

Cordon and Search Operations in Phuoc Tuy Province

LTCOL J. A. Warr.

Royal Australian Infantry

Lieutenant-Colonel Warr enlisted in the A.I.F. in 1944. After graduating from the Royal Military College Duntroon in December 1947 he served with BCOF in Japan and 3 RAR in Korea, where he was wounded. He was adjutant of the 8/7 Inf Bn CMF at Ballarat from 1952 to 1955. He then served at AHQ Melbourne (Infantry) until attending Staff College at Queenscliff in 1957. He was on exchange with the Canadian Army (1960-62). Other appointments include Coy Comd 1 RAR, 2IC 5 RAR Holsworthy and CO 5 RAR at Holsworthy and in Vietnam.

Introduction

THE war in South Vietnam is being fought with the aim of controlling the people, as the side which controls the people must eventually control the government and the country.

As a basis for achieving this aim, the communist, wherever possible, have established their own administration at village and hamlet level. This is achieved by creating in each village a cadre, usually composed of dedicated communists, whose tasks are to discredit the government, indoctrinate the villagers with communist propaganda and build an organization to support the Viet Cong forces in the field. The methods used by the cadres to obtain the co-operation and support of the villagers are, brutal but effective. The headmen, schoolteachers, policemen and local administrators are either eliminated or their families killed or tortured if they fail to co-operate. The cadre is also used to recruit young men and women into the Viet Cong forces and to provide labour when required.

The French Army in Indo-China found it almost impossible to operate in such an environment where they were like goldfish in a bowl with the Viet Minh almost invariably being aware of their intentions and all movement being reported. Ho Chi Minh considered that the establishment of the cadres was of prime importance as they would allow his guerrilla forces to operate like fish in a sea of peasants. It is suggested that if the village cadres were eliminated and the people secured against Viet Cong influence, the major advantages enjoyed by the Viet Cong would disappear. Unable to use the villages as operational bases the Viet Cong forces would be isolated from the people and their military effectiveness reduced as their ability to obtain food, tax and intelligence decreased. The Viet Cong would not be able to visit their homes and families and their morale would be reduced accordingly. In addition the villagers would not be subjected to communist propaganda.

If the Viet Cong lost their ability to use the villages for their own purposes, they would be compelled to operate from bases in the mountains, swamps or thick jungle and, while they remained in such bases, would be unable to achieve their aim and would therefore be ineffective except as a threat. To become effective, the Viet Cong would have to leave their bases and seek battle with the government forces. Such battles would, as a result, almost certainly be in areas where the great fire power of the Allied forces could be employed most effectively. If the Viet Cong chose to remain in their bases they could, be harassed by air and artillery which, as has already been illustrated in South Vietnam, will reduce their morale and increase the number of *Hoi Chanh*, (Viet Cong who surrender).

With the elimination of the Viet Cong cadres, government armed forces and police (but not Allied troops) must be employed to secure the villagers against Viet Cong activities and the movement of the people distribution of food must be controlled. Then the government will be in a position to re-establish local administration, including medical services, education and transport; civil aid can also be commenced.

The re-establishment of government control should also convince the villagers that the Viet Cong lacks the ability to secure, administer and assist the people. Once the villagers have been convinced this will be passed onto the Viet Cong through their families in the villages and the number of *Hoi Chanh* will further increase.

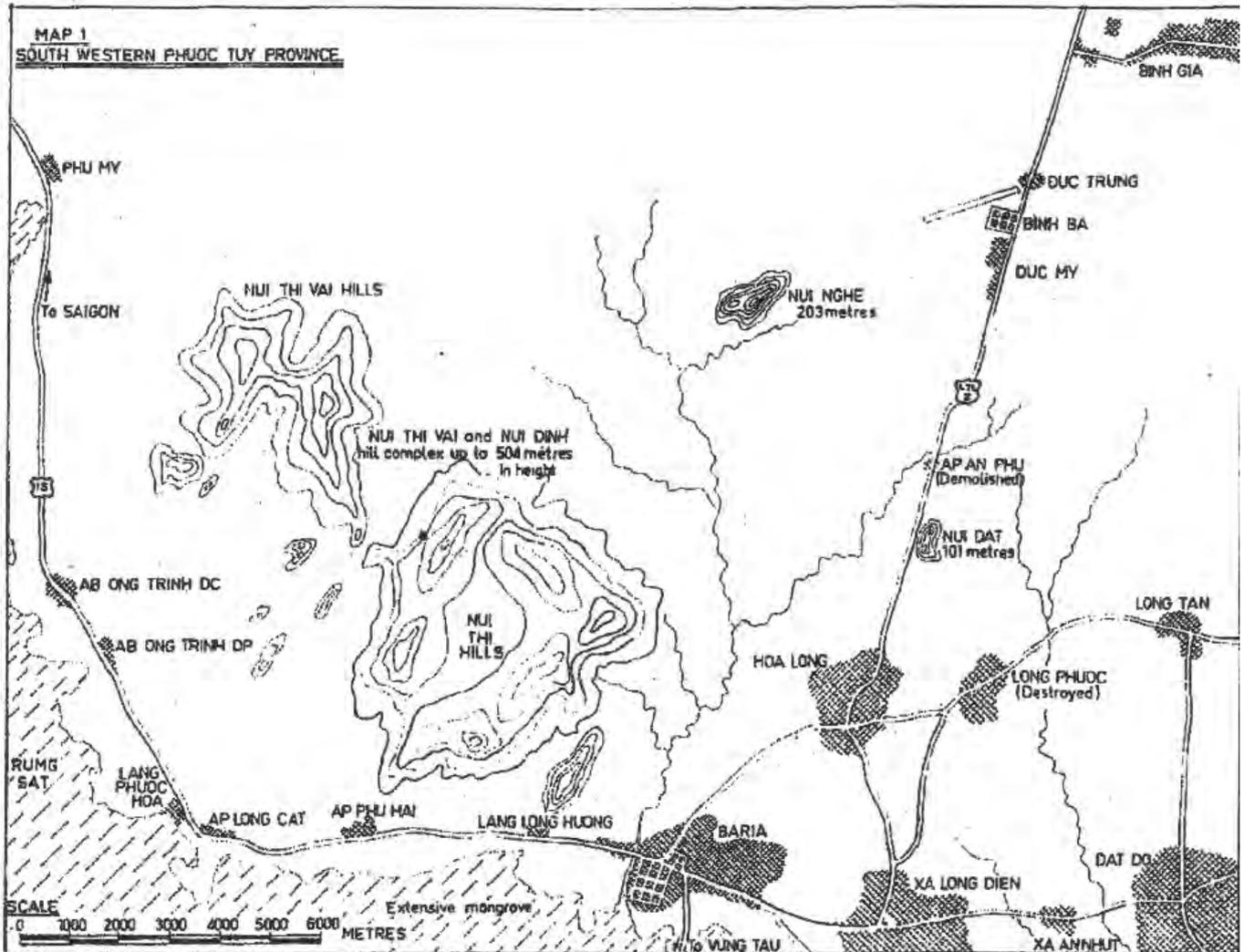
In addition, with the added security gained by the elimination of Viet Cong support in the villages, increased intelligence gained from the *Hoi Chanh* and the villagers, more effective operations can

be mounted against the Viet Cong bases. Such operations should not be mounted until the Viet Cong cadres are destroyed and the people secured.

During its service in Vietnam in 1966—67, 5 RAR cordoned and searched villages on nine occasions in order to remove Viet Cong cadres. As a result of these operations, 5 RAR devised a number of techniques, particularly methods of control of the people. This article will describe cordon and search operations in three villages, each of which produced different problems in its planning and execution. The operations were:

- Operation 'Sydney Two'-The cordon and search of Duc My village on 20 July 1966
- Operation 'Holsworthy' -The cordon and search of Binh Ba village on 9 August 1966
- Operation 'Yass'-.The cordon and search of Phuoc Hoa village on 7 November 1966

Map 1 illustrates the location of these villages in Phuoc Tuy Province.



CORDON AND SEARCH OF DUC MY VILLAGE

The Village of Duc My is one of the Binh Ba estate villages situated on Route 2 about 3 miles north of the First Australian Task Force base of Nui Dat. These villages are

- Duc Trung - population approximately 700,
- Binh Ba - population approximately 1,800, and
- Duc My - population approximately 500.

Duc My is separated from Binh Ba to the north by 500 yards of clean rubber plantation. Before the operation it was known that 97 Viet Cong had relatives or friends in these Binh Ba villages and, of these, 26 visited Duc My occasionally. The attitude of the local population was pro-Viet Cong due to the absence of government control for several years.

Operation 'Sydney One' which required 5 RAR to clear the area to the west of Duc My commenced on 4 July and continued until 14 July. For this operation, a base (code-named 'Tennis') was

established about a mile south of the southern part of Duc My village. Tennis was occupied by battalion headquarters, one rifle company, the assault pioneer platoon, anti-tank platoon, the mortar platoon, less one section, 105 Field Battery and one troop of 1 Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron. As a preliminary to the cordon and search of Duc My village, the establishment of the base at Tennis had the following advantages:

- It allowed 13 days (later increased to 16 days) for the Viet Cong and villagers in Duc My to become accustomed to the presence of the battalion so close to the village and lulled them into a false sense of security.
- It permitted easy air and ground reconnaissance of the village and approach routes without unduly arousing Viet Cong suspicions.
- It allowed the battalion to concentrate at Tennis immediately before commencement of the operation without affecting the operation's security.

Duc My consisted of about 80 houses, widely scattered on the west side of Route 2. The villagers were mainly Montagnards and the majority were employed as rubber tappers on the Binh Ba estate. A number of banana plantations and mixed gardens were located in and around the village and these made movement difficult at night. The perimeter of the village was poorly defined except on the north side where a broad track ran along the edge of the rubber plantation. Air reconnaissance indicated a number of bunkers in the village.

Forces Available

The following forces were available for the operation: 5 RAR about 550 strong; the remainder were required to defend the battalion base area, or were in hospital, on leave, or attending language courses.

Under command: One troop of 1 Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron, and one mortar section of the squadron. Elements of 3 Field Engineer troop.

In direct Support: 105 Field Battery.

In support: One company 6 RAR; two Sioux aircraft; four RAAF Iroquois; six Vietnamese policemen; Vietnamese interpreters.

Considerations

Duc My village was scattered over an area of 600 metres from east to west and 1,200 metres from north to south. It was considered that each rifle company in the cordon could cover a distance of approximately 450 metres, with two platoons forward in the cordon, each with three sections forward, and men positioned in pairs at 22 metre intervals. A platoon would be held in depth some 75 to 100 metres in rear of the forward two platoons of each company. Thus, if all four rifle companies were used, the complete village could not be cordoned. It was therefore decided to place the cordon as indicated in Map 2. This plan had the disadvantage of excluding from the cordon a small number of scattered houses to the east and south but would permit most of the cordon to be along easily located tracks and tree lines.

The use of all rifle companies in the cordon required that:

- 105 Field Battery (Major P. Tedder) be returned to Nui Dat base area as troops would not be available to protect the gun area at Tennis.
- One of the rifle companies be relieved by armoured personnel carriers or other troops after the cordon had been closed to allow the rifle company to search the village and apprehend suspects.
- One of the rifle companies be held as battalion reserve while the cordon was moving into position. 'A' Company (Major A. P. Cassidy), mounted on armoured personnel carriers was nominated for this task.

The next problem was to determine the time that the cordon would be in position. It was decided that the final movement of the companies into their cordon positions should be carried out immediately after first light. This would permit the movement to be carried out with the greatest possible speed and reduce the danger of companies clashing with each other as they closed the

cordon. If the cordon companies commenced moving into their positions at 0545 hours, the time of first light, it was estimated that the cordon would be completed by 0615 hours. A move at first light into the final positions permitted the use of armoured personnel carriers, armed helicopters, Sioux helicopter and a Cessna light aircraft fitted with loud-speakers to advise the villagers to remain calm and stay in their houses etc. However, the operation taught that a cordon must be in position before first light for at that time the normal life in the villages commences with people moving out to begin tapping rubber trees, moving goods to market and cattle to the areas.

The next consideration was the choice of the routes of approach to the Village. As the cordon was to be completed just after first light it was necessary for most of the movement to be at night. While it produced problems, it also increased the likelihood of achieving surprise for, at that time, the Viet Cong accepted that Allied troops did not move at night.

The main problems posed by the move were seen to be:

- The need for reconnaissance to confirm routes into assembly areas and into the final cordon positions. In some areas the eastern and southern cordons would pass between houses.
- Control at night when hand signals could not be used. This problem was partly overcome by using a toggle rope tied to equipment on the back of each soldier for the soldier following behind to hold. Radio was used to control and confirm the movement of companies. All radio users spoke in whispers and the use of radio was kept to a minimum.
- Control and deployment of the battalion if a major contact occurred while the companies were moving into position (when it would not be in the best posture to meet such a threat). The CO's party (CO, BC, IO, batmen and operators) moved immediately behind the leading company. In addition 'A' company, mounted on armoured personnel carriers, was made the battalion reserve and in an emergency could have moved in the vehicles at night along Route 2 to support 'B' Company. (Major B. McQualter) and 'D' Company (Major P. Greenhalgh).
- Security. If the Viet Cong learnt of the intention to cordon and search the village, they would not only have left it, but might also have laid booby traps and ambushes on the probable approach routes.

The initial plan was to move all the companies except the company which was to cordon the north side, into position via a re-entrant running into the village from the south-west as this route would have assisted in navigation and provided covered approach. The final company was to move by armoured personnel carrier along Route 2 and close the cordon on the north side at the last minute

On the night 14-15 July, reconnaissance parties of company second-in-commands (Captains Bade, Milligan and Boxall) under command of Captain O'Neill and including company guides and representatives from the armoured personnel carrier troop checked the proposed routes to assembly areas and cordon positions. As a result, the proposed route along the re-entrant was found to be unsuitable for the movement of large numbers of troops at night due to thick undergrowth and fallen dead timber which would have made silent movement impossible.

Plan

As a result of the reconnaissance it was decided to move 'C' Company (Major N. Granter) into its cordon position from the west. 'B' and 'D' Companies and the CO's party would move from the east and 'A' Company with battalion headquarters (under Major M. Carroll), with the mortars and the anti-tank platoon on armoured personnel carriers would move from the south at the last possible moment. 'A' Company would also be battalion reserve unit the cordon was closed, when the armoured personnel carrier troop and anti-tank platoon would take over this role. Once 'A' Company was in position, the armoured personnel carrier troop would relieve 'D' Company of the role of cordoning the north side of the village.

Two sections of mortars were to move in mortar armoured personnel carriers to an area between the village and Route 2 while the assault pioneer platoon was to provide protection for battalion headquarters and construct enclosures for suspects and villagers awaiting interrogation.

On 15 July the operation was deferred when 'B' and 'C' Companies returned to the 1 ATF base to participate in Operation 'Brisbane'. On the night of the 16-17 a further reconnaissance was carried

out to confirm the proposed new routes. On the 19th 'B' and 'C' Companies rejoined 5 RAR at Tennis and the battalion moved that afternoon to cordon Duc My next morning.

Security

The following precautions were taken to ensure that the intention to cordon the village was not disclosed to the Viet Cong:

- No movement of ground forces north of Tennis towards the village was permitted except for the reconnaissance parties of 14-15 and 16-17 July.
- 105 Field Battery was returned to Nui Dat from Tennis during the afternoon of 19 July inside armoured personnel carriers. While the battalion base was located at Tennis there had been frequent but irregular movement of personnel carriers to and from the base. The movement of 19 July should not therefore have caused undue concern to any Viet Cong who observed it as the guns were concealed within the armoured personnel carriers. Tyres from the Italian-made guns were placed onto the guns used by 105 Field Battery on this operation in order to permit the guns to be carried inside the APCs. (It should be noted that the introduction of the twin .30 calibre machine-gun turret has restricted the interior space of the APC and, as a result, it will not take the 105-mm field gun.)
- Air reconnaissance by all company and platoon commanders was permitted over the village up to 16 July. There was a risk that this would alert the Viet Cong in spite of the fact that each flight was allowed to pass over 'Ule village only once and then was required to fly westwards to the area where the battalion operated until 14 July. The deferment of the operation for three days assisted in reducing any suspicion aroused by the air reconnaissances.
- The Vietnamese police and interpreters who were to assist with the search of the village joined the battalion at Tennis during the afternoon of 19 July and were not briefed about their tasks until that time.
- A rear battalion assembly area was selected about 800 metres south of the cordon area. This allowed the battalion less 'C' Company to move from Tennis late in the afternoon of 19 July and arrive in the rear battalion assembly area just at last light when the possibility of contact with woodcutters and other 'civilians' in the area would be reduced. From the rear battalion assembly area it was comparatively easy for 'B' and 'D' Companies to move after last light to their forward assembly areas as the going was through a clean rubber plantation. The rear battalion assembly area was considered to be sufficiently far from Duc My to allow the armoured personnel carrier troop to move into it just before last light, at low speed without being heard. Next morning, however, when the armoured personnel carriers started up at first light, the noise of their motors would be heard by the CO's party 1,400 metres to the north-east. However, at that time, speed was more important than quietness. The direction of movement of the vehicles could not be determined from their sound. 'C' Company was allocated an assembly area about 800 metres to the west of the village. The company could occupy the area by last light on 19 July and the area and the routes into it were such that detection was most unlikely.

Execution

In order to assist the movement by night, all packs were moved in armoured personnel carriers, daylight rehearsals were held at Tennis and companies used toggle ropes to assist soldiers in following the man ahead.

Everything went according to plan until about 0100 hours on 20 July when the leading soldier of 'D' Company, Private Clark, fell 50 feet down a disused well. Fortunately he was rescued unhurt within about 15 minutes.

At 0545 hours 'B' Company commenced to move into its cordon position. Soon afterwards, 4 platoon (2nd-lieutenant Carruthers) met six Viet Cong moving towards them. One Viet Cong was killed, four were wounded (of whom three were captured) and one was captured unhurt; 4 Platoon was unscathed. The captured and wounded Viet Cong were handed over to the reserve platoon and the company closed its portion of the cordon on time.

'A' Company in armoured personnel carriers moved at full speed along Route 2 but experienced some difficulty in crossing the re-entrant to the south-west of the village and one of the armoured personnel carriers became bogged. Some troops then dismounted and ran into position.

The mortars and battalion headquarters (less the CO's party who were with 'D' Company) arrived on time.

The second-in-command (Major S. Maizey) flew overhead at 0615 hours in a Sioux helicopter with two armed UH1B helicopters and the Cessna loud-speaker aircraft.

Minor resistance was encountered in the village. At 0630 hours 'C' Company, on the west side of the cordon, killed one Viet Cong trying to move through the cordon. At 0730 hours another Viet Cong who tried to break the cordon in 'C' Company area was wounded and later he was flushed from a nearby bunker. About 1130 hours an armed Viet Cong, who had been hiding in thick undergrowth in the village, suddenly stood up and ran. He was killed by the 'A' Company cordon with one round.

These contacts emphasized the need for good fire discipline, the ability to recognize our own soldiers quickly, and observation of the following rules of engagement which were issued before the operation:

- Fire only
 - (a.) When fired at.
 - (b) When a suspect is about to commit a hostile act.
 - (c) If a suspect attempts to run through the cordon and fails to halt after being challenged.
 - Don't fire into the cordoned area unless the fire is controlled and the target can be clearly seen.
 - If fired on from a house:
 - (a) Take cover.
 - (b) Call an interpreter forward.
 - (c) Have the interpreter advise the occupants by means of a loud hailer to surrender.
 - (d) If this fails, call in the village chief and have him speak to the householder.
 - (e) If the occupants still refuse to surrender, burn the house (this is the only circumstance under which houses will be burnt).
 - If in doubt, don't shoot.

As a safety measure, all troops wore gold tape in their hats to assist in recognition.

'D' Company, with engineers, seven interpreters, six policemen, the regimental medical officer, the bandmaster, the stretcher-bearer sergeant and a medical team from 1 ATF commenced to clear the village about 0630 hours. By this time the cordon was complete and the loud-speaker aircraft had advised the villagers that they were surrounded and to remain in their houses and obey directions. The village was divided into platoon areas for the search. Half section groups cleared each house in turn, evacuating the males and directing sick villagers to company headquarters for medical treatment. The clearance of the village was completed about 1400 hours.

The assault pioneer platoon constructed three separate barbed wire enclosures at battalion headquarters. Two of the enclosures were provided with screened toilet facilities and the third had a screened interrogation area. The regimental police and intelligence section guarded the cages. All males of Viet Cong military age (12 to 45 years) were evacuated by the clearing company to the north end of the village where the anti-tank platoon and a section of armoured personnel carriers evacuated them to the enclosures.

The Intelligence Officer (Captain D. Willcox), assisted by Vietnamese interpreters, interrogated the men, and suspects were evacuated to the 1st Australian Task Force base by armoured personnel carriers for further interrogation.

The battalion withdrew from the village area late in the afternoon and four ambushes were laid around the village that night but no further contacts occurred.

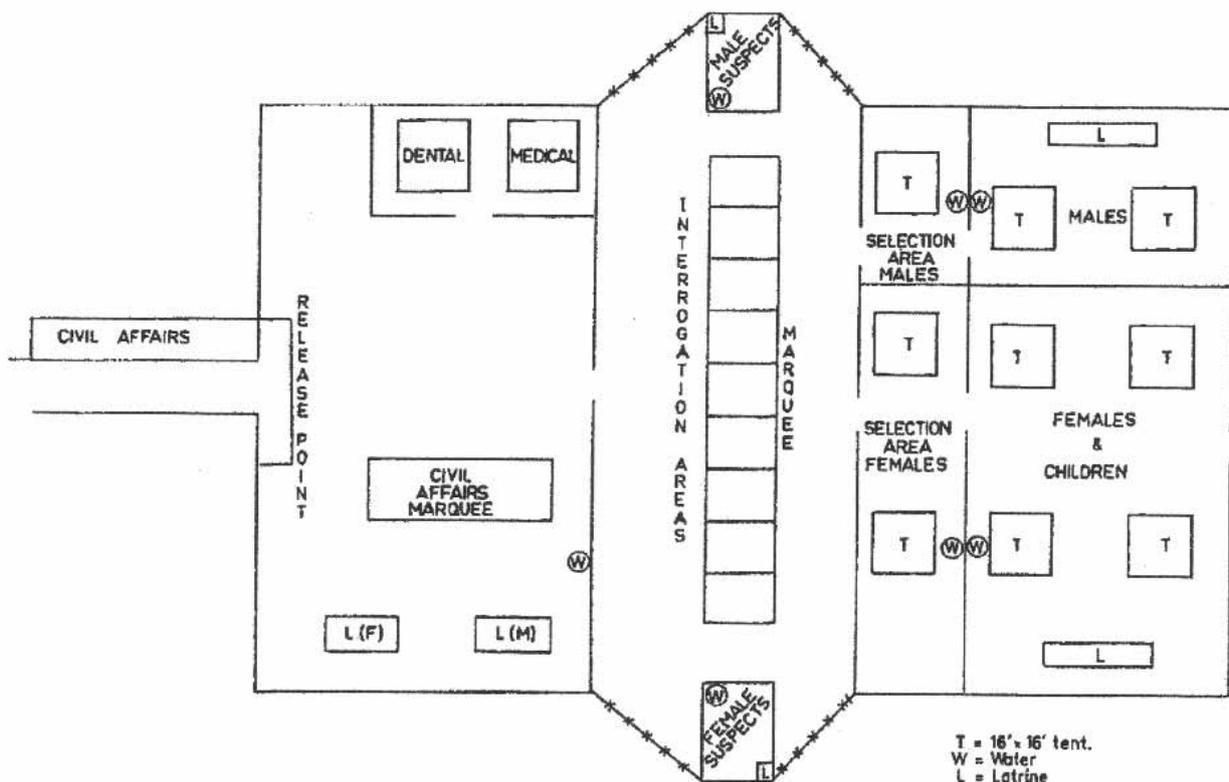
Lessons

As this was the first cordon of a village undertaken by troops of the Australian Task Force in South Vietnam, a great number of lessons were learnt. These lessons included:

- The Success of such an operation depends on meticulous preparation at all levels, sound security and good reconnaissance. As a guide, it is considered that seven clear days are required to plan, prepare and execute a cordon and search of a village.
- The cordon must be in position before first light as this is the time that the Viet Cong leave the villages and rubber tappers commence work. All later cordons undertaken by 5 RAR were in position at least one hour before first light; all were successful and no contacts were made while the cordon was moving into position. The time for the completion of the cordon must also be varied. In December 1966 it was learnt that the Viet Cong at Quang Giao, east of Binh Gia, were leaving their village each morning an hour before first light as they believed the battalion cordons were always completed at that time.
- A more efficient interrogation system was required. In all later cordons Vietnamese interrogation teams were provided and had marked success in locating Viet Cong cadre and sympathizers in the villages.
- Medical, dental and civil aid teams must be available to give assistance to the villagers once the initial search has been completed. Arrangements were improved with each cordon and the final organization is described below.
- Food, water, shelter and latrines must be provided for villagers awaiting interrogation.
- Barbed wire should not be used for compounds as this creates the wrong atmosphere.
- In later cordons, white tape was used, sentries were kept as inconspicuous as possible and, in order to assist in creating a friendly atmosphere, the battalion band played popular Vietnamese and other music.
- Twelve Vietnamese police for each rifle company used to clear the village are required and should be used to give orders to the villagers and to move them. The use of Vietnamese police provides evidence to the villagers that their government is actively engaged in clearing the Viet Cong from their village.

Organization for Interrogation, Distribution of Civil Aid etc.

The diagram below illustrates the layout used by 5 RAR in the final cordons in 1967.



The whole layout could be established by a platoon in about an hour, by which time the first suspects would be arriving from their houses.

The battalion command post should be established a little distance from the interrogation area.

Where sick people and children are encountered and cannot be moved from their houses, battalion headquarters should arrange medical treatment and interrogation in the houses. Civil aid personnel should also visit such houses and assist if possible.

Children should accompany their mothers to the interrogation area.

Villagers must be allowed time to have breakfast before moving to the interrogation area.

When all the people are in the holding area and before interrogation begins, have a Vietnamese senior official explain to the people why they are being interrogated and the procedure to be followed. The use of *Hoi Chanh* to move among the villagers and talk to them has also assisted.

Results

The cordon and search of the village of Duc My resulted in the elimination of the Viet Cong cadre from the village, paved the way for the restoration of Government control and permitted the commencement of civil aid to the villagers.

CORDON AND SEARCH OF BINH BA VILLAGE

The Government's influence in Binh Ba had been eroded gradually since 1961 and its forces were compelled to leave the village in 1964. From then on the village had been controlled by the Viet Cong. It was estimated that perhaps 20 per cent of the population (particularly the younger men) were actively supporting or were sympathetic towards the hard core Viet Cong cadre within the village.

It was accepted that the majority of the village would have collaborated with the Viet Cong and that many had become members of the civil or political organizations or members of the military elements. As a matter of personal survival the villagers would have had little choice but to pay their taxes and provide food and labour. In 1965 one of the village leaders who refused to co-operate with the Viet Cong was taken from his bed late one night and killed on the village soccer field. Several others who had resisted conscription disappeared without trace.

Consequently, it was considered that the political allegiance of most villagers probably was more related to military strength than to ideology.

The enemy force in the area was believed to consist of:

- *Main Force.* 5 Division comprising 274 and 275 Regiments. It was considered unlikely that Main Force units would be uncounted initially in strength in or near Binh Ba during the cordon and search phase of the operation. Small reconnaissance elements might be encountered at any time. It was possible that during the pacification stage, the Main Force units (in conjunction with the Provincial, District and Guerilla Forces) could quickly launch a major attack unless a sizeable force actively patrolled the area surrounding Binh Ba.
- *Provincial Force.* It was believed that the Viet Cong Provincial Headquarters was based in an area a few miles south-east of Binh Ba. The Provincial Mobile Battalion (D445) was considered unlikely to be encountered in strength in or near Binh Ba in the cordon and search phase of the operation. It was believed possible that small reconnaissance elements could be encountered at any time. The 50th Platoon was known to consist of three squads each of eight to ten men and to be in the area and directly subordinate to the Viet Cong Provincial Headquarters. The platoon was armed with Soviet 7.62-mm M1944 rifles, US carbines, possibly three Thompson Sub-machine-guns and M26 grenades. The area of responsibility of the platoon was the forest area on each side of the Inter-Provincial Route 2 in the vicinity of Binh Ba and was about six square kilometres in extent.
- *District Forces.* It was considered unlikely that the Duc Thanh District (C20) Company would be encountered in strength; however, if the cordon force achieved surprise, it could encounter elements of the Binh Ba Village Guerilla Platoon within the village. This platoon consisted of

three squads each of twelve men and was armed with ten Soviet 7.62-mm M1944 rifles, eight US .30 M1 carbines, two German rifles (possibly Mausers 7.92) and four M26 grenades. The task of the platoon was to exercise military control over Binh Ba village.

It can be seen that the intelligence available was far more detailed than that provided in July for the cordon of Duc My village. The additional information was obtained from Viet Cong prisoners and documents taken at Duc My and other Viet Cong captured during Operation Sydney, together with information from other sources.

Apart from the cultivation of minor fruit and vegetable crops, the major source of income for the Binh Ba villagers was the Gallia Rubber Plantation which surrounds the village. The plantation was under French ownership and management. In order to keep the plantation operating the French owner had agreed to pay tax to the Viet Cong.

The clearance of the Viet Cong cadres from Binh Ba and Duc Trung and the subsequent pacification of the villages were aimed at:

- (a) Permitting the Province Chief to re-establish government control in the village and, as a result, depriving the Viet Cong of tax, food and intelligence. The Viet Cong in the village had been taxing the villagers one day's pay and two litres of rice per month.
- (b) Opening up the road from Binh Ba to the Catholic (and therefore anti-communist) village of Binh Gia to the north-east to permit the people of Binh Gia to have access to the Ba Ria market. The village of Binh Gia had a population of some 6,000 and the Viet Cong had not permitted them to use Route 2.
- (c) Allowing a large quantity of rubber stored in the processing plant at Duc Trung to be moved to Saigon via Ba Ria for processing and export.

Late in July 86, 5 RAR was ordered to carry out a simultaneous cordon and search of the adjacent villages of Binh Ba and Duc Trung, to make a second search of the village of Duc My and later to open and secure the road from Binh Ba to 1 Australian Task Force base. There was also a requirement to secure the village area to allow a Vietnamese commando company to be established on the village outskirts. This was to be Operation Holsworthy.

Forces Available

The following forces were allotted to assist 5 RAR in the cordon and search: 2 Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron less one troop; 105 Field Battery; 161 Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery; 'A' Battery 2/35 Artillery (USA) equipped with 155-mm self-propelled guns; one troop 1 Field Engineer Squadron; 'C' and 'D' Companies 6 RAR; one section 1 Transport Platoon; one Sioux helicopter of 161 (Independent) Recce Flight; one Iroquois helicopter of 9 Squadron RAAF; Light Fire Team (two USA armed Iroquois helicopters); Cessna aircraft equipped with loud-speaker; Psychological Warfare detachment; Forward Air Controller Detachment; 1 Australian Task Force Linguist Section; six Vietnamese policemen; one Medical Officer (for civil aid assistance). In addition elements of 3 Special Air Services Squadron were to operate well to the north-west and north-east of the villages to give early warning of large-scale Viet Cong movements.

Considerations

Duc Trung village was about 800 by 850 metres and surrounded by a high Wire fence with a deep ditch outside the fence. Its total length of 1,300 metres could be cordoned in the clean rubber plantation by two rifle companies. Binh Ba was approximately 600 metres by 300 metres with well-defined sides. This would require a company on each of the larger sides and approximately two platoons on each of the shorter sides to complete the cordon. It was therefore decided to cordon each village as follows:

Duc Trung: 'D' Company 5 RAR (Major P. Greenhalgh) and 'D' Company 6 RAR. (Captain I. McLean-Williams).

Binh Ba: 'A' Company (Major Maizey) less one platoon to cordon the west side. 'B' Company (Major B. McQualter) to cordon the east side. (After first light two sections of 1 Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron were to relieve 'B' Company of the cordon task and allow the company to search the village.) 'C' Company 5 RAR (Major J.

Miller) to cordon the north side of the village. 'C' Company 6 RAR (Major B. McFarlane) to cordon the south side of the village.

The rubber plantation was worked daily and therefore the cordon force could approach only to the edge of the plantation by daylight. Thus the final approach had to be under cover of darkness. An approach from the east would have required the force to move through thick country outside the plantation. This was often frequented by woodcutters and to conceal the 900 man force would have been most difficult. An approach from the south was not possible due to the location of Duc My village. Consequently an approach from the west appeared to be the best and offered the following advantages:

- (a) A covered approach to the south-west corner of the plantation through an area regularly patrolled by our forces and in which no civilians were allowed.
- (b) The edge of the rubber plantation and the air strip could be used to assist night navigation, particularly since the air strip led directly to both villages.

The western approach was therefore selected for the cordon force, less 'B' Company, which was to cordon the east side of Binh Ba village. 'B' Company was given the eastern approach to reduce the number of companies on the western route, to give flank protection to the main force, to cut off any Viet Cong who may have received warning of the approach of the cordon and fled to the east and to enable the cordon to be placed around Binh Ba as quickly as possible early on 9 August.

It was considered that one rifle company on the east route could move into position undetected and even if it were seen by Viet Cong trail watchers its size would not indicate its cordon task.

Plan

The outline plan is illustrated on Map No. 3.

The cordon was to be completed by 0530 hours which was one hour before first light. In addition to the cordons by the six rifle companies, a number of ambushes were considered essential on the likely exits from Duc My village and north of Duc Trung to stop any Viet Cong who tried to escape. These ambushes were to be in position before the cordon was closed and thus would be also able to give protection and early warning to the cordon companies of the presence of any Viet Cong forces. Four ambushes each of half platoon strength and equipped with radios were to be established by the 'A' Company platoon not included in the cordon and by the anti-tank platoon.

The village of Duc Trung was to be searched by the platoon of 'A' Company after it lifted its ambushes near Duc My on the morning of 9 August. This platoon was to be assisted by engineers of 1 Field Engineer Squadron during the ambushes and search of the village.

It was estimated that the search of the village of Duc Trung would be completed by midday, as both the area and the population were small. The greater part of Duc Trung was covered by the rubber processing plants. As soon as the search of Duc Trung was completed and all males of Viet Cong military age had been evacuated, 'D' Company 5 RAR was to move to Duc My village and search it while 'D' Company 6 RAR moved to an area south-west of Binh Ba village to secure a gun area for use by 105 Field Battery and 'A' Battery 2/35 Artillery. Armoured personnel carriers were to block off possible escape routes from Duc My while 'D' Company 5 RAR searched the village.

The assault pioneer platoon was to provide protection for battalion headquarters during the approach march and cordon and was then to construct enclosures in the battalion headquarters area and secure suspects until they were evacuated by road transport to Ba Ria for interrogation. The vehicles were to be escorted by armoured personnel carriers. All males of ages between 12 and 45 years were to be taken to Ba Ria for interrogation. In all later cordons, women 15 to 35 years were also screened and as a result a number of female Viet Cong cadre members were apprehended. On this occasion it was considered undesirable to take both the women and the men from the village as it may not have been possible to return them to their homes for a day or two in which case the young children would have been neglected.

that they were to obey directions. Leaflets were also prepared by the 1 Australian Task Force to be distributed during the search of the village and the ensuing civic action.

The mortar platoon less one section was to come forward in mortar armoured personnel carriers at first light on 9 August. Armoured personnel carriers were also to take over the cordon from 'B' Company, block Route 2 north of Duc Trung and provide a reserve from shortly after first light on 9 August. The Battalion Headquarters Group under Major M. Carroll, together with the CO's party, moved in rear of 'D' Company 6 RAR.

Execution

On 5 August, 'C' Company established a base some 1000 metres due south of the south-west corner of the airfield and on the night 5-6 August reconnaissance parties from all companies except 'B' operated from the base to check routes and timings. During this reconnaissance it was discovered that the proposed battalion assembly area for the evening prior to the cordon would be unsatisfactory and it was therefore decided to move the cordon force into the rubber plantation just at last light.

'C' Company and the reconnaissance groups returned to 5 RAR on 6 August and orders were issued the following morning. On the 8th at 0800 hours, the Adjutant, Captain P. Isaacs, who had the task of laying out the battalion assembly area together with company guides, departed from Nui Dat and the remainder of the battalion group departed at 0930 hours. The battalion group, less 'B' Company, were in the selected area by 1700 hours and just at last light moved into the rubber plantation. The companies were then laid out ready to move later that night.

Toggle ropes were to be used to assist movement in the dark some troops tied the toggle rope of the soldier ahead of them to a piece of their equipment which was placed beside them while they rested. The leading company ('D' Company 5 RAR) was scheduled to depart from the assembly area at 2300 hours. Troops were alerted in time and minor movement, including closing up occurred in preparation to move off, with the result that in some instances the equipment tied to toggle ropes suddenly took off between the rubber trees in the dark, much to the consternation of the owners. In this way the Forward Air Controller lost his radio and one officer lost a bag containing maps and papers. (These were recovered in the assembly area next day.) As a result the move commenced 15 minutes later than planned, but because of the bright moonlight, the easy going through the plantation and along the side of the airstrip and the time reserve which had been allowed, all companies and ambush parties arrived in the allotted areas on time. No contact was made with any Viet Cong forces. At 0615 hours the voice aircraft arrived over Binh Ba and 45 minutes later the armoured personnel carriers relieved 'B' Company of its cordon task. At 0730 hours the search of Binh Ba and Duc Trung began. By the end of that day the searches of the villages of Duc Trung and Duc My were completed and the search of Binh Ba and evacuation of males was completed by midday on 10 August.

Pacification

The pacification programme which followed over a period of months was just as important and significant as the operation on 9 August.

Unlike the operation at Duc My village in July, the battalion did not leave the area immediately after the search of the villages but remained until 16 August patrolling and Searching the plantation area and approaches. On 11 August the road to Ba Ria was opened for the first time in more than three months and picqueted to prevent interference from the Viet Cong. The opening of the road had a remarkable effect on the morale of the people. In the first two days, 1,500 people travelling on Lambrettas, ox carts, bicycles, tractors and army transport moved south to Ba Ria.

During the period 9 August to 16 August, Effective contact was made with the villagers in the following ways:

- Companies organized football matches with the villagers, particularly with the Children.
- Medical and dental teams from I ATF gave regular treatment. The French doctor from the head office of the plantation recommenced regular weekly visits by aircraft to the plantation.
- Civil affairs section of I ATF distributed food and clothing.

- The Roman Catholic padre with the battalion (Chaplain John Williams) conducted services with the village priest in the village church and many soldiers attended services with the villagers on a voluntary basis.
- Above all the soldiers were courteous and kind to the villagers, respectful to the women and elderly folk and at all times did their best to treat the Vietnamese as equals.

1 Australian Task Force arranged for a newly raised Vietnamese Commando Company (with Captain R. Boxall of 5 RAR as adviser) to be moved to Binh Ba to give security to the village after the withdrawal of our forces. In order to support this Vietnamese company, 'C' Company and later other companies from the battalion, together with a section of mortars, remained at Binh Ba for the next two months.

Lessons

The lessons learnt during the cordon of Duc My were applied, but other lessons emerged:

- Ample time must be allowed in a night move to ensure that all soldiers are awake and have checked their equipment before moving.
- The need for Australian interpreters was vital.
- All tinned food issued to villagers must first be opened to prevent it being stored and later given to the Viet Cong. It is better to deliver gifts of food to each house to ensure an equal distribution or give the food to the village chief (if reliable) or the village priest to distribute.
- Never throw food or gifts to crowds of children or adults. The resultant scramble or fight among themselves for the items on the ground destroys their self respect.
- Do not give food to children as their parents generally disagree with such action. It destroys parental discipline and makes beggars of the children.

Results

A total of 168 males of military age were apprehended and interrogated and of these, 17 Viet Cong were captured and 77 suspects detained. Thus, without a shot being fired, the Binh Ba Village Guerilla Platoon and the Viet Cong cadre in the village was eliminated. There is little doubt that to have killed or captured these Viet Cong in ambushes and search and destroy operations would have required several months of constant patrolling and would in all probability have resulted in casualties to ourselves. The cadre members employed in the villages could not have been captured by any other means.

The psychological effect on the villagers of the operation was tremendous for they saw the Viet Cong take from the village, the re-establishment of government control and a return to a more normal life.

The road from Binh Ba to Ba Ria has not been closed since the operation and the Viet Cong have not attempted to interfere with any traffic.

Reports late in 1966 indicated that some Viet Cong had infiltrated back into the village, so early in January 5 RAR again cordoned and searched Binh Ba village during Operation 'Caloundra' and 9 Viet Cong were apprehended.

CORDON AND SEARCH OF PHUOC HOA VILLAGE

The area of flat ground to the west and south-west of Phuoc Tuy was of considerable importance to the Viet Cong. This region linked the sea transport routes of the Rung Sat, a marshy low-lying area to the west, with the system of foot and cart tracks which ran through to the Hat Dich area the main Viet Cong base in the northwest of Phuoc Tuy, and to other bases north of Route 15.

Viet Cong activity was concentrated in the area between the villages of Phu-My, Phuoc Hoa and Long Huong and Long Son Island. The island was situated near the junction of several sea routes leading into landing points and was ideally situated for use as a refuge and a rest centre. The main routes for water-borne traffic were the rivers which fanned out on the northern side of Long Son Island. The most direct route for the Viet Cong into Phuoc Tuy Province was through the fishing village of Phuoc Hoa. This village was also the one best served by land and sea routes and harbour

facilities. It was therefore the scene of the most significant Viet Cong activity which passed through into western Phuoc Tuy Province.

The western strip of the Province was also of interest to the Viet Cong because of Route 15, the main road between Vung Tau, Ba Ria, the Province capital and Saigon. The Viet Cong had made a number of attacks in the area in order to establish domination of their supply routes by crushing villagers who resisted them and by exploiting people who were sympathetic. .

Along Route 15 were a number of military posts garrisoned by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but they were largely ineffective because, at that time, the troops did not patrol sufficiently or ambush at night. In addition, the Viet Cong intelligence net invariably obtained details of any activities initiated from these posts. The Viet Cong, however, had a regular patrol system which covered the whole area at night, usually with platoon strength patrol although company-sized patrols had been reported.

The Viet Cong also used the area for gaining intelligence concerning Allied movements as it was possible to observe road movement along Route 15, air movement to and from Vung Tau and shipping arriving at Vung Tau and moving along the river to Saigon.

There was much civilian activity in the area; woodcutters moved far inland with ox carts and fishermen covered the waterways. Theoretically, night movement was forbidden, but this was rarely policed on Route 15 and never policed on the water. Many fishermen worked at night and it was impossible to tell a Viet Cong sampan from an innocent one. Because of the impracticability of enforcing the night curfew, the area was not a free fire zone and fire could not be opened unless direct physical contact occurred with the Viet Cong. This situation was of tremendous assistance to the Viet Cong.

In September 1966 Brigadier O. D. Jackson, the Commander, 1 Australian Task Force, indicated that 5 RAR would be required to clear Long Son Island later in the year. In October, 5 RAR conducted Operations 'Canberra', 'Robyn' and 'Queanbeyan' in the area along Route 15 and Nui Thi Vai, a large mountain nearby, and, as a result, came to know the general area quite well. During Operation Robyn, 'A' Company (Major P. Cole) established a company base 800 metres east of Phuoc Hoa village and a study was made of the village layout in case it might be required at a later date. Documents captured during Operation Queanbeyan, together with information from other sources, confirmed that Phuoc Hoa village, in spite of having a Popular Force (PF) Company located in it, was the centre of Viet Cong activity in the area. 1 Australian Task Force therefore directed that 5 RAR would cordon and search Phuoc Hoa village (Operation 'Yass') immediately before it carried out the operation to clear Long Son Island (Operation 'Hayman'). Some troops could then be located in Phuoc Hoa village to block any movement of Viet Cong from Long Son Island to the village during Operation Hayman.

The main Viet Cong unit known to be located in the area was the C20 guerrilla company which had three platoons, each of three squads with a total strength of 110 men. They were armed with 1 medium machine-gun, 4 light machine-guns, 19 sub-machine-guns, 2 revolvers and the remainder of the company carried carbines or AK 44s. The members of the company were drawn from Long Son Island, Phuoc Hoa and Long Huong villages. The morale of the company was fair.

It was considered probable that some sea transportation members would be at Phuoc Hoa overnight. It was also feasible that a medium sized Viet Cong force could be staging through the area at the time of the operation. It was thought that once the operation commenced the C20 company might harass the battalion by sniping and booby traps. Other Viet Cong in Phuoc Hoa would probably try to flee by sampan into the mangroves or by the track to the north-east.

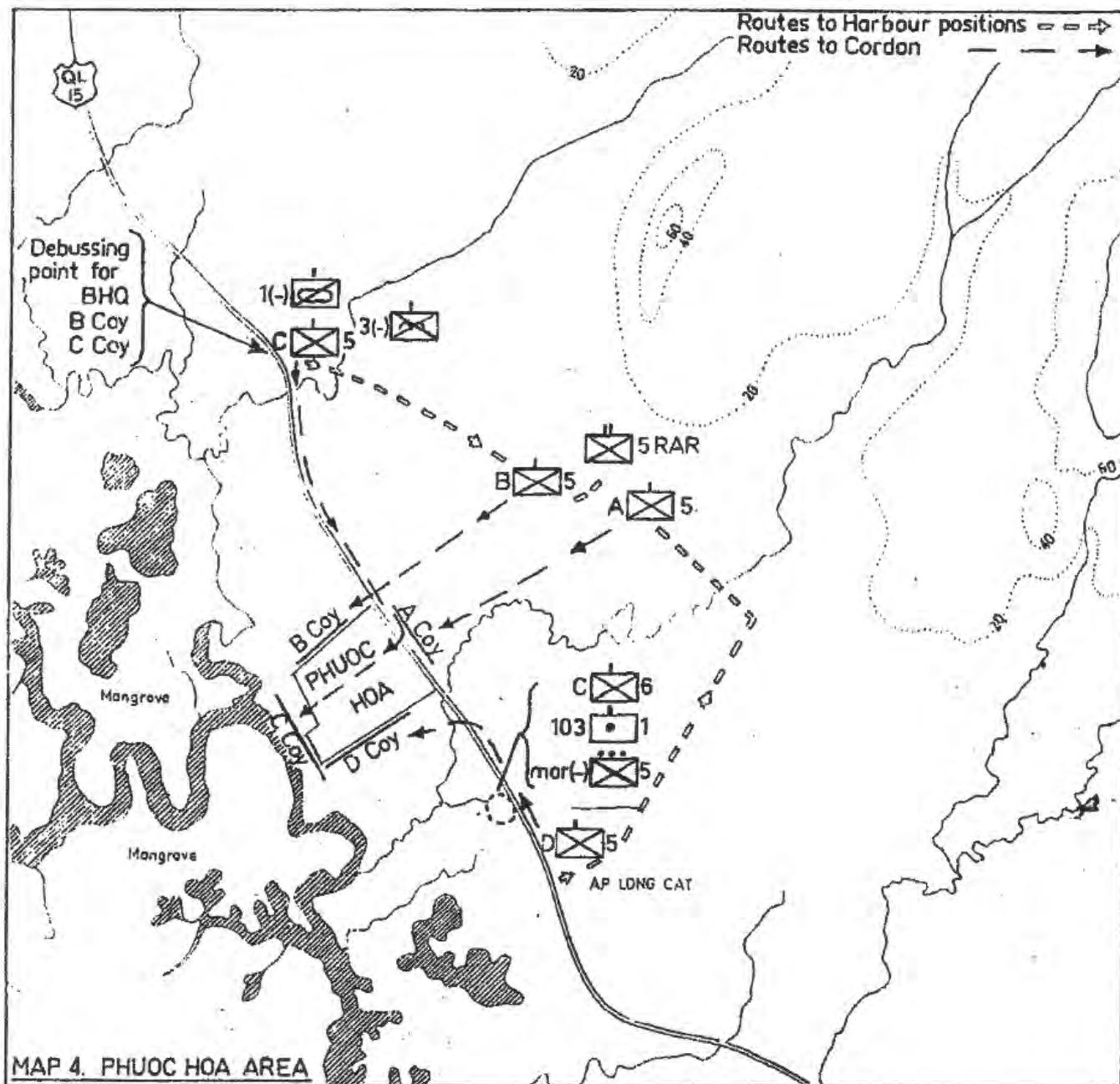
Phuoc Hoa had a population of about 700 adults who were engaged mainly in woodcutting or fishing. Many sampans used the harbour and several families lived on these sampans permanently. The village area was well defined with Route 15 on the north-east side, and a high embankment and ditch on the other sides; in addition, mangroves bordered the village on the south-west side.

Forces Available

Additional forces were allotted to assist 5 RAR in the operation. These comprised: 1 Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron, less a troop; 103 Field Battery, one platoon A Battery 2/35 Artillery Battalion (USA); one troop of 1 Field Engineer Squadron (30 all ranks); 'C' Company 6 RAR; elements of 3 Special Air Service Squadron; 30 national policemen; six interpreters; one light fire team (two armed Iroquois helicopters); one Sioux helicopter of 161 (Independent) Reconnaissance Flight; and one Cessna aircraft equipped with loud speaker.

Considerations

The sides of the village were between 550 and 650 metres long. One company would therefore be allocated to cordon each side, and 'C' Company 6 RAR (Major B. McFarlane) would secure the gun area. A detailed ground reconnaissance of the village immediately prior to the operation was not possible, but it was believed that booby traps and mines were probably laid along the ditch on the outskirts of the village. It was therefore decided that the cordon companies on the north-west side ('B' Company, Major B. McQualter) and south-east side ('D' Company, Captain R. Boxall) would not approach closer to the ditches than 200 metres.



The village was beyond the range of field artillery at the 1 ATF base and so the supporting artillery had to be moved to a suitable location nearby. This would make it impossible to hide the fact that an operation was to be undertaken in the general area. It was therefore decided to move the force

via Route 15 in armoured personnel carriers and trucks. If the cordon was to be in position about an hour before first light, the force would have to be moved to an area east of Route 15 where it could be concealed by day and able to establish the cordon by night. 'A', 'B' and 'D' Companies and the battalion headquarters group would therefore dismount from vehicles in the general area of Phuoc Hoa village and move thence on foot to harbour areas about 1,000 metres east of Route 15.

'C' Company (Major J. Miller) was to cordon the south-west side of the village adjacent to the mangroves. Air reconnaissance indicated that even at low tide it would be impossible to move this company in the dark through the mangroves quickly enough to ensure that the cordon was closed before any Viet Cong in the village had an opportunity to escape by sampan into the mangroves.

It was therefore decided to use the armoured personnel carriers to move 'C' Company through the village from Route 15 to the boat harbour area at maximum speed when the other sides of the cordon were in position and to establish the cordon along the top of the embankment while simultaneously securing the boat harbour area to prevent sampans escaping.

It was also considered that two assault boats would be required in the Rach Tre to further ensure that there was no movement from the village in sampans. 3 Special Air Services Squadron was given the task of providing the assault craft, crews and radios for this task. Consideration was given to moving the boats into position along the Rach Tre but this was ruled out due to the difficulty of navigation at night and possible loss of surprise. 'C' Company with the assault boats was to harbour some 1500 metres north of Phuoc Hoa and off Route 15 where there was reasonable cover. The outline plan for the movement of the cordon force is illustrated in Map 4; detailed cordon positions are shown in Map 5.

Security and Deception.

103 Field Battery and the platoon of A Battery 2/35 Artillery were required to support both Operation 'Yass' and Operation 'Hayman', including the air assault on Long Son Island, at first light the day after Operation 'Yass'. It was therefore desirable that the selected gun area meet the requirements of both operations. The general area was flat and muddy and there were only a few likely sites. The gun area selected by 1 Australian Task Force was on the west side of Route 15 about 500 metres south of Phuoc Hoa. As the gun area was to be occupied on November 6, the day preceding the cordon, a cover plan was necessary to convince the Viet Cong that the activity in the area was not related to Phuoc Hoa village or Long Son Island. The proximity of the gun area to the village should have convinced most observant Viet Cong that the guns were not intended to support activities in the immediate vicinity of the village.

A cover plan was Issued by 1 Australian Task Force one week before the operation and the actual details of both Operation Yass and Operation Hayman were restricted so that in the battalion only four officers (the Commanding Officer, Second-in-Command, Operations Officer and Intelligence Officer) were informed. The cover plan gave the exact details of Operation Yass as they were to occur, including times, dates and method of movement up to the stage where the troops debussed on Route 15 and moved east. Here the cover plan varied from the true plan and indicated that the battalion would continue to move east to the Dinh Hills to carry out a clearing operation. The cover plan was given a wide distribution.

In addition, two 'teams' (2nd-Lieutenant J. McAloney and 2nd-Lieutenant J. Carruthers and W02 B. M. Hughson and Sergeant T. Witheridge) were provided with money and sent on two occasions to Vung Tau to spend the evenings in the bars talking about the 'forthcoming' operation in the Dinh Hills.

The four members knew only the details of the cover plan and no members other than the four officers mentioned above knew of the tasks of the teams in Vung Tau. During their 'tour of duty' In Vung Tau, the NCO team had their conversation recorded on tape by a Vietnamese barman In one establishment, were questioned at length about the operation by Vietnamese girls in another bar and on another occasion were followed from a bar for some distance by a Vietnamese civilian. The four concerned all agreed that it was the most enjoyable task ever given to them.

Vietnamese Popular Force Company was located In Phuoc Hoa village and this raised the problem of either moving the company or risking a clash with it while the cordon was being placed in position.

As 'C' Company was required to move through the middle of the village to establish the south-west side of the cordon, contact with the Popular Force Company was inevitable and it was necessary therefore to move the company without arousing the suspicions of the villagers. The Province Chief, who was the only Vietnamese to know of the operation, agreed to direct the Popular Force Company to move to an adjacent ARVN post on 6 November for training purposes and to remain there for the night. Apparently it was not uncommon to move these companies to ARVN posts for training.

It was essential that the two assault boats to be used by the Special Air Services soldiers should be hidden from view and so the boats were moved inside 2 ½ ton vehicles with their canopies closed down.

On 6 November, the initial movement was carried out according to the cover plan and the troops left the vehicles near Phuoc Hoa and moved about 1000 metres east to the areas indicated on Map 5.

An hour after this eastward movement commenced, 103 Field Battery fired a number of missions to the east on the Dinh Hills where the falling rounds were clearly visible for many miles and a Sioux helicopter made a number of flights over the same area to convince any Viet Cong observers that the battalion was moving towards and intended to operate in the Dinh Hills.

The Vietnamese policemen and interpreters allocated to assist in the clearance of the village were not informed of their tasks by the Province Headquarters until early on the morning of 7 November.

Execution

On 6 November (the day preceding the cordon) everything went according to plan until 1530 hours when 'B' Company, while moving into its harbour area, met 35 civilians from Phuoc Hoa. 'B' Company sent the villagers back to their village and continued moving east, harbouring as a result of the encounter a little further east than had been planned.

When 'C' Company, In armoured personnel carriers, passed the entrance to Phuoc Hoa village they noticed a large moveable barbed wire barricade with M26 grenades hung on it at the village entrance. It seemed possible that the barricade might be placed across the entrance each night and as this would have delayed movement of the APCs by the minute or two needed to enable Viet Cong in the village to escape into the mangroves, the company commander Major Miller, returned to the village later that afternoon on the pretext of arranging for a medical team to visit the village next morning. During his visit, Major Miller learnt that the barricade was not placed across the entrance each night.

By 0400 hours next morning, all companies of the cordon except 'C' Company were in position. The curfew along Route 15 was supposed to be enforced until 0530 hours daily, but at 0430 hours the civilian traffic began move. A little later 'A' Company observed movement in the village. So, at 0500 hours, 30 minutes earlier than planned, 'C' Company was ordered to move. The APCs carrying 'C' Company and escorting the two trucks carrying the assault boats came down Route 15 at maximum speed, with headlights on, and turned in straight through the middle of the village. Within minutes the assault boats had been launched and the cordon completed. 103 Field Battery, fired illumination rounds over the western end of the village and APCs with spotlights on each turret lit up the boat harbour and mangroves so that any movement by Viet Cong Would have been easily detected. Some APCs were then moved back to Route 15, where all traffic had been stopped, and their headlights and spotlights were used to light up the ditches on the north-west and south-east sides of the village.

The voice aircraft; which was not due to fly until first light (0630 hours), did not arrive at all, because of mechanical failure. Interpreters, with loud hailers and mounted on armoured personnel carriers, were then used to advise the villagers of the procedures to be followed.

At 0800 the first of the villagers departed by truck and APCs for interrogation in Ba Ria and by midday the last of the 700 villagers to be screened (men 12 to 45 years and women 15 to 35 years)

had departed. Fifteen members of the Popular Force Company who had remained in the village were also apprehended.

Results

A total of 16 Viet Cong were captured in the cordon again without loss to the battalion. One of the captured Viet Cong was a cadre leader who had been sought for many months by the Vietnamese Government authorities. These results would indicate that the cover plan and deception activities were successful.

The battalion reconnaissance platoon (2nd-Lieutenant M. Deak) the anti-tank platoon had been retrained for a reconnaissance role remained in Phuoc Hoa village until 12 November to prevent Viet Cong using the village as an escape route from Long Son Island. In this period a sound, friendly relationship was established with the villagers by the platoon, medical aid for the villagers was also provided.

CONCLUSIONS.

In the seven months period, July 1966 to February 1967, 5 RAR carried out nine village cordon and search operations. These resulted in 14 Viet Cong killed, 5 wounded, 224 prisoners and detainees for the loss of 4 men killed and 5 wounded. All the casualties except one suffered by the battalion were due to one booby trap.

When 1 Australian Task Force commenced operations in Phuoc Tuy in May 1966, the Viet Cong controlled the entire province except for the capital Ba Ria, which was expected to fall to the Viet Cong at any moment. As a result of 1 ATF operations in 1966-67, the majority of people in the province were brought under effective government control.

The speed with which the Viet Cong cadres can be eliminated by cordon and searches must be adjusted to the capacity of the government forces to secure the villages against the return of the enemy. Once village security is established certain restrictions will be necessary. A detailed census of all people in each village will be required. Daily road-checks will be essential to ensure that the Viet Cong are unable to move as civilians on the roads and use public transport. Food control must be established so that all rice is collected, accounted for and secured centrally in each village, and issued weekly to villagers in accordance with the number of people in each family. Daily checks will also be required by the police in the village to ensure that the villagers take with them only sufficient cooked rice (which cannot be stored) for their midday meal. In this way the villagers will be protected against Viet Cong demands for food. Where farmers live outside a village and cannot be protected, a resettlement programme must be initiated before the cordon operation is undertaken. A poor resettlement plan can quickly nullify all other efforts.

Cordon and search operations and the follow-up pacification programmes are the only effective means of re-establishing effective village control and such operations are an essential preliminary to the defeat of the Viet Cong main force.

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