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MISC

AMBUSH REACTION

FROM

INTERVIEW WITH FORMER RECON

PLATOON LEADER 1ST BN 50TH INF (MECHANIZED)

CAPTAIN JAMES H. LAMBERT [REDACTED]

AMBUSH REACTION - INTERVIEW WITH RECONNAISSANCE

PLATOON LEADER, 1ST BN, 50TH INF (MECH)

(760 words)

A. A brief descriptive, narrative of how a mechanized infantry platoon reacted with great success when ambushed by an enemy force of approximately twice its size.

B. Provides a good illustration of how the overwhelming firepower (1 cal .50 and two M60 machineguns per vehicle) of the modified M113s in Vietnam were used with great success against the enemy, even when the enemy had the initiative.

C. A very good example of shock action provided for by the modified APC used in a tank-like role in Vietnam.

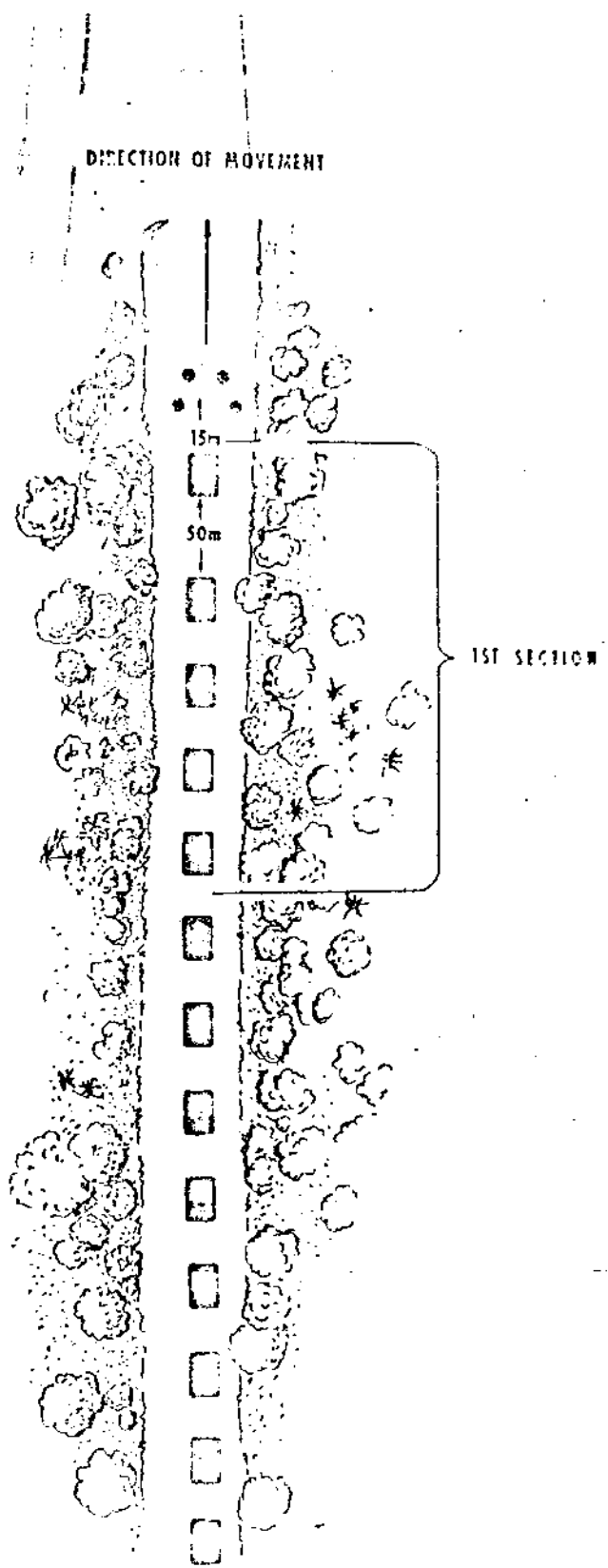


FIGURE 1.

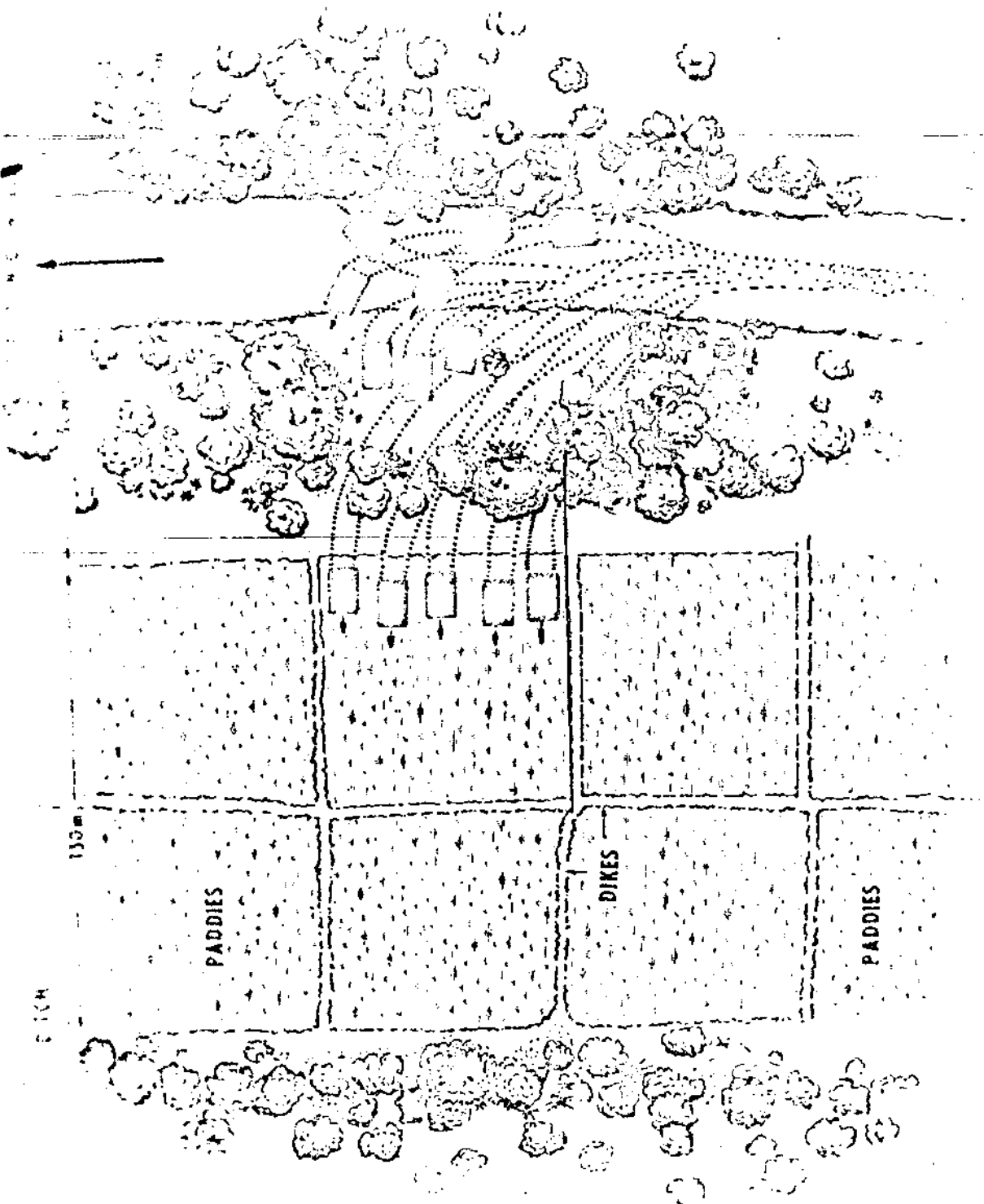


FIGURE 2

~~SECRET~~ the Reconnaissance Platoon of the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry (Mechanized), departed Phan Thiet with a multipurpose mission. The platoon was to conduct search-and-destroy operations in the Thien Gaio area, approximately 30 kilometers north of Phan Thiet, in the II Corps area. Intelligence sources reported that the enemy presence was represented by local force VC and NVA cadre. In addition to this primary mission, the platoon was to protect the local Vietnamese farmers from the VC, and deter the VC tax collectors during the harvesting time. The enemy was reportedly well armed with AK 37's, light machineguns, 60-mm mortars, 82-mm mortars, and rocket launchers.

The platoon was organized into two sections of four tracks each, all M113A1's converted to armored cavalry assault vehicles. In addition to these eight tracks, the platoon's vehicles also included the platoon leader's track, the platoon sergeant's track, an 81-mm mortar track, a medic track, and a flame track with a service vehicle. Each platoon track carried a crew of four: driver, track commander (.50-caliber machinegunner), and two M60 machinegunners. Attached forces carried their normal crews.

Departing at approximately 1300 hours, the platoon began movement along a hard packed dirt road which had had no US traffic on it in three years. The terrain along the route varied from medium forest, extending up to the side of the road, to open, dry rice paddies.

The platoon advanced along the road in a column formation. (See figure 1.) The lead track was preceded by a dismounted minesweeping team composed of two minesweepers and two riflemen. Movement was slow through the unfamiliar area, as the troops of the platoon were constantly on the alert for enemy activity. Shortly, the platoon had an opportunity to demonstrate its aggressiveness and firepower.

At approximately 1400 hours, the minesweeping team reported sighting several armed people 50 meters west of the road. Simultaneously, the team and lead elements of the platoon were taken under fire by small arms, automatic weapons, and 60-mm mortar fire. The enemy force, estimated at 50 local VC, were firing from positions behind paddy dikes. Immediately upon contact, the platoon returned fire and moved into the attack. (See figure 2.) The lead section moved forward, recovered the sweep team, maneuvered into a line formation, and swept toward the enemy position with the .50-caliber and M60 machineguns putting out a heavy volume of fire.

The second section, with the attached elements, deployed forward in a herringbone formation on the road, with the mortar track setting up in the clearing along the side. The flame track remained at the mortar position, ready to lend support as necessary. As the tracks

moved swiftly toward the enemy positions, the enemy fire slackened and the VC broke and ran. Some of the enemy troops attempted to take cover behind paddy dikes, or concealed themselves behind light brush in the area. However, the tremendous punch of the .50-caliber guns routed them. Some VC were killed when the bullets passed through the earthen dikes and found their victims. One enemy soldier was struck down by a .50-caliber bullet which entered a radio carried on his back and exited from the front of his body. With the overwhelming firepower cutting down their comrades in an amazingly short period of time, the demoralized and panic-stricken VC fled the field.

Ten minutes after first contact, helicopter gunships called in by the platoon leader began to strafe and pour rocket fire into the wooded area 200 meters west of the road. The enemy, however, had moved farther to the north and the strikes were ineffectual. The Reconnaissance Platoon tracks were prevented from pursuing by a ditch at the west end of the paddies. Reorganizing, the platoon began to gather the 15 enemy dead, along with 7 prisoners, one a female platoon leader.

After-action information revealed that the VC were planning to spring their ambush on an RF/PF platoon which was patrolling along the road from

the north. This accounts for the fact that the enemy had no antiarmor weapons to use. Without the lightning reaction and overwhelming fire superiority gained by the US troops at the opening shot, the result might not have been the same. Most certainly, the Reconnaissance Platoon would have ~~been defeated by the enemy's superior armor.~~ The decisive factors in the encounter are readily apparent: (1) The US forces were well trained, and reacted automatically, a life-saving ingredient in an ambush; (2) the overwhelming amount of automatic weapons fire available from the armored cavalry vehicle; and (3) the sheer power and demoralizing effect of caliber .50 machineguns.

After completing the necessary after-action procedures, the Reconnaissance Platoon continued on its mission, satisfied that the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry (Mechanized), had introduced itself to the local enemy in a most outstanding manner.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The article "Ambush Reaction" was based on an interview conducted by the monograph project office at the Infantry School, with Captain James H. Lambert, former Platoon Leader with 1st Bn (Mech) 50th Infantry 173d Airborne Brigade.