

2/101 Operations in 1968 - 69

The following article written by 1st Lt Albert Banks was printed in the Winter 1968-69 issue of "Rendezvous with Destiny" magazine, a 101st Airborne Division publication.

#### 11 Days on Vinh Loc Isle

Vinh Loc district lies lazily on an island 24 kilometers long and four and one half kilometers wide, nestled openly against the South China Sea, southeast of Hue. Before the enemy Tet Offensive, more than 50,000 predominately catholic Vietnamese lived in this relatively rich district engaging in fishing, gardening, and tobacco farming. They were happy, contented people who supported their government. After Tet, the Viet Cong moved in and took control of the district, using it as a recuperation area and continually terrorizing its residents. The VC forced the villagers to farm for them, feed them and perform numerous other duties against their will. The South Vietnamese government retained control of the eastern tip of the island, where reportedly more than 29,000 natives and 12,500 refugees lived; leaving approximately 8,500 unaccounted for, or under VC control. Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais, commanding general of the Screaming Eagles, assigned the mission of rooting out the enemy insurgents to the 2nd Brigade as part of a combined force operation. The 2nd Brigade commander called upon his seasoned battalion commander to lead the mass combat assault. On September 11th, as the morning mist attempted to hold off the first rays of the sun, the swishing sound of helicopter blades could be heard faintly over the murmuring roar of the South China Sea. The VC were lounging content with their surroundings, for never before had they been seriously bothered in their self acclaimed haven. That day, it was to be different. The plan was to cordon the district without alerting the enemy. This was done. Maneuver forces landed on the ocean side of the island and drove straight into predesignated objectives. During the night, all blocking forces moved into position, thereby disrupting enemy communications and denying normal escape routes. Throughout the operation, preparatory fires were limited to barren ground around landing zones. Supporting fires were to be used only in the case of organized resistance, which never was

encountered.

Early the next morning, 7th ARVN Cavalry armored personnel carriers drove into the western end

of the island while 1st Bn., 54th ARVN Regt. troops simultaneously assaulted into three landing

zones. Two Regional Forces companies force marched to an Oceanside position, and Screaming

Eagles of the 1st Bn., 501st Abn. Inf. air assaulted into three landing zones on the eastern end of the

island. By 11 am all units were in position.

As the largest combined forces combat assault of the Vietnam war began, the enemy in the area

were caught completely off guard and went scurrying in all directions. Some made a last ditch effort to

bury their weapons and ran toward sampans in the South China Sea. However, Navy "Pistol Pete"

patrol boats and paratroopers on air cushioned vehicles were there to stop them. Enterprising North

Vietnamese Army soldiers attempted to change their clothes and blend in with the villagers, but

special teams of allied soldiers quickly separated the natives from the imposters. Enemy elements

that did make it to the coast found patrolling U.S. Naval vessels waiting for them. Besides picking up

suspects and searching sampans attempting to slip out of the area, the patrol boats transported

hoards of detainees to questioning points.

Paratroopers of A Co., 1st Bn., 501st Abn. Inf. swept the district for

two days with ARVN troops searching abandoned bunkers, huts and

underground tunnels, while uprooting insurgents. On the third day,

paratroopers took up positions along a deep rice paddy and began

systematically searching the dikes. During the search, two Viet Cong

soldiers were spotted, giving away their positions. Paratroopers

opened up with small arms, M-79 grenade, and machine gun fire and

attacked the positions, killing 23 insurgents. One group of 215

detainees proved especially cooperative. As their CH-47 helicopter

set down at a collection point, the suspects filed out, somewhat

bewildered by their first chopper ride. An imaginative national

policeman sensed their puzzlement and shouted, "All members of the

pects had fallen in as directed. An amazed group of paratroopers, their

interrogation chores shortened considerably, quickly confirmed the

suspects as members of those units.

As intelligence was gathered from Hoi Chanhs (ralliers to the government) and detainees, the

nearest troops were lifted to enemy concentrations. All detainees were

delivered to Vinh Loc district

headquarters, where the combined forces, tactical operations center was

located, The detainees

where processed by combined intelligence teams on a 24-hour basis.

The results of the operation are self explanatory and mirror the success of

the combined forces

actions. One hundred and fifty four enemy were killed, 178 individual and crew served weapons

captured and 370 suspects detained, of which 126 were identified as members of

the local Viet Cong infrastructure. In addition, 32 Hoi Chanh rallied to the South Vietnamese Government. Three paratroopers were wounded and Vietnamese casualties were reported light. No Screaming Eagles were killed.

Through mobility and careful planning, the Vinh Loc campaign illustrated the conclusiveness and success of combined forces operations. Before the operation began, smooth coordination was established among 101st Airborne, ARVN forces, national policemen, U.S. Navy swift boat and river assault groups, and supporting psychological operations teams. By carefully consolidating and analyzing, intelligence information, it was learned that friendly forces never before had stayed for any length of time in Vinh Loc. It was decided that this time, combined forces would maintain blocking forces throughout the operation. This strategy surprised the enemy, and as the days wore on, the VC became hungry and gave up their more sophisticated hiding places and later surrendered in droves. By the fifth day, armored personnel carriers were rolling through the district at will, while blocking forces steadfastly remained in place, proving an insurmountable barrier to enemy escape plans. The enemy had been outsmarted, surprised and badly beaten. As an epilogue to any successful operation in Vietnam, a program must be developed to insure that the enemy does not return to the area. Immediately after the victory, two revolutionary development teams moved into Vinh Loc district to help the people get resettled. Regional and Popular Forces were assigned to protect the district and its people. Self defense groups have been expanded to each village, and additional weapons are being carried by local police forces. ARVN and Airborne troops remain constantly in view and serve to convince the people of a lasting security. Markets are well stocked and fishing remains good, barbed wire, pickets and weapons for self defense are available. Vinh Loc district is being restored to its pristine past. The villagers no longer are afraid of VC reprisals.

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101st slowly defuses death trap village

FIRE BASE SANDY - Outside this fire base east of Hue, paratroopers of the 1st Bn., 501st Inf. cordoned a deserted village and removed its year old Viet Cong death curse.

In what was likely a staging area for enemy battalion size units that attacked Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive, troopers of Co. A cleared and destroyed 112 bunkers and 176 booby traps. They captured 15 pounds of secret documents, 5,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, 10 Chi-com grenades, assorted clothing and equipment, and 15 ready to fire RPGS. More recently, the village, just 200 meters from the fire base perimeter, had been the daylight haven and night time retreat for local VC and infrastructure cadre. An increase in light contacts with enemy small arms and RPG fire had brought the abandoned village to the attention of 2nd Bde. officers, who planned the operation.

Three companies of the 1st Bn., 501st Inf. were deployed to the village with two companies of the 1st Bn., 502nd Inf. and a company of the 1st Division, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, acting as a blocking force.

"The nature of the light contacts pointed to the likelihood of finding a very heavy booby trap concentration," said Capt. Jerry R. Fry C.O. of A 1/501. Early in the afternoon of the first day, the third platoon of the company encountered the first boobytrap, a grenade rigged with a tripwire in a hedgerow that slightly wounded three men.

"We didn't take any chances," said Fry. "We walked slowly. Our forward progress was slow, but we cleared one inch at a time and didn't lose any men that way."

"The first two days were experimental," explained Lt. James C. Judkins, a platoon leader. "In the evenings, we'd review the various methods used in the day's clearing operations."

The suggestion of using bangalore torpedoes was the key of success in the operation. "We reconned the virgin area with M-79 rounds like a miniature artillery prep," Judkins said. Then, the bangalore torpedoes were carefully shoved into the suspect area and detonated. This cleared an area for safe advancement, and the slow progress could continue. More than 300 cases of bangalores were used in the operation.

"It had the same effect as a defoliating agent," said Spec. 4 Dennis B. Kramer. "The explosion would knock the leaves off the brush and either expose the boobytrap or blow it in place."

A pattern in the VC plan began to be evident. Sometimes a sock or rag, some shred of cloth tied to a tree, would mark the presence of a bunker. Punji stakes would be pointing outward from a heavily camouflaged bunker with only one entrance marked by a change in the pattern of stakes.

"The bunkers were not the usual kind found near hootches all over Vietnam," said Judkins. "These were sleeping, fighting, and storage positions at least four feet underground. They were built with deep

flower pot entrances and several air holes made from illumination flare casings."

A captured VC had told how his comrades lived in these bunkers two to seven months at a time. The first bunker discovered contained freshly cut melon inside and two American magazines less than a week old.

Maj. Gen. Ngo Quan Truong, commander of the 1st ARVN Division, visited the area just after the operation's end and said that without the new tactic of clearing with bangalore torpedoes, the operation might have cost his unit 150 lives.

At an impact awards ceremony at Eagle Beach, Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais, 101st Airborne Division commander, awarded two Bronze Stars and seven Army Commendation Medals with "V" device for acts of heroism by Screaming Eagles in the operation.

"At least 21 VC have been killed or captured directly because of this operation's success," he said. "Being forced out into new and unfamiliar territory throughout the area of operations, these enemy were eliminated because their longtime haven was gone."