

ON ORDER – ASSIST

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On 12 March 1967, Company C, 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry was operating in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. At 0900 Company A reported heavy contact with a North Vietnamese Army force of undetermined size. The C Company commander returned to his CP and monitored Company A's action. As the reports flowed into the Battalion CP, it became apparent that they would need assistance.

C Company had completed seven days on a search and destroy operation and had remained in their night location to resupply. At the time of A Company's contact half of the weapons in C Company were disassembled for cleaning. Personnel within the platoons were engaged in replacing unserviceable equipment.

The platoon leaders were called to the CP, informed of Company A's situation and received a warning order, "Assemble and test fire all weapons, inspect basic loads, break camp and be prepared to conduct a combat assault and assist Company A."

By 1000 all weapons had been assembled and test fired. The men were breaking camp when the intensity of Company A's action increased.

A Company's Third Platoon began to close on the First which had been pinned down for almost an hour. The point element of the third platoon spotted well concealed bunkers to their front. They notified their platoon leader, Lt. Karopcyzc. He maneuvered the platoon on line and advanced toward the bunkers. Within minutes heavy automatic weapons fire engaged the third platoon from three sides. Lt. Karopcyzc was seriously wounded in the early moments of the fight. He reorganized the platoon, broke contact, moved to another position and set up a defensive perimeter.

C Company received its mission at 1100. "Be prepared to conduct a combat assault in one hour; occupy blocking positions southwest of Company A and on order move to assist Company A."

All platoon leaders were summoned to the CP, and the loading plan for the combat assault was issued. The third platoon would lead the assault. They would be followed by the CP group and the second platoon. The second airlift would consist of the first platoon and headquarters (-). Due to the size of the pick up zone only three helicopters could land at one time. To avoid last minute confusion all aircraft loads were broken down into five man groups and positioned at the expected landing sites.

The battalion commander, LTC Clinton E. Granger Jr., arrived at C Company's location at 1115. He quickly briefed the company commander, Cpt Ronald B Rykowski, on the concept of operation and present situation. Company C would conduct a combat assault south of Company A and move northwest to occupy a blocking position close to the Cambodian Border. After C Company had landed, Company B would conduct a combat assault north of Company A and move southeast to link up with them. On order, Company C would leave the blocking position and move to assist the two companies.

After the briefing a reconnaissance of the area by air was conducted to select a landing zone. Earlier in the week an air strike had cleared an area approximately 1500 meters south of

Company A. This was selected as the landing zone. The Artillery Liaison Officer began to register fires for a fifteen minute preparation prior to the combat assault.

Upon completion of registration the reconnaissance element returned to the assembly area and dropped Captain Rykowski off. He issued his orders to the platoon leaders and oriented them on the landing zone.

Within five minutes the battalion commanders' Command and Control helicopter returned with a Pathfinder team. They surveyed the preplanned arrangements for the pick up, found them satisfactory and prepared to mark the site for the in-bound helicopters.

At 1200 the company began the airlift. The first three helicopters picked up the lead elements from the third platoon and moved to an on-station position. The artillery preparation began while the remaining aircraft's in the first lift completed loading. At 1215 the lead helicopters headed into the landing zone.

Although the air strike cleared most of the tall trees, stumps almost eight feet high, dotted the landing zone causing the aircraft to hover while unloading. Due to the height several men were seriously injured. Dust Off was immediately requested.

Tall grass obstructed observation and the lead platoons employed smoke to speed reorganization. The third platoon reorganized and moved to secure the northern edge of the landing zone to provide protection for the Dust Off helicopter. As they moved into position the second airlift arrived. The remainder of the company landed without injuries.

At 1301 the company moved north from the landing zone until it came to a small stream that represented its northern boundary. Here the company changed direction and began to move northwest. Because of the dense undergrowth movement was slow and necessitated moving in single file. To provide some measure of security to the north flank the company traveled close to the stream bank. This provided some observation and limited fields of fire.

B Company was committed at 1330. They began their airlift at 1350 and closed into their assigned landing zone at 1530. B Company then proceeded southeast to link up with Company A. Meanwhile, C Company received orders to change direction and proceed northeast to assist in the link up.

From 1200-1530, the first and third platoons of Company A were still in contact. The second platoon, co-located with the headquarter element, were pinned down approximately four hundred meters to the rear of the third platoon. The first and second platoons had set defensive positions and were clearing areas to be used for the evacuation of their wounded.

At 1600, the third platoon sent an eight man squad to the second platoon to secure additional ammunition. This squad, together with five men from the second platoon and one from the headquarters element, started their return to the platoon at 1630. They had closed to within 150 meters of the third platoon's position when they received mortar, automatic weapons and small arms fire from an NVA force that was attempting to flank the third platoon. They were pinned down by the heavy fire. Eight men became casualties, and the squad was separated into two elements. They remained in this disposition until 2300 when C Company reached them.

Company C continued its advance from the southwest, but it was seriously hampered by fallen trees knocked down by the heavy artillery and air strikes. At 1745 the company had its

first contact. A sniper, located in a tree, opened fire on the lead platoon. The point returned the fire killing the sniper. Before the company could continue its advance, Company B approaching from the northwest, came under heavy automatic weapons fire from well concealed bunkers about 25 - 30 meters to their front.

B Company had been moving down a trail in platoon column for speed and control, when the point of the third platoon came under fire. The platoon took immediate, heavy casualties. The Company Commander monitored the initial report sent to the battalion and held the company in place. They were less than eight hundred meters from B Company and could move to their assistance. He called the battalion and requested instructions. LTC Granger directed the company to continue towards A Company since they were still surrounded and in contact.

Due to the close proximity of the enemy, the company moved out with two platoons abreast. Proceeding cautiously, because of fading visibility and imminent contact, the company had difficulty in maintaining contact in the dense underbrush. Frequent halts were necessary to allow the platoons to cross obstacles and maintain contact. Proceeding under these conditions the company covered less than five hundred meters before all light disappeared.

The Company Commander halted the company and contacted A Company. He requested that their third platoon come up on his net to assist in guiding the company to their location. Company A responded immediately and the third platoon entered Company C's net. They were directed to fire three shots on order to assist in guiding the lead elements to their location. The Company Commander then called the second and third platoon leaders forward and informed them of the method to be used in guiding on Company A's third platoon.

To increase security to the flanks the Company Commander directed the second platoon to lead out. To gain maximum security on the southern flank the company moved along the edge of a steep hill. Within four hundred meters the draw on the south flank turned sharply to the north and headed directly into the main enemy positions. The second platoon halted and relayed the information back to the commanding officer.

Moving up to the second platoon location, he directed the platoon leader, Lt Rutledge, to send a squad down the slope and look for a crossing site that would speed movement and provide a degree of security. Within fifteen minutes the squad returned and gave its report. It was almost one hundred meters to the bottom of the slope. The bottom of the draw was almost ten feet wide, with the opposite bank rising steeply. The squad had found a crossing site less than twenty meters up the draw.

The second platoon was ordered to move down the slope, secure the crossing site, post guides and secure the opposite bank. The platoon moved out at 1915 and had accomplished its mission by 2000. The first platoon was then ordered to move up, cover the crossing of the third platoon and headquarters element and cross on order. The third platoon and headquarters element closed on the second platoon at 2045, and the first platoon was ordered to cross the draw.

The lead element of the first platoon closed on the company (-), but a break in the platoon caused a further delay. After fifteen minutes the missing element was located and proceeded towards the company. They were assisted by the security element from the second platoon. While waiting for the lost element to rejoin the company the second and third platoons were placed in columns.

Once the first platoon had closed, Company A's third platoon was called and requested to mark their location. From the sound of their fire the platoon was located less than three hundred meters away. The company moved forward on a forty-five degree azimuth.

At 2210 Lt. Rutledge, leading the second platoon on the right flank, called back that he could see several bodies to his front. The company halted and took up defensive positions while Lt. Rutledge move forward. Before he could cover five meters an enemy automatic weapon opened fire on Lt Rutledge's element.

"Hold Fire", yelled the Company Commander. He immediately called the third platoon of Company A and the fourteen man element to determine their location from the enemy automatic weapon.

The third platoon was located some 150 meters northwest of the enemy position. The fourteen man squad reported they were pinned down by the enemy position and were less than twenty meters to the east. Lt Rutledge called back to report that he was cut off from his platoon and was pinned down by the enemy fire.

Lt Alvarado, the third platoon leader, was directed to take the enemy position under fire. As the lead elements of the third platoon opened fire the enemy detonated several claymore mines. The enemy opened fire along the entire front of the company. Lt Alvarado, called back and reported that he had become pinned down by the heavy fire.

Moving forward to survey the situation, the Company Commander placed the left flank of the company into position to prevent the enemy from flanking them. Upon reaching Lt. Alvarado's position, he called the first platoon and told them to close the rear of the company and tie in with the second and third platoon.

Lt. Rutledge was requested to mark his location. When the enemy heard the calling, they opened fire with machine guns. The incoming fire split the second and third platoons and effectively pinned down the second platoon. Locating the enemy position, the Commanding Officer moved to his left and secured a M-60 machine gun.

Returning to his original position he again called out to draw the enemy fire. When the automatic weapon opened fire, he moved forward firing short bursts. His third burst destroyed the enemy position. Before he could direct his fire against another enemy position, a bullet struck the M-60 rendering it useless.

Returning to the perimeter, he then directed the second platoon into position. He had them lay down a base of fire to cover Lt. Rutledge's element move back into the perimeter. Lt. Rutledge informed the Commanding Officer that several seriously wounded men were located about fifteen meters to the right of his platoon. He was directed to expand the perimeter in the direction of the wounded personnel from the fourteen man element from A Company.

Lt. Alvarado was directed to maneuver his platoon to the left. As the third platoon moved forward the NVA detonated several more claymore mines. Snipers, in the trees to their front, opened fire on the third platoon. Enemy grenades fell among them and wounded five men. Realizing that he was opposed by a larger force than earlier estimated, the Commanding Officer ordered the third platoon to fall back.

At 2300 Lt Rutledge led several volunteers out of the perimeter to assist the wounded men from A Company's composite squad. Their movement drew immediate fire. Lt Rutledge

crawled forward to the more seriously wounded and administered Morphine. He then began the slow task of pulling them back into the perimeter.

The Pathfinder team accompanying C Company immediately began to cut an opening in the thick jungle for use by Dust Off. This action drew fire from the front and left flank of the company. Indirect fire was called in. It was used throughout the night to suppress the enemy sniper fire.

At 0115 the first platoon was directed to move from its present location, pass through the second platoon and link up with A Company's third platoon. Direct coordination was made between the two platoons. They agreed on a whistle signal to identify and locate one another. The first platoon passed through the second platoon at 0150 and moved toward Company A's third platoon.

As the first platoon approached the element from A Company they gave the prearranged signal. Some forty answers were received from around the surrounded platoon's positions. This information was quickly relayed back to the Company Commander. Realizing that any attempt at a link up would undoubtedly result in heavy casualties, and knowing that the surrounded platoon was not receiving fire at the time, he ordered the first platoon to return.

The situation was relayed to the battalion CP and a request was made to hold C Company in its present location until first light, at which time a platoon would be left behind to secure the landing zone. The company minus would then move to link up with the third platoon of A Company. LTC Granger approved the request and the company dug in for the night.

At 0530, the company received several rounds of mortar fire, and the NVA broke contact.

As first light approached, C Company moved out of the perimeter and headed for the third platoon of A Company. Contact was established by 0630. Casualties were treated and evacuated to C Company's location for extraction.

The company then headed toward the first platoon of A Company to assist them. They were located some three hundred meters to the southeast. Again, the medical aidmen treated the casualties. Company C ran a sweep over the area while the wounded were being treated. They constructed litters and began the move to A Company's CP. At 1130 the elements from both companies closed on the CP.

After twenty three hours, C Company had accomplished its mission.