

Rushing to Song Be

Well the 1st Division to our west, had a series of set backs, including the Battalion Paul Gorman commanded. The NVA has started crossing more into South Vietnam with Regular North Vietnamese forces, so they had to concentrate their forces to deal with the threats, and the good old 25th Division was tasked to cover some of their bases.

My 1/27th Battalion was ordered to fly over into their sector and secure the Air Strip at Song Be.

I was there for a week after flying in by C-123s, after clearing the area out by heliborne combat assault with the lead company. We then got mortared nightly. Few casualties because we took over, and expanded, more fortified bunkers.

But when some shells landed close by where one of the kitchens were, one of my men dug out mortar fragments I sent home attached to a letter - one fragment for each of our three kids. Still have them. The Brigade had 1 killed, 6 severely wounded and 21 lightly wounded.

I met one classmate Dick Wyrrough who was eager for a battalion, while John Wickham, who became much later the Army Chief of Staff, was wounded badly enough he was sent to Walter Reed Hospital in the States.

The Iron Triangle

After mid November, the 2d Brigade was tasked to go into the Iron Triangle, where the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had spent decades digging tunnels to hold their units who came down the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos where, again according to US Policy, they couldn't be attacked.

The question became how to root out the enemy and any supplies they put in the tunnels. The Commanding General was convinced the only way to clear them out was to flood them. While I just shrugged and did it

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- bringing in pumps and pumping over 1,000 gallons a minute - with yellow dye - into tunnel entrances I was assigned, classmate Walt Adams, commanding the 2/27 didn't - instead getting the Air Corps to come over and drop 750 pound bombs on where the tunnels were supposed to run. That made the General mad at him until he complied.

I don't know how much good either did.

1st Division versus 25th Division (at least my) Tactics

Then it was back to more Search and Destroy Missions.

The 1st Division already had the reputation of putting their efforts into heavy fortifications. I am not sure how much energy that left them for ranging out to find the enemy. Instead they dug in - reminding me of Dien Ben Phu.

At one time, knowing how Viet Cong take their time to plan attacks on small isolated US units at night, then strike, I decided to substitute rapid movement of the maneuver units of my battalion. Rather than sally forth all day and then return to our fixed base at night - which base could be, over time, struck by well planned attacks, I started planning to stay in the middle of our rather large and spread out AO at night. By a very calculated tactic.

After a day of search and destroy, often with few results, I would pick out an 'instant base camp' by ordering by encrypted radio messages each of my maneuver companies to converge on the area I selected, putting them down in a star, spider, not circular configuration, with platoons even stretching out further in such a way that if the Viet Cong approached, they would be engaged from two, not one direction. With my very small, one tent battalion command center. And so time the landing at an overnight camp, that the Chinook supporting us could come in just at dusk, off load cooked meals for each company, in two trips, while the 1st Sgts and Administrative clerks would get off the first trip and as rapidly as possible deliver mail, take back reports, including

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the sacrosanct Morning Reports - which is THE way the Army tracks the location of every soldier. And then at the end of the second delivery trip, run to get into the Chinook and take off just as it was too dark, and fly back to Battalion Base at Cu Chi to complete the administrative work.

We did NOT dig in deeply then. We arranged everyone including indirect mortar and registered artillery fire to cover the perimeter by a simple numbering system more than map coordinates.

Then when dawn broke the Chinook would fly back in to take out the 'dirty dishes' so to speak, the same administrative persons would run to their companies, and the battalion cp and pick up any papers we prepared at night. And drop any ammunition that had been expended over night - which my Supply officer would radio in for the dawn Chinook. Then fly off.

Then my Huey's - already inbound - would fly in along with my command helicopter, to pick up the first company for the day's search and destroy day, and me, and we would be off, with everyone gone from that patch of ground by 7am or so.

Now my uninaginative Regimental Commander did not like my Muhammid Ali tactics - float like a butterfly, then sting like a bee. Then fly off, with minimum digging in. Made him nervous, worrying what would happen if we were heavily attacked while on the ground, not well dug in.

But I calculated, I could use mobility for my security more than sandbags, and that I could fly in, stay the night, and fly out before any Viet Cong commander could plan an attack, much less assemble the men and then carry it out.

My proof of the pudding was in the eating. NEVER in my six months of command was I caught defending from a surprise Viet Cong attack on our overnight camp, while many 'bases' were attacked, even if not overrun.

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I had to laugh, when a West Point Classmate of mine, who commanded a Battalion in the 1st Division (Big Red One) operating area, next to our 25th Division, flew in to visit me early one morning. He was appalled at my lack of fortifications. Seemed like the rule in the 1st Division was to dig in deeply, everywhere, and turn the AO into a fortress. That was where Paul Gorman was.