

MECHANIZED INFANTRY IN VIETNAM: OPERATIONS
OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 50TH MECHANIZED INFANTRY
IN BINH THUAN PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM
FROM 30 AUGUST 1969 TO 10 JULY 1970 (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE).

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview. By the latter part of August 1969, the military and political situation in southern II Corps required a realignment of US forces in the area. The 1st Battalion, 50th Mechanized Infantry was detached from the 173d Airborne Brigade and moved from Binh Dinh Province to Binh Thuan Province.

B. Scope. The operations of this battalion from the period of 30 August 1969 (when the battalion moved to Binh Thuan Province) until 10 July 1970 is the concern of this monograph. I shall review how the mechanized infantry conducted its operations.

C. Objectives. I shall examine the battalion's operation in order to determine how mechanized infantry was employed in Vietnam. I shall try to determine how mechanized infantry should be employed in a counterinsurgent environment.

D. Method of Development. I shall conduct this study in the chronological order of events.

II. BODY

A. MACV and I Field Force Vietnam Considerations. In early August 1969, Task Force South was responsible for US Army forces in Binh Thuan and Lam Dong Provinces which are the two southernmost provinces in II Corps. The task force had the 3d Battalion, 503 (Airborne) Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade at Ba Loc in Lam Dong Province; Task Force 1st Battalion, 506 Infantry, 101st Airborne Division collocated with Task Force South at Phan Thiet in the southern part of Binh Thuan Province; the 2d Squadron, 1st Armored Cavalry located at Song Mao in northern Binh Thuan Province; and combat support and combat service support units to support the ground troops. The military situation had stabilized in Lam Dong Province, and Army planners felt that the Republic of Vietnam forces in that province were capable of controlling the enemy. Furthermore, General Barnes, 173d Airborne Brigade Commander, wanted to get the 3d Battalion, 503 Infantry back with the brigade in Binh Dinh Province to reduce the administrative and logistics problem of having a battalion located so far from his brigade. The 1st Battalion, 50th Mechanized Infantry, which was supporting the 173d's pacification mission in Binh Dinh Province, was not being employed to take advantage of the mobility and firepower of a mechanized battalion. The I Field Force commander decided to move the 3d Battalion (Airborne), 503 Infantry to Binh Dinh Province and the 1st Battalion, 50th Mechanized Infantry to Binh Thuan Province. This gave Task Force South two battalions to provide security to the populous areas of the province and one battalion to conduct strike operations against the enemy located in the mountains and jungles.

B. The Existing Situation. The Viet Cong had a military region headquarters, two main force battalions, four or five local force companies, and numerous local guerrilla units located in the province.

The main force battalions were well equipped and composed of approximately 80 percent North Vietnamese regulars. The enemy had been increasing his military effort in the province. The Viet Cong had always had a lot of support in the province, but it had been slowly slipping away. Possibly the local Viet Cong leaders felt that they could take over the province. Perhaps it was an effort to insure their continued supply of rice, salt, and fish which they had been able to get in sufficient quantities to feed them and units in III Corps. Whatever the reason the Viet Cong had decided to concentrate their forces in the province.

C. Analysis of the Area of Operations.

1. To understand the battalion's operations, it is necessary to know something of the area of operations. Binh Thuan is the southernmost province of II Corps tactical zone. It is bounded by Binh Tuy Province on the west (III Corps tactical zone), Lam Dong on the northwest, Thuyen Duc on the north, and Ninh Thuan on the northeast. Although all but a fraction of Binh Thuan's population inhabits the coastal plains, the southern tip of the Hoanh Son Cozdiller mountain range falls within the province. Phan Thiet, capitol and principal city, lies 140 km east of Saigon on the sea. Its harbor is poor and supports only a local fishing industry and junk traffic. Phan Thiet lies along the path of Highway 1 and the coastal railway. However, the railway was not in operation. Highway 1 was open to daylight traffic, but travelers were subject to Viet Cong taxes. The primary military and administrative lines of communication with the province was by air and sea.

2. The best estimate of Binh Thuan's population is over 250,000. Phan Thiet's population is about 75,000. There are two population centers within the province. The first, and most important to the battalion, can be described by an approximate right triangle with Phan Thiet at its base and Muong Man and Thien Giao forming the other corners (see map). The people had been relocated where they were located along Highway 1 and 8B. While exact figures are not available, the triangle contains the majority of Binh Thuan's population and economic resources and is the heartland of the province's administrative machinery. The second lies along Highway 1 and is composed of the villages of Song Mao, Hoa Da, and Phan Ri.

3. The plains area along the coast is generally flat and lightly vegetated except for the Le Hong Fong forest which begins northeast of Phan Thiet and runs between Highway 1 and the South China Sea to Hoa Da. This area was constantly used as a Viet Cong base area, and its heavy vegetation severely limited aerial observation and restricted movement in armored personnel carriers (APC's). Lanes were being cut through this area by a land clearing company, and shortly after the battalion's arrival, security of this operation would become its responsibility. There are numerous streams in the area, and their steep banks restricted crossing sites. The Viet Cong quickly began to mine these crossing sites, and this would be a problem for the battalion to overcome. The mountainous areas of the province were unsuitable for mechanized operations.

4. The summer monsoon (June through September) brought up to 50 inches of rain in some areas of the province. This restricted the movement of APC's somewhat but was not that great of a problem. However, the rice paddies had to be avoided during this time because of the rice crops. The low ceilings accompanying the monsoon did not adversely effect helicopters in the plains areas but hampered operations in the mountains.

D. Move to Phan Thiet.

1. About 1 week prior to the move, the APC's were brought back to the battalion rear while the companies continued to operate. The tracks, with a driver and track commander (TC), were convoyed to Quin Nhon 35 miles to the south. A general support maintenance battalion was tasked to give inspection and perform any maintenance needed on the battalion's vehicles. This maintenance period would become important because there were no supporting maintenance facilities in Binh Thuan Province.

2. After the battalion was relieved of its mission, the rifle companies and selected support personnel were flown to Phan Thien in C-130 aircraft. They carried sufficient equipment to operate as light infantry until the heavy equipment arrived. The vehicles and other heavy equipment were moved by landing ship transports (LST) from Quin Nhon to Phan Thiet. The entire battalion was moved in a 3-day period ending on 2 September.

E. Operations.

1. Initially, the battalion area of operation (AO) was Thien Gao district (see map) which was the principal population center in the province. The battalion's mission was to provide security for the Thien Gao/Phan Thiet area. The 1st Battalion, 506 Infantry was conducting strike operations in the mountains northwest of Phan Thiet, and one company was securing land clearing operation northeast of Phan Thiet in the Le Hong Fong forest. The battalion's AO was divided into three companies' AO.

2. The battalion had not conducted mechanized operations in some time, and it would be several months before they would be making maximum utilization of the available firepower and mobility. As is probably the normal procedure, the battalion was overcaution in the beginning. The companies were operating in company strength with occasional platoon size patrols during the day and three squad size ambushes from the company position each night.

3. A week after arriving, the landing clearing company was ambushed for the second time. The infantry that was securing it could not keep up with the bulldozers. The battalion was tasked with the security mission with the hope that the mechanized infantry could secure them. The landing clearing company consisted of 20 D-9 bulldozers with cutting blades that could rapidly clear the dense jungle areas. The mechanized company was task organized with one armored cavalry platoon and a platoon of artillery (two 155 howitzers SP) in direct support. The landing clearing company was clearing lanes through the dense Le Hong Fong forest to permit aerial observation, provide numerous landing zones (LZ), and permit rapid movement of APC's in the area.

4. The mechanized company was able to secure the landing clearing company without any problems. Although the company only made a few contacts, they destroyed a number of supply bases and one large hospital complex. Another reason that mechanized infantry is well suited for this type mission is because of their understanding of the resupply and maintenance required.

5. In this type of warfare, there is no FEBA trace and no rear areas that afford a relatively secure area to operate a trains concept of resupply. As was the case with most combat units in Vietnam, the battalion depended on helicopters for resupply. The resupply of fuel, which averaged 3,500 gallons daily, was the biggest problem. Fuel was resupplied in 500-gallon blivots that were sling loaded on CH-47 Chinooks. The mechanized company vehicle track recovery (UTR) was used to lift the blivots and gravity feed the fuel. The battalion coordinated with the other units to insure maximum utilization of the aircraft resupply the landing clearing operation. The landing clearing company required 1 day's maintenance for every 3 days of operations which also permitted the mechanized company to pull its maintenance. In addition, the maintenance sections of both companies could help each other.

6. In October, the battalion began encountering a large number of mines and booby traps. These were designed to counter the effectiveness of the APC. Some of the booby traps had trip wires 12-15 feet in the air that were to be tripped by the antennas on the APC's. The crossing sites on the streams were being mined with large antitank mines. To counteract this, the floors of the APC's were sandbagged to reduce the chance of secondary explosions and fires. In addition, likely mining sites were checked out by dismounted troops and a mine conscious attitude instilled in everyone. Although the mines were the source of some irritation, they did not significantly effect operations.

7. In October and November with the monsoon ended and a better knowledge of the area, the battalion began to operate in platoon size elements. This permitted the battalion to cover larger areas and move out deeper into the contested areas. The battalion began to integrate airmobile and mechanized operations which successfully complemented each other. The number of enemy contacts and KIA steadily increased during this period. The 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry departed the province during the middle of November to join the 101st in I Corps.

8. The Viet Cong decided to make their move in December. Bravo Company was operating northeast of Phan Thiet with the mission of opening and securing Highway 1 from Highway 403 to Luong Son on 8 and 10 December. After opening the road on the 8th without incident, the company spent the 9th conducting operations in the area. One of the platoons inserted a ranger team about 12 kilometers north of the road and returned. About 1600 hours, the company began moving to set up a new position for the night when it received word that the rangers had spotted two companies of NVA regulars. Although the vegetation was fairly thick and there were numerous streams in the area, the company was able to make the move in 30 minutes. The NVA were located in a small valley, and while gunships sealed one end of the valley, the mechanized infantry pushed through from the other end. The valley was only wide enough for one platoon on line, and this platoon made maximum use of its firepower and mobility to destroy and maintain contact with the enemy. The other platoons swept the area, took prisoners, and captured weapons and equipment. The aero rifle platoon of Delta Troop 2-1 Cavalry conducted an airmobile assault behind the fleeing enemy to act as a blocking force while B Company pushed them into them. The battle lasted well into the night, and what was left of the enemy was able to break contact under the cover of darkness. The majority of the two enemy companies were killed without a single friendly casualty.

9. On 11 December, the Viet Cong set up a battalion size ambush 3 miles north of Thien Gao to ambush an RF company. However, the scout platoon was moving in that area, and the Viet Cong initiated their ambush on them. The scout platoon violently attacked the flank of the ambush. A Company was moving out of LZ Betty, 20 kilometers away, and they were able to move to the battle in 40 minutes and assist the scout platoon. The scout platoon was outnumbered, but they were able to contain the enemy because of their firepower and mobility.

10. During the early part of January, the battalion continued its operations around the populated areas with little contact. Intelligence indicated that the enemy was moving into his base areas in the mountains north of Phan Thiet. The battalion conducted an airmobile operation in this area that lasted for 40 days. As this paper is concerned with mechanized operations, it should be sufficient to note that a mechanized unit can successfully conduct airmobile operations. One troop from 2-1 Cavalry was moved to Thien Gao district to provide security for the populated areas.

11. In March, the Viet Cong shift his emphasis to the area around Song Mao. The 2-1 Cavalry reconnaissance team spotted a VC battalion, but the squadron was unable to react to it. B Company was placed under operation control to 2-1 Cavalry to conduct an airmobile operation in the mountains north of Song Mao. On the second day of the operation, VC sappers attacked the squadron base camp at Song Mao. The area northwest of Song Mao is a flat, relatively open valley that leads back into the mountains, and the sappers withdrew in this direction. The VC had two battalions located in this area to ambush the forces pursuing the sappers. The squadron reacted with two troops mounted, one going up the eastern side and one to the west. Two RF companies pushed from the south, and elements of the 44th ARVN Regiment conducted an airmobile assault to cut off the sappers. The 44th ARVN Regiment landed just to the rear of the left flank of the ambush. The enemy moved to the southeast and he was surrounded. The APC's and tanks of the cavalry troops attacked from the flanks. Of the 160 enemy killed, the majority were killed by the cavalry squadron. Again this showed that the mobility and firepower of a mechanized unit is devastating.

12. In May, the 2-1 Cavalry Squadron was moved to An Kae to support the 4th Infantry Division in its operations in Cambodia. This left the entire province to be covered by the battalion. One company went to Song Mao, one operated around Thien Gao district, and one company was required for base defense at LZ Betty. This meant that companies were operating in what had been battalion size areas of operation. My platoon had an AO of 30 by 40 kilometers. Communications are vital in this type operation overextended ranges, and the battalion operated a radio relay on Ta Dong Mountain just north of Phan Thiet along Highway 1. This was a large mountain (386 meters high) that dominated the coastal plains and provided excellent communication throughout the province.

13. During this period, the enemy, although greatly depleted in strength, attempted numerous operations to try and improve their position and to create pressure to cause us to pull troops out of Cambodia. However, the mechanized units with the mobility and firepower afforded by the APC's were able to control the situation and inflict further casualties.

III. ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Mechanized infantry can be a highly effective force during a counter-insurgent conflict such as Vietnam. The firepower and mobility of this type force enables it to fight and win against a numerical superior but unsophisticated enemy. Furthermore, its mobility enables mechanized infantry to cover large areas of operations without the use of large numbers of aviation assets. As proven in several examples, mechanized infantry can quickly react to the enemy and provide more firepower than an equal size airmobile force. Airmobile and mechanized operations can complement each other while exploiting the unique advantages of both forces. A mechanized unit when provided the aviation assets can successfully conduct airmobile operations.

The area of operations for a mechanized unit should be carefully chosen to take maximum advantage of its mobility and firepower. While the area does not have to be flat and open, it should not be so restrictive that the mobility cannot be exploited. Commanders should not be lulled into a false sense of security of the protection afforded by the APC. Even an unsophisticated enemy can devise means to destroy the APC. In addition, they should not become so engrossed with mechanized operations that they fail to operate as straight infantry when it is more advantageous.

Mechanized operations in this type of warfare present unique logistic and communication problems. Logistics is the backbone of mechanized operations, and commanders must carefully utilize their assets to accomplish it. There is no established doctrine to accomplish resupply in this type of operation, and commanders must use their initiative to establish procedures to efficiently resupply their units. The units must plan their communications to insure it is effective over the long ranges required.

IV. RECOMMENDATION

That mechanized forces should be employed in counter guerrilla operations.

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