before the flare burst. Sims sent out snatch parties, but the enemy avoided them. After several nights of this, the contest became one of hide-and-go-seek, and the Marines were disappointed when their elusive foes didn't come back on 11 January.

At the security meeting the next afternoon, Sims reported that the enemy reconnaissance elements had pulled out. He concluded that the alert posture of his men had discouraged the enemy and that they would have no further trouble. Babich and Marron concurred.

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*Devices which measure earth vibrations and thus can warn of an approaching enemy force.

Sims returned to his company and at dusk dispatched a four-man patrol to circle the perimeter and see if anything was amiss. The patrol unknowingly passed within 10 yards of the 70th Company, who had taken shelter to eat and wait for darkness. They were in a ditch 4 feet deep and clogged with brush 6 feet high. The enemy had moved rapidly through the mountain passes, covering 23,000 meters in two days, passing through areas held by the 3rd North Vietnamese Regiment; yet the company, worried that there might be a tip-off, did not feel secure traveling in such a large group. They had nearly been discovered only 1 mile from the Marine position. Skirting a small hamlet in late afternoon, they were seen by a 10-year-old girl who was anxious to tell what she had seen to the Americans, who played with her when they passed on their frequent patrols. The 70th Company was lucky, however, for the girl did not see any Americans until the next day. The company was not worried about Sims's dusk patrol, for they were too well informed, hidden, and outposted to be discovered by a random patrol.

Another three-man patrol from Item company went out at 2100 and also passed the enemy assembly area on the way to an ambush site near the vendor's shacks set up along Rte. 1. The patrol leader thought the drone of voices and the number of lights coming from the shacks looked normal enough, as the three riflemen settled down for what they thought would be a long, dull wait. Behind them the barbed-wire perimeter of 2/11 was quiet and dark, but that did not deceive the patrol members. They knew that alert men sat behind automatic weapons in bunker after bunker on the other side of the wire. Their battalion commander had seen to that.

The men of the artillery battalion had not been pleased by their June performance. Lieutenant Monroe's infantry patrol had been deprived of support; and some VC had been able to breach the wire undetected and reach the guns. Since then, the officers of the battalion had worked out a defensive system which, although it did not overly tax the men or take them away from their guns, seemed adequate to beat back an attack. This system had not, however, been put to the test.

The main line of defense centered around a perimeter of 19 bunkers, each manned all night by four men. This left 270 men free to man the

howitzers or to sleep and work the next day. Between 10 and 30 yards in front of the bunkers the barbed wire began. It was laid in three rows, with 10 yards of ploughed earth between rows. Each row formed a pyramid, with two rows of concertina wire on the bottom and one roll on top. Another roll of concertina separated the bunkers from the howitzers to the rear. Every 40 to 50 yards around the half-mile perimeter, bulldozers had pushed up mounds of sand and dirt 4 to 8 feet high, and upon these perched the wood and sandbag bunkers.

No mines were laid; their indiscriminate use by other friendly forces in Vietnam was considered criminal by the Marines, who would tear up any minefield they found. Few Marines had not seen a buddy wounded by a mine, which may have been stolen from careless friendly forces or constructed from artillery duds.

The men of battalion 2/11 had one favorite defensive device, however. In early January they had received four SIDs which were placed in bunkers 1, 7, 10, and 16 and were regarded as an aid to rather than a substitute for alert men.

The battalion commander, Lt. Col. I. L. "Bud" Carver, was convinced that the key to the defense of 2/11 lay in the spirit of the privates and lance corporals who mounted the guard each night. Thus, at odd hours the colonel would circle the perimeter, popping in unexpectedly to talk with his men in one bunker or another. He was not testing the sentries to see whether they were awake; each bunker had a phone and reported in to the sergeant of the guard every 15 minutes. The colonel was there because he wanted them to know that their dreary, dull jobs were just as important in his eyes as were those of the men who pulled the lanyards. Major Marron shared his commander's outlook and often in the early morning hours would get out of his cot, take a jug of coffee, and go visiting the bunkers. For effective leadership, there is no substitute for sincere supervision.

The VC had no way of knowing that there were alert sentries on the perimeter. When their reconnaissance teams scouted the perimeter on 10 January, the entire area seemed deserted. They had been able to sneak to within 50 yards of the wire apparently undetected. Actually, the SIDs had picked up their vibrations, and a patrol from regimental

headquarters was slipping up on them from the rear when they left the vicinity by an alternate route.

The area seemed quiet to the leaders of the sapper unit on the night of 12 January as they grouped their men in a tree line 200 yards from bunker 11. (The VC route of attack is shown in Fig. 3.) They sat in the tree line for an hour before midnight, while Uoc delivered a pep talk on bravery. The troops were fidgety. From bunker 12 they had heard voices, low and clear. Their plans were thus disrupted, since the scouts had reported that there were none awake in the bunker at night. Bunker 12 was the key to the breach; if it could not be destroyed, the assault teams would be checked. Uoc was not about to back off, however; no battle would be a defeat. He desperately wanted to destroy an artillery tube. By shattering this symbol of American technological superiority, the VC would gain prestige among the people out of all proportion to the military significance of the act. At Uoc's insistence, Am sent his whole force in shortly before midnight to blow bunker 11 when they had wriggled right up to it. The troops accepted the situation glumly. Talk of bravery aside, they were the ones who had to crawl under the wire to an imposing bunker which stood 10 feet in the air.

The attack groups slithered slowly forward amidst the rubble of a vegetable garden which adjoined the first row of barbed wire. Reaching the wire, they fanned out, each team selecting a different entrance point but all teams huddling rather close to one another. They pulled the strands of wire apart, no more than 20 inches and tied them off with bamboo cord. They slipped forward inches at a time through the narrow openings, carefully lifting their equipment and placing it down again. The teams advancing on bunker 11 carried large sections of bangalore torpedoes with which to blow the wire completely during the attack, so they could dash swiftly out when it was over.

By midnight, they were through the first wire row. One hour later they had penetrated the second row. The bunkers loomed large and empty against an overcast sky. There were less than 40 yards to go.

The Marines knew they were coming. They had known since SID soundings and glimpses of movement were reported by bunker 1 at 2200

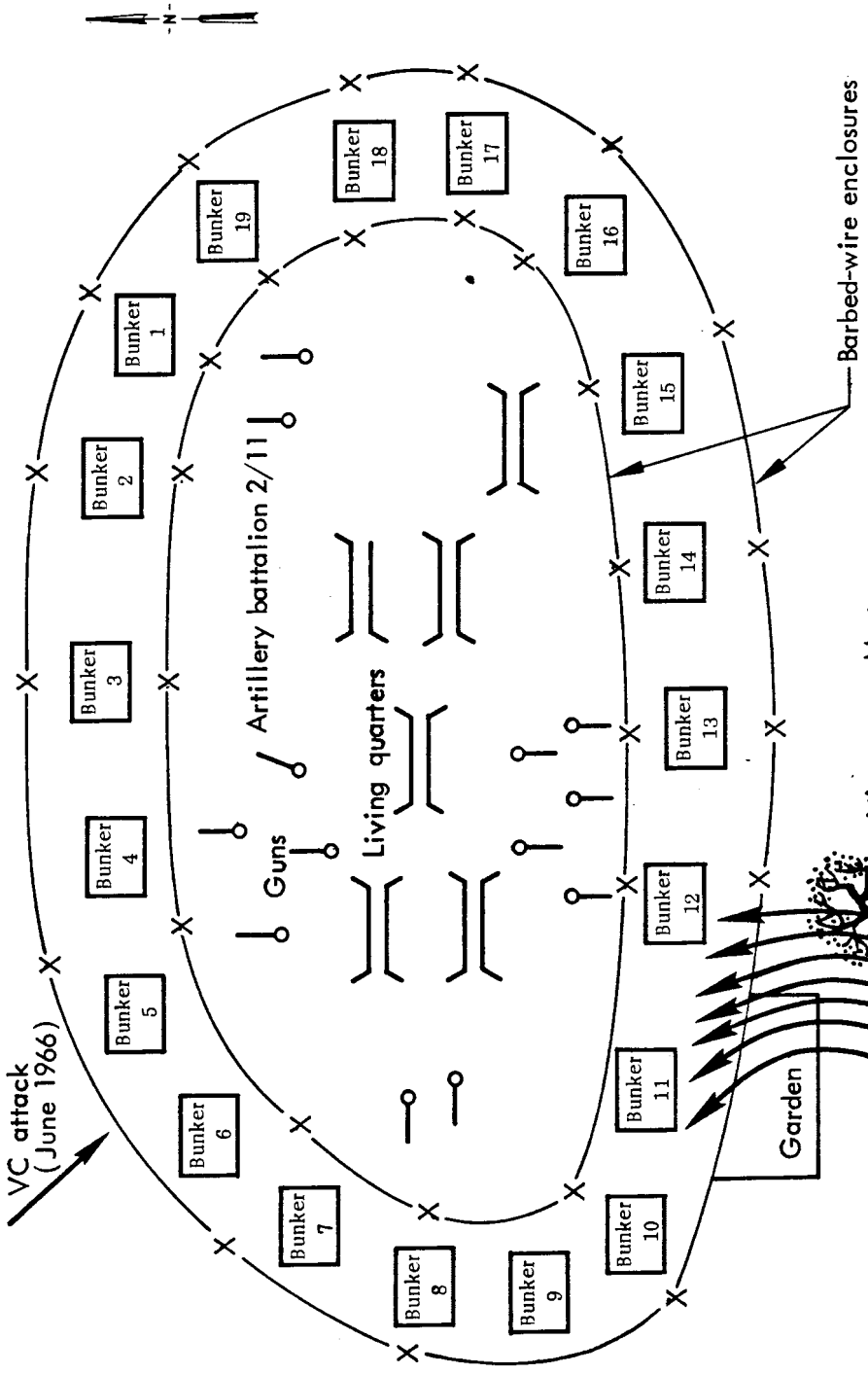

Fig. 3—U. S. artillery dispositions, 13 January 1967

and by bunker 16 an hour later. Near midnight bunker 10 reported many soundings on its SID. Major Marron noted that the enemy movement followed the same route it had on 11 January. Every man in the battalion was wide awake, waiting.

The Marines had occasionally thrown up a few flares but had seen nothing. Just before midnight Carver and Marron discussed the situation. "If we get hit," the colonel said, "it will be from 11 and 12 area."

The prediction came true at 0200. The headquarters battery gunnery sergeant, Vanderlinden, was listening to the radio chatter of the sentries in various bunkers and concluded that an attack was imminent. But no individual enlisted man wanted to take the responsibility for sounding the alarm and opening fire first. Like their companions on Hill 80, each man sought the reassurance of the other to support what he had seen or heard. None was willing to take action alone, when there were 350 other Marines also aware of the situation.

Vanderlinden called Marron. "We have almost positive proof that there are VCs around the wire at bunkers 10 and 11."

"Where?" Marron asked.

"Inside the wire," the sergeant replied. "What do you want me to do?"

"Fire."

While this conversation was taking place, Lance Cpl. Carey, on watch in bunker 11, was peering through an infragreen scope designed to pierce the darkness. He saw a man crawling on his hands and knees outside the nearest row of barbed wire. His three watch mates clustered around to see.

Just then the gunnery sergeant called back.

"Guns," Carey said. "We've got a definite target."

"Go ahead and shoot," came the reply.

Suddenly an illumination flare burst overhead. The enemy flattened themselves in the grass and Carey could not see them. When the flare died, they moved and Carey saw them clearly, without the scope. So he threw a hand illumination grenade. Private First Class Harley, in bunker 13, saw the grenade sputter through the air and hit a guerrilla,

who then rolled over. Seeing this movement, Cpl. Belen and PFC Lykis opened fire. Lance Cpl. Hildevrandt popped an illumination flare.

The flare was off target and sailed behind bunker 11, accidentally providing the men in that bunker with an excellent field of fire. The area was lit up like daylight, and straight in front of them were the startled faces of five VC. Private First Class Hollada sighted down the barrel of his machine gun and squeezed the trigger. Lance Cpls. Luneberg, Carey, and Lowey joined in with their rifles. The VC frantically grasped for their weapons, but they were dead within 15 seconds.

In bunker 13, Hildevrandt looked up from shooting the flare to see two of the enemy running away from the wire directly in front of his bunker. He called to his companions, who shifted their fire and brought down both men.

Within the interior perimeter, mortar shells were dropping near the howitzers, which in turn were being fired back at possible mortar sites. Private First Class Valerio, standing in bunker 14, heard the mortars crashing close behind him but kept his gaze riveted to the front, where he knew the enemy attack force was pinned. He was the first to see the shower of sparks which gave away a mortar when it is fired. He yelled, "Mortar, mortar." It looked to be not more than 150 yards away in a tree line.

Lykis, firing at targets not 40 yards in front of bunker 13, heard the yells and looked up in time to see another shell leave the mortar tube in a red streak. Lykis raised his heavy .50-cal machine gun and pumped shell after explosive shell at the target. Bullets from several lighter weapons chased his full red tracers into the tree line. There followed a sharp explosion, and the mortar stopped firing.

The men of Item company had sprung to full alert when the first rounds popped below them on the artillery perimeter, but they were not sure what was going on. The officers of 2/11, concentrating on the fight at hand, were using their radios for intrabattalion communications only. Sims drew on his infantry experience to make a swift decision. He knew the outer perimeter was his responsibility, and

only his patrols went forth. The lance corporal at Rte. 1 called to say he was still in position and the firing was all behind him. Sims told him to stay in position and yelled to Oliver to get his mortars working over the tree line outside bunker 11.

Less then 4 minutes after 2/11 engaged the enemy, Oliver's mortars were slapping at the command post of Uoc and Am. Sims wanted to box the enemy in, so from his vantage point he walked the mortars toward the wire by shouting adjustments after the explosive flash of each hit. He could see the flashes of the enemy weapons near the wire and concentrated on hitting them.

Sims had been walking his mortars in for 20 minutes when his radio operator finally made contact with Lt. Curt Wagoner, the security officer for 2/11. Wagoner told him to keep the rounds coming, even to shift in closer. That worried Sims, who feared he might then knock out bunker 11.

"I'll try one round in closer, Curt," he said, "and you tell me what to do after that."

Oliver made the shift and the 81-mm round splashed in the wire right in front of the bunker. Carey got on the tie line from bunker 11 to Wagoner.

"That's beautiful, sir. We're getting showered with shrapnel. It's on their heads. Keep it coming."

Sims did.

Marron was in the process of dismantling and moving bunker 12 several yards to the rear, so he had not manned it that night. When the firing began, SSgt. Sherman Hiscock and four other Marines darted to it and from there engaged some enemy caught in the wire to their direct front. The range was so close that grenades were the weapons most favored at first. But many were duds, and Hiscock, infuriated, cut loose with a 12-gauge shotgun. The noise of the shotgun had a psychological effect on the enemy even more potent than its buckshot. When Hiscock started blasting at the shadows in front of the bunker, some VC who had been huddling in tiny depressions scurried away in terror, only to be cut down by rifle fire.

In his preplanning, Am had not forgotten the threat that Item company presented to any force attacking 2/11. He had arranged with the local guerrillas for a diversionary probe to keep the Marine infantry occupied. However, the guerrillas started their probe 45 minutes late and had not planned their action carefully. The probe hit the infantry perimeter from the exact spot where the SIDs had first picked up the enemy scouts during the past two weeks. The Marines on the lines estimated the number of enemy at ten, firing with rifles from the brush 70 meters in front of the wire. Illumination from artillery shells was lighting up the entire hill. The guerrillas were firing from the shelter of shell holes which marked a preplotted mortar barrage. Sims told his 60-mm-mortar crews to flatten the place. The first concentration of shells flung two bodies out of the brush; successive waves of shells dropped two more. The remaining enemy pulled off.

From 0200 until dawn at 0500, illumination was continuous over the perimeter. The Marines took and toppled their targets as they saw them. Their rifle magazines held no tracers, but the Marines brought their rounds on target by watching the strikes, which kicked up sprays of dirt or water in the paddies. The enemy attack teams were trapped within the wire without hope of escape. Terror saved the life of Nguyen Phong. The Marine firepower was so concentrated and continuous that he was unable to think, much less move. He lay on the wet ground and did not stir for four hours.

He was not alone in his terror. Fully a third of the members of the attack teams forgot or disobeyed their pledge to their political officer to avoid capture at all costs. They lay among the dead and desired only an end to the one-sided battle.

Uoc and Am tried to get them out. Despite the fierce fire, the captain kept his few reserves darting forward one at a time in desperate efforts to drag the attackers back. Each time a man crawled forward, the Marines doubled their rate of fire. Finally, as dawn neared, Uoc realized the hopelessness of the situation and ordered his men to back off. Those trapped in the wire were left to their fate.

With the dawn, Sims was anxious to follow the enemy. He knew that his men, familiar with the terrain and knowing the general position of the enemy, could cut them off from the mountains and have them trapped in the open paddies when full light came. Instead, however, Mike company was ordered on the intercept mission, since they had suffered so heavily on Hill 80. But the men of Mike company, hurrying to the scene from their base a mile distant, got lost in the unfamiliar terrain, and the remnants of the 70th Company slipped by them in the dark.

When the dawn came, Maj. Marron could see no enemy moving beyond the wire. Wanting some prisoners, he walked to bunker 11 and from there passed the word that no VC still alive within the wire was to be shot, unless the VC reached for a weapon. But Marron did not relish crossing the wire and sifting the live enemy from the dead. While he was pondering the situation, Capt. Babich walked over to him and asked, "Can I help?"

"You're a grunt* by trade, aren't you?" Marron asked.

"Yes."

"How many troops you got?" Marron expected at least a platoon.

"Four."

"My God." Marron said. "Well, my men are cannon cockers. We got them in there, but it's your job to get them out."

Babich did, in a most undramatic fashion. While his interpreter screamed and cursed at the terrified guerrillas and his four Marines covered his every move with their automatic rifles, the captain climbed over the barbed wire, strode through the weeds, bent down and lifted a live VC over his shoulder, and strode back to Marron's side. In this fashion, seven captives were removed from the field of the dead. There was no fight left in them.

At the same time, several miles to the northwest, the 14 survivors of the VC company were dogtrotting toward the sanctuary of the mountains. One said he had a cramp in his stomach. As soon as the others had disappeared from sight, he turned and retraced his steps to give himself up.

The Marines suffered no fatalities. The enemy company had been reduced to a squad.

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*Infantryman.

Sims got on the phone to Lt. Col. Carver. "Say, sir," he said, "any time that artillery battalion of yours needs a little fire support, you must let my mortars know."

Such was the battle.

At Marine interrogation headquarters, all the prisoners except one told their stories quickly and willingly. Nguyen Trung, the 25-year-old leader of the 2nd Squad, 3rd Platoon, refused to talk. He spat at his guards and called the other prisoners traitors. His hostile silence was broken by a surprise visit by Nguyen Tam, who had been his assistant platoon commander in 1965.

Tam had defected from the VC ranks, and his military ability had so impressed the Marines that they had enlisted him into the Kit Carson scouts, a group of ex-VC who fought for the Marines. These scouts were effective but not very savory characters, men whose basic motivation was not any ideology but rather a desire to excel and a taste for violence and danger. At first, Trung thought Tam was crazy and defended his VC record. He proudly pointed out that he had worked his way up the ranks and had just been selected for the Revolutionary Youth Group, one step below membership in the People's Revolutionary Party and the officer ranks. When an interrogator pointed out that if he made officer it would be due to his Communist Party membership, Trung angrily retorted that he would rise because he was a leader and men respected him, not because he had joined the party. Tam smiled. He thought it would be only a matter of time until Trung joined him in the Kit Carsons.

While Carver and Marron were congratulating their men, the Vietnamese chief of Ly Tin district drove up in a dump truck. He asked to see and was shown the bodies, which looked like wax dolls. He asked if he might have them. Permission was granted. The corpses were piled on the truck and he drove away.

All that day the bodies were on display at a spot along the side of Rte. 1, passed by many villagers on their way to the marketplaces. And all that day villagers came to look.

The next morning the district chief arranged for the burial of the bodies of the main-force North Vietnamese. During the day relatives had claimed the bodies of the guerrilla guides who had accompanied the company on its last raid.

VI. THE STAGNATION OF STRATEGY

The Marines left Chulai in May 1967, having been called north to the DMZ. The Army moved several battalions in to fill the TAORs, and the guardianship over Ly Tin continued. Not knowing exactly what to expect, the battalion commanders at first kept the units intact and centrally located; then, with an absence of action, the companies were gradually moved out on their own.

In July the 2nd Platoon of Charlie company of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade moved from battalion Hill 69 the 1 mile forward to Hill 76, where Cooper had been a year earlier, and established a combat outpost. From there 2nd Lt. Emery D. Beasley sent patrols forth night and day.

In August they never saw an enemy soldier. The four CAPs in the TAOR accounted for almost all the battalion's kills. The patrols from Hill 76 settled into dull routine. The troops worked with 17 PFs, who had been sent by Capt. Nghoto to live on the hill with the soldiers. The PFs were friendly enough but liked to patrol only their own hamlets, to the east of Hill 76.

The PFs were indifferent to patrolling south during the daytime to Thanh My Trung, now a dirty, lifeless place with listless people and children who stared but did not speak when American soldiers passed. Many of the houses sagged, empty, and in the whole hamlet only one person, an old woman, would approach the soldiers to ask for cigarettes or coffee.

The PFs did not want to patrol at all to the north of Hill 76. In Ky Long, at the foot of Hill 80, three American soldiers and a scout dog had been recently killed by a mine. The PFs claimed that a VC district company was operating in that area and that it was wisest to avoid it altogether.

The PFs liked the barbed wire strung around Hill 76 because they feared an attack. The position was strong as long as the men remained alert. But after two weeks on the hill, the platoon sergeant was threatening the men with court-martial because some were dozing off while standing their night watches in the bunkers. The battalion officers had run a practice reaction force to Hill 76 one night. In accordance

with textbook doctrine, the force followed devious routes in the dark so as not to risk ambush. They reached the hill in 4 hours. Lieutenant Beasley's platoon sergeant warned the troops not to fall asleep on watch, for there were no other forces to help them in a fight. On the unswept trails around Thanh My Trung the guerrillas had scattered hand-printed leaflets whose message, meant for the villagers, was simple: Keep the water buffalo and the children off the trails that the Americans are using; obey the people's curfew from 2000 to 0500, but lights may be left on in the houses.

Lieutenant Beasley wondered about the tactical competence of the PFs, since during target practice many turned their faces away when they fired their guns, and none wished to move anywhere at night except to their own hamlets to the east.

Lieutenant Beasley did not like keeping his platoon on that hill where there was no shade except in the muggy bunkers, dirt covered everyone every time the resupply helicopters landed, water had to be hauled up the steep 200-foot hill, and the men slept on gravel every night.

A year had passed since U.S. forces had gone into Ly Tin district. The villages under government control remained that way; those sympathetic to the VC were harassed and swept periodically by the VC. Thanh My Trung and other villages, with no firm commitments to either side, waited--for what they did not know.

The succession of American units on Hills 22, 69, 76, and 80 prevented the VC from holding by military force any hamlet from the mountains to the coastal plain. But the Americans never arrested members of the infrastructure, or worked with the people, or made a permanent change in the habits of the PFs. They did fulfill the purpose (thought by some to be the sole aim of the American military in Vietnam) of providing the South Vietnamese time to reorganize.

The South Vietnamese had had time to rebuild on their own. The amount of influence that battalions situated on bare hills can have in the prosecution of a guerrilla war is questionable, but certainly the enemy main forces were forced back by the presence of these battalions. In June 1966 Lieutenant Monroe had intercepted villagers carrying pots of cooked rice to the bivouac camp of the 409th Sapper Battalion in the

hamlet of Thou Hai, 6,000 meters northwest of artillery battalion 2/11. By January 1967 that sapper battalion had moved to Hau Duc, 43,000 meters northwest of 2/11.

Thwarting the main force, however, had done little to loosen the VC grip on the people. Each day, and especially each night, the battalions ran dozens of patrols and ambushes, mostly in the tree lines and paddies outside the villages, rather than in the hamlets themselves. These patrols and ambushes made movement for the enemy hazardous but not impossible, particularly for the guerrillas, who knew the villages much better than did occasional patrols.

Such a defensive strategy, relying as it did on hurting the enemy but in the main ignoring the people and the GVN officials, was clearly an interminable process which yielded no lasting results. As long as the guerrillas could prevent the establishment of security at the village level, they would win the war, for eventually the United States was bound to disengage, and any vacuum left behind would be filled by the VC.

By summer 1967 the situation of Ly Tin district had stalemated. There were not enough U.S. forces to extend their patrols any farther without radically changing tactics and deployments, nor was there any attempt to incorporate GVN manpower in any direct way into the pacification process. At least the situation was fairly stable and U.S. casualties relatively light.

By fall, the district seemed so quiescent that the U.S. battalions abandoned the enclave tactics and moved out to hunt VC in the hills, leaving a skeleton force behind in the district to tend to administrative tasks.

VII. TET 1968

By 1968, the VC were coming back into Ly Tin. The object of the battalion-sized search-and-destroy operations in the hinterlands was to keep the enemy main forces off-balance and away from the people. Yet the absence of the U.S. units from the populated areas also allowed the enemy freer movement among the people than they had previously enjoyed.

In early November, 40 men from the 70th Sapper Battalion--a considerable number of professional fighters--moved into the district to hit Chulai. For 6 hours one afternoon they stayed in the GVN-pacified hamlet of Binh An, popularly called Fish Island, a thin slice of shoal-bound land 700 meters from Ly Tin district headquarters and 1 mile from Chulai. That night the enemy blasted several helicopters in Chulai and were ambushed by a CAP trying to get out. One captured enemy said that his group had not worried about any informers on Fish Island and that five men from the local hamlets had been recruited a week earlier to act as guides.

In December the village chief of Phu Vinh, an island less than 500 meters from the district headquarters, was assassinated along with his daughter during the night. A runner can cover the island in 17 minutes; the village is so small that even the Americans who were there for a few months in 1966 knew everyone by face. There was a Revolutionary Development (RD) team there. Yet no one saw the assassins. The district chief refused to go or to send anyone else out to the island on the day of the killing.

A week later shots were heard at noon down the street from Ly Tin; a PF had been killed entering his home. No one saw the killer. The district chief didn't budge from his fort.

Outside the Chulai gate, An Ton, a boom town of claptrap shanties had sprung up in 1966 to service the needs of the GIs: laundry, girls, souvenirs, beer, narcotics, etc. By fall 1967, pallets loaded with American beer and truckloads of scrap lumber were rolling in, and there were reports of bootlegged medicinal supplies. In this atmosphere, one small incident could cause an explosive situation. The colonel of the military

police at Chulai had requested permission several times to raid some stores, but the district chief and other Vietnamese officials consistently refused permission.

In December the number of warnings from National Police and Census Grievance sources about mischief somewhere in the district rose sharply. Two warnings per night in the district would be average; by December the average had risen to eight (this number did not include all those kept secret from the adviser by the police and RDs). In addition, there was a sharp increase in the incident rate. The VC were proselyting in the hamlets and trying to stir the villagers to demonstrate or to strike at the Chulai airbase, where many worked. The villagers, naturally, were reluctant to do anything for either side until forced.

Major Robert Nourse, the district adviser, believed the security situation in the district was becoming steadily less effective. Except for the few incidents cited above, he had no proof, just a feeling. Since he did not feel at all secure in the district compound, he rotated a night watch among his five U.S. advisory personnel to check posts at random hours. Several times PFs were found asleep on watch. These infractions were reported to the district chief, only to be dismissed. The adviser's caution soon paid off, in January.

On 30 December, during the New Year's truce, CAP K5, 4 miles north of the district compound along Rte. 1, received warning that the 706th Local Force Company was in the area and that a main-force battalion was moving in toward the district headquarters.* Shortly after 0100 on 2 January 1968, the CAP received reports from the two patrols that had been sent out that they could see dozens of enemy moving about. Both patrols were ordered back to the CAP fort, with the enemy in pursuit. Artillery and illumination were requested and compliance was instantaneous, since the nearby U.S. units and headquarters at Chulai had been monitoring the CAP radio net.

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*During 1967, six CAPs, each consisting of 12 U.S. Marines and 30 PFs, were established within Ly Tin. Each CAP patrolled between 2 and 3 kilometers and their patrol boundaries did not interlink. In their separate areas, however, they received substantial intelligence from the villagers through friends and relatives in the PFs.

While CAP K5 was taking this attack, a patrol from CAP K4, 1 mile north of the district compound, ambushed a party of 15 enemy walking hurriedly south. Within minutes this ambush was followed by contact from K4's other patrol, also reporting enemy moving south.

In the meantime, K5, under small-arms fire and mortars, had called for Huey gunships with spotlights because the enemy attack force was burning part of the village. The apparent severity of the attack warranted priority fire support. At 0200 the district compound was attacked by a force of 500 men from local forces and the 409th Sapper Battalion. Just two minutes prior to the attack the American sergeant checking posts had verified that all PF sentries were awake.

According to standard procedure, the enemy blew the wire with a bangalore torpedo and tried to rush in. The rush was cut to pieces, but on the other side of the compound seven sappers had already slithered through the wires undetected. Before they were killed, they managed to blow a corner bunker and the officers' quarters, accounting for 6 of the 11 PFs killed in the attack.

Because enemy mortars were dropping on the U.S. artillery battalion up the road to prevent fire support and because of the commotion over the CAP diversion, the district did not receive artillery illumination and HE until more than 30 minutes later. But when this support came the district adviser was able to lay it right on his wire, and the PFs held to their sandbagged and bunkered firing line.

The enemy seemed to have retreated, allowing helicopters to fly in and evacuate the wounded, holding fire when they had targets. Yet at 0400, after an hour's lull, they came back strong against a hyper-alert defense and died by the dozens. At dawn they finally pulled off, leaving behind 40 dead. (The same kind of action occurred at CAP K5, where only one PF was wounded. The villagers there reported that the VC suffered 35 fatalities.)

The PFs were elated. The villagers were shocked but pleased. But within two weeks a reaction set in that had taken place after other successful GVN defenses: depressive trepidation. Instead of thinking

they could take all comers, the PFs started worrying that their victory had outraged the VC and that when the enemy came back, it would be for vengeance. In the villages the VC were saying that they were coming again and that the people should rise up against the district officials. The district chief announced that his PFs would shoot any people who so dared.

In this atmosphere Tet came and the bridge between An Ton and Chulai was destroyed. Rockets reached the Chulai airfield (referred to as 9 on Frontispiece) from launching pads within the district, and throughout the early morning hours of 31 January the district radio mounted reports of attacks up and down I Corps. The PFs were accustomed to returning at dawn to their home hamlets, but this morning the district chief kept them at the compound.

A few hours later an Army outpost on Hill 76 radioed that thousands of villagers celebrating Tet were streaming from their hamlets towards the district headquarters. The PFs fidgeted nervously as 2,000 people pressed against the compound gates, bearing colored streamers and the traditional gifts of Tet. Word came that at each of the six CAPs similar crowds were surging in. Without orders, the PFs fired into the air, and the villagers, as frightened as the PFs, huddled on the ground, revealing a dozen armed cadres among them. The VC tried to flee, but the PFs, sensing they had the upper hand, chased and killed them.

One tall, thin, bespectacled man refused to run, and the American advisers managed to save him from the hands of the PFs. Poised and self-confident, he told his captors in good English that he had come down from North Vietnam two months earlier with instructions for the following action. He was to have taken over as district chief after the villagers, under the direction of his cadres, had peacefully "sat in" within the compound. If the PFs did not then voluntarily surrender their weapons, his men were to gun them down. He had a North Vietnamese scroll explaining who he was and telling the GVN district chief that his services were no longer needed and that he stood relieved.

Although the "uprising" plan was foiled both at the district headquarters and at all the CAPs, the morale of the PFs and the faith of the villagers in the GVN's future hit a new low. The VC said they would return.

But as the months went by and no VC came back in force, the district adviser thought that the people had regained their spirit and the PFs their confidence.

The intelligence was improving, after the province chief had tried hard to convince the various GVN intelligence agencies to learn to work together. However, warnings from informants were erratic, with less than one-fifth of the tips proving accurate. But the Census Grievance Teams were reliable, although they belonged to the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, the ultranationalist party of Central Vietnam whose political zeal sometimes exceeded patriotic interests.

This party, however, was losing power, as manifested by the refusals of both the province chief and the district chief to meet with its members. These leaders would not have dared refuse in 1966.

The American division was very generous in supporting the Regular Force (RF) and PF operations with helicopters, and the Vietnamese worked better for it. Nghoto was still the most effective and cagey of the local PF leaders. The VC had tried to assassinate him one night, so his loyalty probably did not lie toward them.

Thanh My Trung was forcibly evacuated in February, after repeated snipings. In March and May rockets were launched against Chulai from the deserted hamlet, and subsequently it was outposted by a PF platoon.

By August 1968 the adviser considered the situation to be as stable as it had been in August 1967, with at least one improvement: The VC seemed weaker overall. On the other hand, the GVN district forces did not seem to have appreciably improved or extended their sphere of influence or sharpness of control. Their confidence remained a fragile thing. Although the Americans by their enclave patrolling had shielded the people (from the enemy main force, at least) for a while, this enclave deployment had been abandoned in favor of the objective of destroying the main forces in the hills. But if that destruction were not accomplished, the question was, How would the

villagers and the GVN officials of Ly Tin react the next time the VC came back in force? And the time after that? How long would it be before the Americans were gone entirely and Ly Tin had to stand on its own?

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The phrase "enclave strategy" has been purposely avoided in describing these events in Ly Tin district, for the word "enclave" refers to a geographic deployment pattern, but it does not describe how or toward what purpose forces are to be used once they are so deployed.

The enclave deployment has been criticized chiefly because it allows the enemy to wander freely in the mountains and to hunt when and where he chooses. Yet if the enemy cannot be destroyed as a fighting force by offensive actions, at a reasonable cost, the best alternative* is to develop a defensive system that can defeat the enemy's offense. The enclave deployment does that. It has proved sufficiently strong to defeat the enemy when he has chosen to contest the deployment.

But the deterioration of Thanh My Trung demonstrated that there are gradations of security according to the nature of the deployment, even within the populated areas. Battalions located on and patrolling from bare hills do prevent the enemy main forces from settling undisturbed in the populated areas. They do not, however, prevent the occasional incursions of enemy units intent upon attacking targets having a psychological or a reprisal value. Thus, people associated with the GVN cause need close and continuous security, not the assurance that some VC units in the hills are being harassed. Even the presence of friendly forces on a nearby hill cannot afford sufficient protection unless the GVN agents have developed a systematic strategy that will make them the equal of their opponents.

The author's objection to the enclave deployment as detailed here is that it did not go far enough in evolving a strategy from one of VC attrition to one of GVN improvement. The deployment of U.S. forces in the populated areas is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the establishment of a successful area-security system in South Vietnam.

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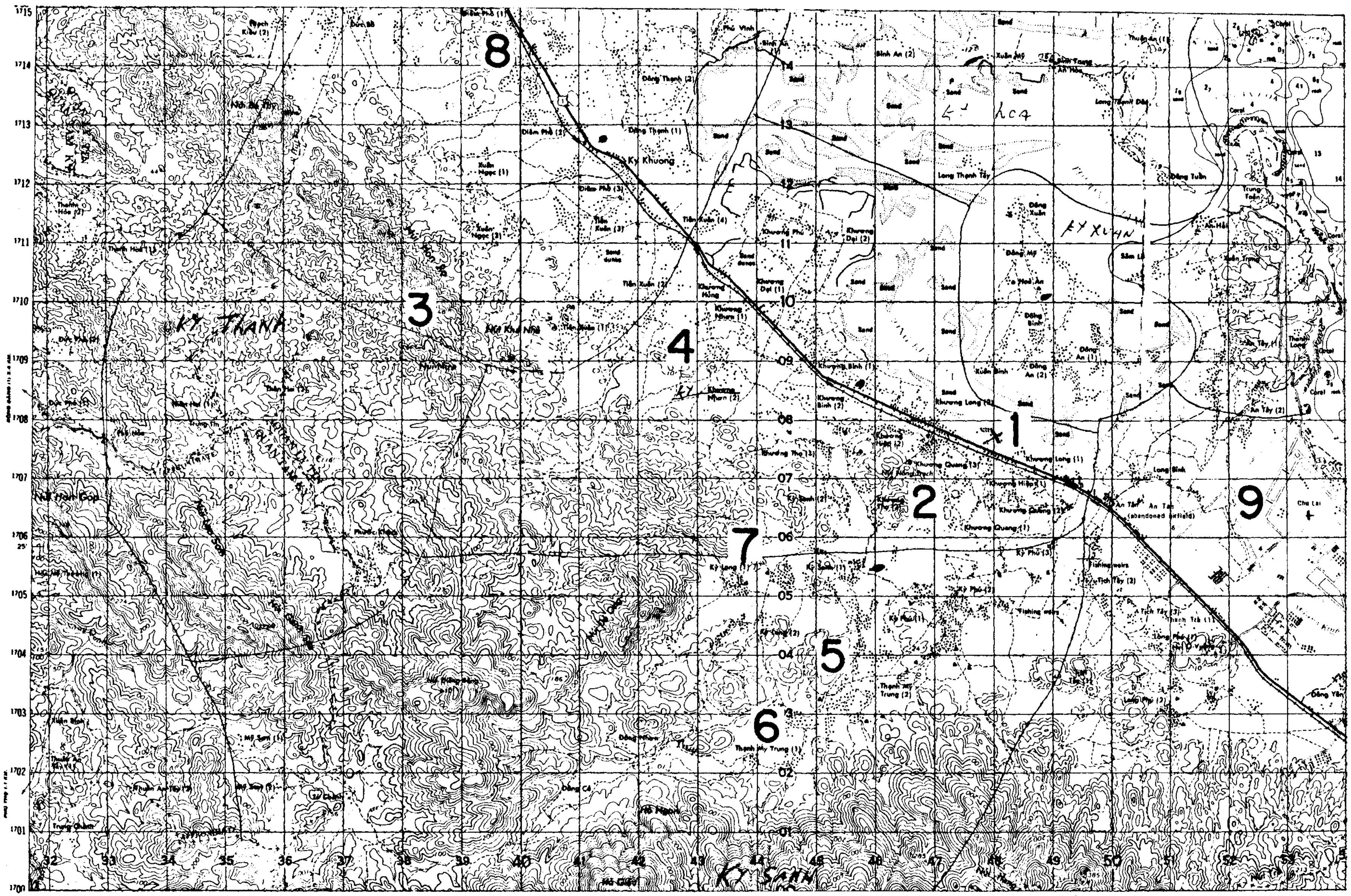
*Obviously, it is not a question of strict alternatives as much as complementary efforts; the question is one of how to allocate resources properly to each task and how to use them wisely.

American forces in Ly Tin concentrated on destroying or deterring an enemy, when the heart of the matter lay in structuring a security system by working with the GVN establishment, some of whose members were corrupt and didn't want to improve, but many of whose members, especially among the PFs, were bewildered, beaten men who didn't know how to improve.

Ly Tin should have been a case study in a learning process. Had it been recognized that the GVN agents were not going to improve automatically through the presence of U.S. forces, other plans of action should have been made. It is not advisable to do the job for the GVN agents if the enemy cannot be completely destroyed. On the other hand, it is certainly not sufficient to give them advice, better weaponry, and a pat on the back, and expect them to do alone next year what they have been unable to do alone for the past five years.

A security system has to be set up in the populated areas which incorporates, not ignores, the GVN agents. Americans must play a decisive role as participants in this system, with a share of the action and especially of the authority in the incorporation of the system; but their role must be self-eliminating as the South Vietnamese assume more and more of the responsibility. The proof of stability in Vietnam will not be the cessation of raids such as those related in this Memorandum--these raids will continue for at least another decade, to one extent or another--but the establishment of a stable system against which the raids are of no avail.

Such a stable system did not exist in Ly Tin in August 1966; neither did it exist in August 1968.



Ly Tin district, Quang Tin Province, South Vietnam