Chapter 3

BACKGROUND

A. ENEMY SITUATION IN MARCH 1968

As a basis for evaluating the enemy situation in Quang Ngai Province, it is noted that in March 1968, enemy strength throughout South Vietnam was estimated to be approximately 263,200 men. Of this total, about 55,900 were Viet Cong (VC) combat forces, 87,400 were North Vietnamese Army (NVA) combat troops, and 69,100 were guerrillas, with the remaining 50,800 comprising administrative personnel.

The enemy maneuver battalions in South Vietnam were estimated by HQ, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to total 278 (158 North Vietnamese and 120 Viet Cong), distributed throughout the four corps tactical zones as follows:

- I Corps - 77 North Vietnamese and 18 Viet Cong
- II Corps - 55 North Vietnamese and 18 Viet Cong
- III Corps - 26 North Vietnamese and 50 Viet Cong
- IV Corps - 34 Viet Cong

Considering only Quang Ngai Province (sketch 3-1), enemy strength ranged between 10,000 and 20,000 men during the 4 years preceding the Son My incident. In early 1968 enemy strength was estimated to be between 10,000 and 14,000 men of which 2,000-4,000 were regular forces, 3,000-5,000 were guerrillas, and 5,000 were assigned to administrative units.

A number of VC and NVA regiments operated in Quang Ngai Province from 1964 to 1966. However, four local force battalions and eleven companies of VC were the forces primarily responsible for harassing the area under government control. The 48th Local Force (LF) Battalion became the principal enemy force in Son Tinh District, although it also operated in the Batangan area to the north as well as to the south of the Song Tra Khuc. Members of the 48th LF Battalion reportedly lived with the local villagers in order to conceal their presence, often working as farmers during the day and fighting as guerrillas at night.
While enemy main force regiments were operating primarily to the west and south of Quang Ngai City in 1967, elements of the 1st VC Regiment and the 21st NVA Regiment of the 2d NVA Division probably operated in Son Tinh District early in the year. During February and March the 1st VC Regiment moved southwest of Quang Ngai City and in April the 21st NVA Regiment was deployed to Quang Tin. After this, enemy main force/local force battalions operated in increasing numbers in Son Tinh District in 1967. The 409th Sapper Battalion began operating in the northern portion of the district in January, augmenting the 48th LF Battalion. Toward the end of 1967, these two battalions were joined by the 81st and 85th LF Battalion.

Prior to the 1968 Tet offensive, the VC formed two regiments in Quang Ngai Province by consolidating main and local force battalions. The 401st NVA Regiment was formed from main forces and infiltration packets, and three of the prominent LF battalions in the area, the 38th, 48th, and 81st Battalions, were consolidated to form the 328th VC Regiment. During Tet those two regiments, plus an independent battalion and at least 10 local force companies totaling over 3,000 men, attacked Quang Ngai City and other towns in the province. These attacks were eventually repulsed, but the VC continued to pose a threat, causing the Quang Ngai Province officials extreme concern over the possibility of a second attack on Quang Ngai City. In the Tet operation the 48th LF Battalion overran the Regional Force/Popular Force Training Center near Son Tinh and held it briefly until driven out by counterattacking 2d ARVN Division forces. In the ensuing fight the 48th LF Battalion reportedly suffered about 150 casualties, including the battalion commander and two company commanders, and a third company commander captured.

With the failure of the assault of Quang Ngai City and other province towns, VC units filtered back to their home areas, mostly to the south and west. Because of its heavy losses during Tet, elements of the 48th LF Battalion withdrew to the mountains in western Quang Ngai to reorganize and refit, while other elements of the battalion returned to their habitual area of operation on the Batangan Peninsula. By late February, the 48th LF Battalion headquarters had reportedly returned to the peninsula, but the unit remained out of contact during the first part of March, apparently to continue recuperating from the Tet setback. At the time of the Son My incident, the 48th LF Battalion had an estimated strength of 200-250 and was the only major enemy unit with elements in the Son My area. However, there were two additional local force companies in the district which on occasion joined the 48th LF Battalion in carrying out specific operations. Overall guerrilla strength in Son Tinh district was reported to be about 700 strong.
B. SON MY VILLAGE

Son My Village is located approximately 9 kilometers north-east of Quang Ngai City and fronts on the South China Sea. In March 1968, the village was composed of four hamlets, Tu Cung, My Lai, My Khe, and Co Luy, each of which contained several sub-hamlets (sketch 3-2).* Most of the residents of Son My either farm the rich alluvial soil along the rivers and streams or engage in offshore fishing operations.

C. THE PEOPLE OF QUANG NGAI PROVINCE

Historically, the people of Quang Ngai Province have a long record of supporting rebellion. In the 19th century they had been a focal point of resistance to French control of Indochina. Later, in the 1930's, they had fomented peasant revolts against Vietnamese supporting the French. After World War II when the French sought to reestablish themselves in Indochina, Quang Ngai became a Viet Minh stronghold and by 1948 Ho Chi Minh considered it free from French rule. Duc Pho, in southern Quang Ngai, became one of the largest rest and recreation areas for the Viet Minh forces until the country was divided by the Geneva Accords in 1954.

Although most of the Viet Minh departed for the north after the settlement of the Geneva Accords, some remained behind and their influence was particularly strong in the rural areas. By the 1960's, a whole generation of young people had grown up under the control of the Viet Minh and the later National Liberation Front.

When the Government of South Vietnam launched the Strategic Hamlet Program in 1962, Quang Ngai Province became a principal objective. The government attempted to separate the villagers from the National Liberation Front soldiers and organizers, usually by forcing the people to move to new fortified villages.

*The Vietnamese knew many of these subhamlets by names different from those indicated on US topographic maps of the area. Where there is a difference, the American designation is shown in parentheses on the sketch map. For example, the subhamlet identified on the topographic map as My Lai (4) is actually named Thuan Yen; the subhamlet identified on the map as My Khe (4) is known to the Vietnamese as My Hoi. Except for Thuan Yen and My Lai (4), which are used interchangeably, the US Map designations for the subhamlets are used throughout this report, since those names are cited by witnesses in testimony.
The old villages and fields were often burned to prevent their use by the rebel elements. The program frequently aroused resentment and, it was eventually superseded by the New Life Hamlet Program which emphasized aid and development for the villagers rather than being primarily security oriented. The end result of both these programs was usually less than satisfactory, for the concentration of villagers in strategic hamlets did not alter their allegiance to the National Liberation Front. Many villages remained under the domination of the Front and continued to provide recruits, taxes, food, supplies, and information to the VC and North Vietnamese units operating in their locale.

The village of Son My fell into this category. Some of its subhamlets, such as My Lai (1), had been burned to the ground by ARVN Forces well before American forces were deployed to Quang Ngai. Many of the villagers had been brought to Quang Ngai City as refugees with plans to resettle them in other areas. Life in the refugee centers was depressing; consequently, many villagers drifted back to their old home areas and to VC control. In the eyes of the Government of Vietnam (GVN) the people who continued to live in the Son My area were considered generally to be either VC or VC sympathizers.

D. ENEMY TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES

As previously discussed, the enemy forces which operated in Quang Ngai Province and Son Tinh District included guerrillas, local and main force units and, at times, NVA units. These forces were highly skilled in hit-and-run guerrilla tactics and had the ability to survive in a counterinsurgency environment.

During the initial phases of the war, the Communists placed primary reliance on the employment of guerrilla tactics which were carried out by basic three-man VC guerrilla cells. Working covertly, these guerrilla cells performed assassinations, acts of terrorism, and conducted sabotage and limited clandestine military operations with the objective of gradually bringing more and more villages under VC control.

As the war expanded, the Communists increased their forces in South Vietnam by the organization of local and main force units up to battalion and regimental size and in late 1964, began a large-scale infiltration of NVA units. The local force units were normally recruited from a particular district and limited their operations to within the district. They lived with the people as a means of concealment and as a source of support. Main force units were organized and operated at province level, usually from secure base areas located in the mountains or jungle from where they could strike targets in the populated areas. Normally NVA units had assigned areas of operation but could be employed wherever the situation required.
Regardless of the type unit, the tactics employed by the Communist forces recognized their own shortcomings and were designed to exploit the weaknesses of the US, ARVN and other Free World Military Assistance Forces. Lacking the strength and firepower to survive an extended major battle, they relied primarily on operations which permitted them to mass, attack, and withdraw before US or GVN/ARVN forces could react. Their operations at every level were characterized by methodical planning, detailed rehearsals, and violent execution.

Prior to undertaking an operation, the VC/NVA normally would obtain very detailed information regarding their potential targets including the location of fighting positions, key installations, and the identification of security weaknesses. Using this information, which might require weeks or months to develop, they would then prepare a detailed step-by-step plan for the operation. The plan would then be rehearsed until every man in the force was thoroughly familiar with details of the target area and the functions he was to perform.

The VC had the choice of the time they wanted to fight and were willing to delay execution of an operation for as long as necessary in order to improve their chances of success. Once the decision was made to attack, the unit was moved, using clandestine techniques, to the target area. In doing this, the VC would often attempt to infiltrate demolitionist, sapper type personnel into the area to destroy key installations, and artillery and automatic weapons positions. Their final attack normally was executed only at a predetermined time or after the presence of their infiltrators had been detected. As an alternate type of attack they sometimes employed mortars, rockets, and recoilless rifles in stand-off attacks against population centers and military installations to prepare or soften the target for attack. These same basic procedures were generally followed in every type of operation, operations characterized by stealth, surprise, and shock action.

Typical operations conducted at the local force level included the ambushing of small convoys, attacking of village and district offices or security outposts, the assassination or kidnapping of local Vietnamese officials and other acts designed to illustrate their control of the area in which they operated. The main force and NVA units assisted the local force units but primarily conducted large-scale operations against US and ARVN forces and installations.

The VC made extensive use of mines and boobytraps, especially at the hamlet and village level. In addition to the men in their combat units, children, women, and old men were used to construct homemade boobytraps and mines which they normally emplaced at night under the cover of darkness. The mines and boobytraps were
used in a wide variety of ways. Some of them were employed as weapons of terror against the population; such as mines planted under or along well used roadways to blow-up buses and other vehicles; demolition devices installed in theaters and other crowded areas; or a simple grenade thrown into a group of people. In another tactic, they used them as defensive weapons to cover roads, paths, and other avenues of approach to and within their controlled areas. Some such areas were literally infested with VC mines and boobytraps and had the effect of slowing and restricting friendly offensive operations. It was this latter type of employment which tended to create hatred and frustration against the unseen enemy.

The operations of all VC/NVA forces in a particular area were closely controlled and coordinated with the local VC infrastructure's political and administrative apparatus in the attempt to achieve their objective of total domination of the people. The Communist recognized but few restraints in their operations and were often ruthless in conducting them. All operations were planned and executed keeping in mind the ultimate goal of seizing control of the government of South Vietnam and the people.

E. FREE WORLD MILITARY ASSISTANCE FORCES (FWMAF) OBJECTIVES FOR 1968

In furtherance of the objective of attaining a stable and independent non-Communist government in South Vietnam, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), in coordination with the GVN and other FWMAF set forth three military objectives after the Tet offensive in January-February 1968 to: (1) Counter the enemy’s Tet offensive and destroy and eject North Vietnamese invasion forces; (2) restore security to population centers and other vital areas and emphasize recovery from the recent pacification disruptions; and (3) resume the effort to fulfill the objectives of the 1968 Combined Campaign Plan to destroy enemy forces in the Republic of Vietnam and extend government control throughout the country.

To carry out the military objectives, MACV proposed the following military tasks to: (1) Inflict maximum attrition upon the enemy; (2) abandon no territory; (3) support the Government of Vietnam in providing territorial security for pacification; (4) open and secure lines of communication; and (5) build the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam physically and psychologically into an effective fighting force.

Operations for the remainder of the year were to be directed at searching out and destroying enemy main, local, and guerrilla forces and at identifying and eliminating the enemy's infrastructure. Particular attention was to be given to the pursuit and
destruction of enemy forces in the densely populated areas and to the containment of the enemy in the border areas. Renewed efforts were also to be made to destroy base areas and to neutralize progressively the less important strongholds.

In the I Corps, north of the Hai Van Pass, MACV objectives were to restore security in Hue and other populated centers; to counter and destroy the North Vietnamese enemy forces; to destroy the enemy base complexes along the Laotian border and in and to the north of the demilitarized zone; to secure Route 1, and to open Route 9, the vital logistics artery from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh; to occupy the Ashau Valley and to destroy the infiltration complexes leading to the valley; to eliminate the threat posed by enemy forces operating from Base Areas 101 and 114; and to assist the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces in restoring security and the pacification program in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. South of the Hai Van Pass, the main tasks were to destroy the 2d NVA Division; to neutralize the Do Xa area; and to establish a more secure situation for Da Nang, Hoi An, Tam Ky, Quang Ngai City, and other population centers in the pacification priority area.

F. STATUS OF PACIFICATION

The enemy Tet offensive had a serious impact upon the pacification effort in Quang Ngai Province. Two districts, Duc Pho and Nghia Hanh, came under virtual VC control and two others, Tu Nghia and Son Tinh, where Son My Village is located, had what was considered a heavy VC presence in the wake of the Tet operations. In addition, because of its large population, Son Tinh had taken the heaviest losses in Quang Ngai insofar as human lives, crops, and livestock were concerned.

There were four Regional Force (RF) companies, each with an authorized strength of 123, and 33 Popular Force (PF) platoons, each with an authorized strength of 33, to provide security for the population of over 120,000 people in Son Tinh District. Additionally, three battalions of the 2d ARVN Division supported the Rural Development Program in the province under the operational control of the Province Chief. The province also had 41 Revolutionary Development (RD) Teams of 59 men each. Of these, 25 were working in the hamlets. However, many of the RD teams removed from the area of Route 1* did not remain in the hamlets overnight, as they were supposed to, but retired to protected bases until the following day.

* Route 1 is the major north-south land route of communication in South Vietnam. It is correctly identified as QL 1 but is commonly referred to by US personnel as Route 1 or Highway 1.
Many of the RF and PF did not return to their pre-Tet positions in Son Tinh District until late February and early March due to the continuing threat of VC forces against the population centers and the lines of communication. For the greater part the RF/PF were employed in manning static defense positions, providing bridge and line of communications security, and guarding the approaches to Quang Ngai City.

They were not oriented toward village or hamlet security nor had they been trained fully as reaction forces for rapid deployment to critical areas as needed. Thus, the RF/PF were not positioned to provide protection for population centers, except for Quang Ngai City, and seldom ventured away from their defensive posts. Their preoccupation with their own fortified bases led to a lack of communication or contact with the people, thereby minimizing government influence in the district and province.

At the beginning of March 1968 security conditions in Quang Ngai did not permit a resumption of normal rural development activities. Fear still existed that a second phase of the Tet offensive might be launched at any time, despite strong indications that only enemy local force battalions were in the area and the fact that no strong possibility of imminent operations had been uncovered. In Son Tinh District, little effort had been made as of March to broaden government control of the countryside or to renew its pacification activities. Government officials were primarily occupied with the restoration of authority in areas lost during Tet and had little time to concern themselves with villages, such as Son My, which had been long under the control of the VC.

G. US PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS (PSYOPS)

The Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO), which was formed in 1965, was responsible for the development of US psychological operations policy in Vietnam. Within the context of this guidance and published campaign plans, MACV policy specified that commanders would plan and conduct psychological operations in support of each military operation and pacification program. The JUSPAO established theme for the post-Tet PSYOPS campaign, which extended from 4 February to 21 March 1968, was "Chieu-Hoi" which means rally to the Government of Vietnam.

Accordingly, the Chieu Hoi program was being emphasized throughout the Americal Division AO immediately prior to the Son My incident. In addition, PSYOPS missions emphasizing the Volunteer Informant Program and the Return to Government Control program were being conducted.
The TF Oregon SOP, which was still applicable at this point, cited the following situations as appropriate for exploitation by PSYOPS:

(1) Explain the presence of American and friendly powers and show that the VC cannot match the GVN, US, and allied commitments.

(2) Exploit victories by both ARVN and friendly forces to maintain a winning spirit within the ARVN forces and the civilian populace.

(3) Exploit the Chieu Hoi program to encourage VC ralliers at every opportunity.

(4) Take advantage of VC/NVA vulnerabilities, such as mounting casualties, alienation of population due to: increased terrorism, taxation, impressment, lowered living conditions, examples of lower morale, and increasing defections.

(5) Exploit information from VC/NVA ralliers or PW's.

MAJ (now LTC) Stanley E. Holtom, Division PSYOPS Officer in March 1968, stated that while PSYOPS should support tactical operations, development of the program was left primarily to his initiative as to the time, themes, and media of dissemination which should be employed. Apparently, there was minimum coordination with G3 or other staff sections. According to Holtom, there was little or no effort to plan PSYOPS to support tactical operations prior to June 1968. In fact, there seemed to be little emphasis on PSYOPS within the Americal Division during this period. All psychological operations were conducted independently and were generally limited to the available standard prerecorded messages or leaflets which applied to any locale rather than being targeted at a specific area. Citing the Son My operation as an example, he stated that he had no knowledge of the planning of the operation. He added that he did work in close coordination with GVN officials regarding programs aimed at instilling in the people a sense of loyalty and responsibility to the government.

The 11th Brigade tactical SOP (draft) stated that commanders would plan and incorporate PSYOPS into all tactical operations and activities involving contact with the local populace. The SOP specified that all PSYOPS activities within the brigade would be directed at achieving the following objectives:

(1) Convince all audiences that GVN victory is inevitable with the support of the US and FWMAF.
(2) Persuade all audiences that the fastest way to end the war and achieve peace and security is to support free Vietnam and oppose the Viet Cong.

(3) Convince all audiences that the US presence in Vietnam is to help the RVN and is temporary in nature.

(4) Convince the Viet Cong that returnees will be sincerely welcome.

While the staff coordination at brigade level appears to have been somewhat closer than that at division, the Brigade S5 still was not completely informed or always consulted regarding PSYOPS support for tactical operations. The 11th Brigade S5 stated that most psychological operations were conducted routinely, and somewhat independently, except for multibattalion operations conducted west of Route 1 for which the S3 would direct him to prepare an annex to the operations order. According to the S5, there were no PSYOPS ever conducted in direct support of any tactical operation along the coastal plains. He stated that PSYOPS in such areas of operation consisted primarily of standard broadcasts and leaflet drops targeted at areas normally selected by him spread throughout the Duc Pho and Mo Duc areas plus the TB Barker AO. Areas in which effective results were achieved were targeted repeatedly.

H. FRIENDLY SITUATION

In March 1968, FWMAF in South Vietnam totaled 576,200 of which over 515,200 were US. The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) had a strength of over 310,700. In addition, there were over 400,000 Vietnamese serving in the Regional Forces, Popular Forces, Police Forces, Self-Defense Forces, and other such organizations. At that time there were 300 friendly maneuver battalions deployed throughout South Vietnam. Of this total, 55 US, 4 Free World, and 36 RVNAF battalions were deployed in the I Corps area.

During the year prior to the Son My incident, Quang Ngai Province had been the responsibility of ARVN, ROK Marine, US Marine, and US Army forces all of which had conducted many small unit operations in the province. Those which were more significant are summarized below.

In February 1967, US Marines, ROK Marines, and the 2d ARVN Division conducted the first combined operation in the I Corps against the 21st NVA Regiment, 2d NVA Division, in western Quang Ngai, employing seven battalions, three of them ARVN airborne. As the 21st NVA Regiment pulled back under ROK Marine pressure,
the airborne forces made heavy contact with the North Vietnamese units and reportedly inflicted over 800 casualties upon them.

During September, the 2d ROK Marine Brigade launched Operation Dragon Fire against enemy forces in eastern Son Tinh and Binh Son Districts. This three-battalion operation lasted until the end of October with the ROK Marines claiming over 540 enemy killed and 138 suspects captured during the campaign.

The 2d ARVN Division carried out several search and destroy missions in eastern Son Tinh District during December 1967. One such operation employed two companies in coordination with one RF company and a PF platoon in a one-day operation northwest of My Lai (4). The Vietnamese forces reported that they had killed 40 of the enemy, while suffering casualties of 11 killed and 8 wounded.

When the decision was made to deploy the 2d ROK Marine Brigade out of Quang Ngai Province into Quang Nam Province to reinforce northern I Corps, the Americal Division, in cooperation with the 2d ARVN Division, was tasked to take over the ROK area of responsibility; areas of operation were changed accordingly (sketch 3-3). Elements of the 198th Infantry Brigade moved into the area in late December with the mission of locating and destroying enemy MF/LF units and extending government control over the districts. Initial contacts were light and friendly casualties were low.

On 2 January 1968, the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, assumed operational control of most of the Muscatine AO (sketch 3-4), the 198th Brigade retaining a small sector in the north. Relief of the 2d ROK Marine Brigade continued until completion on 22 January. In the meantime, the Americal units which conducted operations in the area took a steady toll of casualties from enemy mines and boobytraps. In one heavy contact on 17 January, about 10 miles north of My Lai (4), elements of the 198th Brigade combat assaulted the village of An Thinh (1). Blocking the escape routes and using gunships effectively, the battalion sent one company to sweep the village. As the enemy tried to flee, they were engaged by gunships and the units in the blocking positions. At the end of the day, it was reported that 83 VC had been killed and 34 weapons captured, while the US forces had five men wounded.

The 198th Brigade resumed control of the entire Muscatine area on 25 January to include the operational control of the 11th Infantry Brigade's, 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry (-) and of Task Force (TF) Barker which had been formed to assist in controlling the area vacated by the ROK Marine Brigade. Subsequently, the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, moved north into Quang Ngai Province to replace the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division, in Operation Wheeler/Wallowa.
When the 2d ARVN Division learned that elements of the 22d NVA Regiment, 3d NVA Division, had moved into the area southwest of Quang Ngai City following the Tet offensive, it launched Operation Quyet Thang 22 on 24 February 1968, to seek out and destroy them. Aided by strong tactical air and artillery support during a 2-week campaign, the South Vietnamese maintained continuous pressure against heavily dug-in enemy positions until the latter finally broke contact and withdrew on 10 March.

In the meantime, in Operation Muscatine, the ground contacts had been light. Since most of the enemy local force units had been committed to the attacks on Quang Ngai City during Tet, it was not surprising that the sector was inactive. Gunships, however, engaged a force of 150 VC about 8 kilometers north of My Lai (4) on 30 January and reported that they had killed over 40 of the enemy. TF Barker units made scattered contacts with small groups of VC in the Batangan Peninsula area during the Tet period but none of any significance.

On 4 February, the 11th Brigade assumed control of the southern and western portions of the Muscatine AO and of its own 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry (-), and TF Barker. The 11th Brigade now had operational responsibility for both the Muscatine AO and the Duc Pho/Mo Duc District areas. The districts lying between the 11th Brigade's areas - Tu Nghia and Nghia Hanh - and the southern part of Son Tinh District, north and west of Quang Ngai City, were the responsibility of the 2d ARVN Division (sketch 3-5). In the Muscatine AO, TF Barker was responsible for the region lying east of Route 1 in Son Tinh and southern Binh Son Districts and the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry (-) for the territory west of the road (sketch 3-6). For TF Barker the main task was to conduct operations to locate and destroy main and local force units and guerrillas and to eliminate the VC infrastructure in the area north and northeast of Quang Ngai City.

Headquarters TF Barker was at LZ Dottie, about 11 kilometers northwest of My Lai (4). Its direct support artillery, D Battery 6th Battalion, 11th Artillery (105mm howitzer), was located at LZ Uptight, about 8 kilometers north of My Lai (4). Troop lift and gunships for the TF were provided by the 174th Assault Helicopter Company, located at LZ Bronco in Duc Pho, and aero-scout activities were carried out by Company B, 123d Aviation Battalion, whose rear base was at Chu Lai and forward base at LZ Dottie. Two "Swift Boats" from the Coastal Surveillance Force, Navy were available for patrolling operations offshore in conjunction with the TF's ground operations.
SON MY VILLAGE

- Village Boundary
- Hamlet Boundary

80 74

SONG TRA KHUC

MY KHE (2)

MY KHE (1)

MY KHE (3)

MY KHE (4)

MY LAI (1)

MY LAI (2)

MY LAI (6)

MY LAI (5)

THUAN YEN

TRUNG HOA

TRUNG AN

BINH TAY

BINH DONG

TRANG LANG

AN Loc (1)

SOUTH CHINA SEA
AMERICAN - 2d ARVN DIVISION BOUNDARIES (QUANG NGAI PROVINCE)

Estimate of 2d ARVN western boundary based on best available information.
11th BRIGADE
AREA OF OPERATION

KILOMETERS

SKETCH 3-5
The principal units involved in the Son My incident were B/4-3 Inf and C/1-20 Inf of the 11th Infantry Brigade which, upon its deployment to Vietnam, was attached to the Americal Division.

A. AMERICAL (23D) DIVISION

The Americal Division was organized in September 1967 and formally activated in October, when MG S. W. Koster was presented the division colors. Like its predecessor, Task Force (TF) Oregon, and the original Americal, the division was a patchwork organization. Only one of the three separate brigades to be attached to the division, the 196th Infantry, was in Vietnam at the time of activation. The remaining two brigades, the 198th Infantry and the 11th Infantry, were both still in training in Texas and Hawaii, respectively. In the meantime, the Americal Division assumed temporary operational control of 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, plus the forces supporting TF Oregon. On 4 October, the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division, was also placed under the operational control of the Americal Division, to participate in Operation Wheeler/Wallowa and so remained until 25 January 1968.

In late October, the 198th Light Infantry Brigade arrived in Vietnam, and, after a month's training at Duc Pho, relieved the 196th Infantry Brigade in place at Chu Lai. The latter, in turn, relieved the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, which departed from I Corps in late November. In December, the 11th Infantry Brigade deployed from Hawaii, trained in the Duc Pho area under the sponsorship of the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and subsequently assumed responsibility for the Duc Pho area on 2 January 1968. The 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, was released from the Americal Division, was moved to II Corps, and
was placed under the operational control of I Field Force on 29 February. The 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, was also attached to the Americal Division (less operational control) for a short time on 16 February to 12 March 1968.

By mid-March, the Americal Division was composed of three attached brigades: 11th, 196th, and 198th, plus supporting forces. The division initially was organized with a light division base, since the necessary support elements were organic to each of the three separate brigades. These brigades were initially established as independent brigades to provide the Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) forces which could be detached and immediately deployed to higher priority areas without disrupting one of the combat divisions or the normal administrative and logistical support system. It was not until April 1969 that the division was fully reorganized and the brigades made organic to the division. This was accomplished by attaching each of the brigade headquarters to the division and relieving the maneuver battalions from assignment to the brigades and assigning them to the division.

It was also necessary to reorganize the austere TF Oregon staff into a full division staff. This proceeded in a piecemeal fashion over a long period of time and, with the division controlling the operations of up to five brigades and about 24,000 men in its early stages, many of the division staff sections experienced difficulty. The staggered arrival of the 198th and 11th Brigades from the United States, for example, necessitated the gradual merger of the personnel services elements of all three brigades into a consolidated unit. New regulations and procedures had to be published quickly to insure uniformity and responsiveness of the personnel management system to support the once independent brigades.

The division faced major personnel problems in meeting the 12-month rotational policy, as did all units in Vietnam. Control of the rotational "hump" within the brigades was particularly acute and required the transfer of personnel between the brigades, known as the infusion program, to reduce the impact and to remain within the restrictions established as to percentage of unit strength allowed to rotate within any one month. This infusion program, plus the receipt of large numbers of replacements arriving from the United States, created considerable personnel turbulence. New arrivals had to be integrated and to become familiar with their new commanders and noncommissioned officers and the operating procedures of their new unit. For the two brigades arriving from the United States in October and December, personnel
shortages and the infusion process tended to further reduce the effectiveness of their training and operational readiness.

As the 11th Infantry Brigade completed its movement to Vietnam, the Replacement Detachment of the Americal Division moved to Chu Lai and took over the Division Combat Center where the total replacements received for training each week increased from 300 to a peak of 1,000 for an average of over 500 per week. The Combat Center conducted a 6-day in-country orientation and replacement training course for all replacement personnel plus assigned and attached units. This course was climaxed by a live combat patrol-night ambush operation. Part of the first day's instruction was devoted to the handling of prisoners of war (PW's) and the provisions of the Geneva Conventions. Records of the Americal Division state that 7,700 replacements received instruction in the Geneva Conventions during the period 12 December 1967 to 29 March 1968. (The United States Army, Vietnam (USARV) Inspector General (IG) inspection report of 31 July 1968 lists as a deficiency the lack of instruction on the Geneva Conventions.) Classes were also presented in combat leadership and long-range patrol techniques. As facilities at Chu Lai were substandard in many cases, considerable time was devoted to their improvement in order to provide adequate housing and training facilities for the new replacements. Beginning in December 1967, refresher training was conducted for units to correct deficiencies noted during combat operations and was tailored specifically to the needs of the squad or platoon undergoing the course.

The combat capability of the Americal Division during the September 1967-March 1968 period is difficult to assess, since the composition of the division changed continually, with only the 196th Brigade attached to the Americal for the entire 6 months. The 196th Brigade, operating against elements of the 2d North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Division in Operation Wheeler/Wallowa in January 1968, performed well and accounted for 192 enemy killed in action (KIA) on a single day. Americal Division totals in Wheeler/Wallowa from 1 November 1967 to 31 January 1968 claimed 1,718 Viet Cong (VC) and 1,585 North Vietnamese KIA and 492 individual weapons and 115 crew-served weapons captured. Division losses over the same period in the operation were 220 killed, 713 wounded evacuated, and 342 minor wounded.
B. THE 11TH INFANTRY BRIGADE (LT)

The 11th Infantry Brigade was reactivated in Hawaii in 1966 and was organic to the 6th Infantry Division. Initially the brigade consisted of three infantry battalions -- the 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry; the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry; and the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry--and had the mission of acting as the US Army Pacific reserve.

When the Secretary of Defense approved, in July 1967, General Westmoreland's request for deployment of additional US ground forces to Vietnam by February 1968, the 11th Infantry Brigade was selected as one of the units to be deployed. Since the brigade was designated for attachment to the Americal Division, it had to be reorganized as a separate light brigade to conform with its two sister brigades. The general effect was to increase the number of infantry troops, to reduce the amount of vehicles and other heavy equipment, and to provide the brigade with additional support elements.

During 1967, the brigade had conducted an active training program which began with air mobility training and was followed by tactical exercises during February and March. In April, an accelerated training program was initiated. Special emphasis was placed upon advanced individual training which included use of the Jungle Warfare Training Center (JWTC). This facility was renovated after being in a caretaker status since departure of the 25th Infantry Division. Each company used the facility for one week. Instructor personnel were sent to Hawaii from the US Continental Army Command (USCONAR C) to aid in the training program and 400 fully trained infantrymen joined the brigade to assist in meeting the criteria necessary for an emergency deployment.

In late May and June, the brigade administered battalion and company Army Training Tests (ATT). After the alert was received in July, the brigade began preparation for participation in a 10-day amphibious exercise (Coral Sands II) which was conducted in August off the island of Molokai. This provided one of the limited opportunities for the brigade headquarters to practice command and control over all subordinate maneuver elements during a field exercise.

Upon completion of the amphibious exercise, the brigade concentrated upon preparing personnel for deployment. Language training for men who were to be used as interpreters, individual weapons familiarization and record firing, classroom instruction and field firing for
crew-served weapons personnel, and orientation lectures on the Vietnam social and tactical environment helped to prepare brigade members for their upcoming mission.

One of the more serious problems facing the brigade was the replacement of over 1,300 men who were nondeployable under existing deployability criteria. The decision in October 1967 to deploy the brigade to Vietnam in December rather than January further magnified the replacement problem. Many filler personnel were added to the brigade to meet the personnel shortfalls. Replacements continued to arrive up until the deployment date, requiring numerous adjustments in the training program. It was necessary to shorten the training schedule from the normal 8 weeks to 4 which made it difficult to provide adequate unit training. The combination of all these factors resulted in considerable confusion and caused significant turmoil in the brigade's personnel status which was detrimental to their predeployment preparation. Even with the influx of replacements, the brigade was still short over 700 men at the time of deployment.

Subordinate units were rescheduled through the JWTC for a 3-day course which all units of the brigade had to attend and complete. One of eleven stations set up for the training was a typical Southeast Asian village where the soldier was taught the proper methods of securing, searching, and clearing villages as well as how to work best with the civilian population. In addition, new M-16 rifles were issued to all personnel just 2 weeks before deployment which required that familiarization and range firing be conducted up to the last minute.

The 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry, was assigned as the 11th Brigade's 4th Battalion in November 1967 but did not deploy with the brigade to Vietnam in December. It remained in Hawaii to complete its organization and training, and arrived in Vietnam in April 1968.

The main body of the brigade moved by sea from Hawaii to Vietnam during the period 5-22 December, debarking at Qui Nhon and moving to Duc Pho by land and air. It replaced the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, which acted as the host unit, in the Duc Pho area of operation.

To compensate for the shortened training period in Hawaii, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) had agreed to provide the brigade with a month of additional training in-country before it was committed to operations. The 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, provided 3 days of a planned 7-day
orientation course (curtailed due to operational requirements) and the 174th Aviation Company instructed brigade personnel on the characteristics of helicopter gunships and troop carriers "Slicks" and conducted combat assault training for the infantry units. The 2d ARVN Division provided a Vietnamese village training course that lasted one day. Conducted in a deserted village near Duc Pho, the course gave a practical demonstration of VC methods of concealment and boobytrapping and emphasized correct search techniques. Other instruction received by the brigade in January included search procedures for locating VC bunkers and "holes," ambush techniques, and the destruction of enemy fortifications and rice caches.

As the brigade made its last-minute preparations for commitment to combat, there was one disturbing element. Additional replacements to bring the brigade up to strength plus the infusion of personnel to ease the rotational hump had produced considerable personnel turbulence. Although undesirable, this was not an uncommon occurrence for many of the units deployed to Vietnam who performed effectively despite this difficulty.

C. TASK FORCE BARKER

When the 11th Brigade assumed responsibility for the Muscatine area of operations (AO), it was necessary for the brigade commander to reorganize his forces in order to occupy the area with six rifle companies, which the division commander considered the minimum force required to control the area. BG Andy A. Lipscomb, the brigade commander, opted to establish a separate TF during the period 20-22 January to man the eastern part of the Muscatine AO and designated the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry (-) as the unit responsible for the western section. This permitted the brigade commander to put six companies in the area.

The TF commander plus an austere staff were drawn from the staff of the 11th Brigade. This weakened and reduced the effectiveness of the brigade staff. LTC Frank A. Barker, Jr., the brigade S3, was chosen to be the TF commander. MAJ Charles C. Calhoun, the brigade S1, was designated a combination Executive Officer/S3, and CPT Eugene M. Kotouc was later assigned as the TF S2.

TF Barker (named after its commander) consisted of three companies, one from each of the brigade's battalions. These were: A/3-1 Inf, B/4-3 Inf, C/1-20 Inf. Each was considered by the brigade commander to be the best company in its bat-
talion. Also attached to the TF were: the 3d Platoon, Troop E, 1st Cavalry (-); elements of the 2d Platoon, Company C, 26th Engineer Battalion; and a squad from the 11th MP Platoon. Battery D, 6th Battalion, 11th Artillery (a provisional battery consisting of four 105 howitzers instead of the normal six) located at Landing Zone (LZ) Uptight was in direct support.

From 22 January through 15 March 1968 the TF suffered over 100 friendly casualties, about 40 percent of which occurred during operations in the Son My area during the month of February. During the same period the TF estimated enemy casualties to be about 300 killed and wounded and 50 captured; the recorded individual weapons captured totaled about 20.

D. COMPANY C, 1ST BATTALION, 20TH INFANTRY (C/1-20 INF)

Company C had an authorized strength of six officers and 175 enlisted men until early March 1968, when the authorized enlisted strength was reduced to 158 men by an Army-wide change to the rifle company Table of Organization and Equipment (TOE). However, the operating strength of the unit was much lower. Of the 5 officers and 125 enlisted men available for duty in mid-March, approximately 20 were required to remain at the company's rear base to provide administrative and logistics backup for the company. Eleven enlisted men from other units were attached to the company increasing field operating strength to about 120 men.

Organized as a standard rifle company, the unit had a headquarters platoon, three rifle platoons, and a weapons platoon. Because of the company understrength, some of the platoons operated with only two squads.

Since December 1966, the company had been commanded by CPT Ernest L. Medina. He had led the unit through the regular training program conducted by the 11th Infantry Brigade in Hawaii, where Company C had participated in intensive jungle training, as well as limited amphibious and air mobility training and exercises and had passed its ATT. After the brigade was alerted in mid-1967 for deployment to Vietnam at the end of the year, the company began an accelerated training program for the overseas movement.

Among the many subjects covered, according to testimony
of some witnesses, was routine instruction on the handling and treatment of prisoners. This instruction was directed primarily toward the so-called 5 S's -- Search, Silence, Segregate, Speed, and Safeguard. During this instruction, little emphasis was placed on the treatment of civilians and refugees or the responsibility for reporting war crimes or atrocities.

Company C was selected to deploy with the advance element of the brigade in the move to Vietnam and was consequently scheduled to leave Hawaii on 1 December 1967. The earlier departure date further compressed all training to a minimum during November as the company was heavily engaged in screening out personnel ineligible to deploy, receiving new replacements, and drawing and preparing equipment for the move. The influx of newly assigned personnel into the company (over 50 percent of the strength) during the predeployment period tended to further reduce the effectiveness of the training program.

After arriving in the Duc Pho area in early December, the company attended the brigade's in-country indoctrination training program. Indications are that instruction on the handling and treatment of civilians or refugees was not covered during this training. The company immediately began to carry out small squad-size patrols, to man the brigade perimeter at night, and to construct bunkers during the day. Orientation and training in the Duc Pho area continued until January 1968 when the company was assigned to TF Barker and moved to the Muscatine AO.

During the 7 weeks prior to the Son My operation, Company C did not engage in any major combat action. It did participate in patrolling and other offensive operations and also acted as a base security force. Contacts with the enemy were light and confined to sniper fire. The bulk of the company's casualties from hostile action during the January to mid-March period were caused by enemy mines and boobytraps. Of the casualty total of 4 killed and 38 wounded, only 1 of the killed and 2 of the wounded resulted from direct enemy contact.

A survey of the personnel assets of Company C indicates that none of the men had had significant combat experience before the Son My operation and that this was their first major
assault role. In the matter of leadership, CPT Medina was considered to be an outstanding company commander by his men and superiors, but the platoon leaders were not so regarded.

Two-thirds of the 23 noncommissioned officers in the company were enlistees and the majority were above the average in all evaluated areas. There was a higher percentage of high school graduates and men with college credits in this group than was found throughout the Army at that time with the majority being above the average in general learning and infantry ability.

The remainder of the enlisted men represented an average cross section of enlistees and inductees with about 40 percent being enlistees and slightly over 60 percent inductees. The inductees, as a group, had less education and were less trainable than the average for Army-wide accessions for the period. Despite this, they were better than average in infantry aptitude. Well over 50 percent were high school graduates and almost a fourth of the enlistees had some college credits. The average age of the enlistees was just under 21 years. The inductees were above the average in practically every evaluated area. Close to 80 percent were high school graduates and about 17 percent had college credits. Average age of the inductees was 22 years.

About 8 percent of the enlisted personnel, less noncommissioned officers, fell into the Project One Hundred Thousand category and were in the lowest mental group. The percentage of this group was lower than the Army-wide accession figure of 12 percent.

Taken as a whole, the personnel composition of Company C contained no significant deviation from the average and there was little to distinguish it from other rifle companies.

E. COMPANY B, 4TH BATTALION, 3D INFANTRY (B/4-3 INF)

Company B had an authorized strength of 6 officers and 175 enlisted men until March 1968, when the enlisted strength was reduced to 158 men. In mid-March 1968, there were 5 officers and 134 enlisted men assigned to the company. Of these, 2 officers and 63 enlisted men had been assigned since the company's arrival in Vietnam. Because of personnel requirements for administrative and logistic backup for the company, the field operating strength was reduced to approximately 115 men. The company was organized as a standard rifle company, but because it was understrength, the first and second platoons were reduced to two rifle squads each for the Son My operation.

During 1967 the company followed the regular training program conducted by the 11th Infantry Brigade in Hawaii. After the brigade was alerted in mid-March 1967 for deployment
to Vietnam, the company began, as did all other units, an intensive training program to prepare for tactical operations in Vietnam emphasizing weapons training, the Vietnam social environment, and counterinsurgency operations. Routine instruction on the handling and treatment of prisoners was also covered. Again, no special emphasis was placed on the treatment of civilians and refugees or the responsibilities for reporting war crimes or atrocities. The assignment of approximately 50 replacement personnel during the 2-month period before embarkation undoubtedly resulted in deployment of some personnel without adequate unit training.

After arriving in the Duc Pho area in mid-December, the company received the same indoctrination training as all other rifle companies of the brigade and soon began to carry out small squad-size patrols, to man the perimeter at night, and to construct bunkers during the day. Orientation and training in Duc Pho area continued until January 1968 when the company was assigned to TF Barker and moved to the Muscatine AO.

A survey of the personnel assets of Company B indicates that few of the men had had significant combat experience. There were no Vietnam returnees in the company and only two noncommissioned officers had previous combat experience before Vietnam. However, the company was familiar with and respected the hazards of the Son My area due to its previous operations there.

In the matter of leadership, the company commander, CPT Michles, was considered an extremely conscientious, career-motivated officer. He had commanded Company B for 15 months and had demonstrated sincere interest in the welfare of his officers and men. He led his company into this operation short one commissioned platoon leader. He took to the field two lieutenants. One was considered a mature, solid officer trying to do a job. The other was described as quiet, intelligent, but basically not motivated toward a career as an Army officer. The latter officer had arrived in-country only 3 weeks before the Son My operation.

The noncommissioned officers in the company were apparently well selected with emphasis on quality. Two-thirds of the 27 noncommissioned officers were enlistees. The majority were above the average found throughout the Army in all evaluated areas. This included overall trainability, infantry aptitude, general learning ability, distribution among the four mental categories, and percentage of high school graduates or higher.

The remainder of the enlisted men ranked below the average for the Army in all areas evaluated except preinduction education. This group was composed of 29 percent enlisted
71 percent inductees. The only significant differences within the categories of inductees and enlistees were that the enlistees were better in infantry aptitude and the inductees had a higher percentage of high school graduates and men who had attended college.

When the noncommissioned officers and other men are analyzed as a group, the enlisted personnel of the company are nearly identical to the accessions that entered the Army during the same period of time.

Taken as a whole, the personnel composition of Company B contained no significant deviation from the Army-wide average and there was little to distinguish it from other rifle companies.

F. PREVIOUS TASK FORCE BARKER OPERATIONS IN THE SON MY AREA

There were two significant operations conducted in the Son My Area by TF Barker during the month of February 1968.

The first of these operations began on 13 February and was targeted against the 48th Local Force (LF) Battalion. The general concept was for C/1-20 Inf to act as a blocking force north and northwest of My Lai (4) for elements of B/4-3 Inf pushing toward that position from just north of Route 521.* A/3-1 Inf was to attack east on the northside of Route 521 to My Lai (1). Elements of the 2d ARVN Division also participated in this operation but remained south of Route 521, the boundary between the units.

As B Company approached My Lai (4), heavy fire was received from the enemy occupying prepared positions in the hedgerows and tree lines. A platoon of B Company attempted to flank the enemy position and was pinned down. A platoon of armored personnel carriers (APC's) was committed and, by using heavy suppressive fires, extracted the platoon. ARVN withdrew their forces during the night and B Company was withdrawn. Company B had one man killed and five men wounded in the action. There were 78 VC reportedly killed by the end of the day.

Company A continued the attack the following day and encountered heavy resistance from My Lai (1). The third day, B Company was airlifted into the area to support A Company in a sweep of My Lai (1). However, the VC had slipped away during the night and only light resistance was encountered. A search of the hamlet revealed an intricate and deep tunnel complex with reinforced brick rooms located 12 to 20 feet
underground. After securing approximately 3 tons of enemy equipment, the two companies partially destroyed the tunnel system and returned to their base area. Results of the 3-day operation were 3 US killed and 15 wounded with 80 VC reported killed; no enemy weapons were captured.

The second operation began on 23 February with the 48th LF Battalion again being the target. Two rifle companies, A/3-1 Inf and B/4-3 Inf, plus the same platoon of APC's, were the principal forces in the operation. C/1-20 Inf was located about 10 kilometers north of My Lai (4).

Company B occupied blocking positions north and northeast of My Lai (4). Company A had the mission of attacking to the east toward My Lai (1) while the platoon of APC's screened the right flank along Route 521. Heavy enemy fire was received, including mortars, recoilless rifles, rockets, and automatic weapons, as Company A and the APC's advanced toward the coast. Artillery and air strikes were quickly called in and the APC's swept toward the enemy outpost line; two APC's were hit and the platoon leader was seriously wounded. Following additional artillery and air strikes against the enemy positions, the APC's again attacked and, this time, took a heavy toll of the enemy. In the meantime, Company A continued to put pressure on the VC, but lost some of its momentum when the company commander was wounded. By late afternoon the enemy broke contact and was able to escape by intermingling with civilians evacuating the combat zone and by using the complex tunnel system honeycombing the sector.

Company B, which had only light contact throughout the operation, linked up with Company A, and, with the APC's, withdrew to the TF base. During the night and the following day Company B lost one man and had 10 men wounded from enemy grenades and boobytraps. To the north, Company C suffered five casualties from sniper fire and killed two VC.

The total casualties for the 2-day operation were three US killed and 28 wounded, plus two APC's damaged. There were 75 VC reported killed, one PW, and six individual weapons captured during the operation. This was the last major offensive action in the Son My area prior to the 16 March 1968 assault.

In addition to these tactical operations, there were some psychological operations conducted in the area during the period immediately prior to the Son My incident, although none...
were targeted specifically at Son My.* The Son My area had been a frequent target of earlier psychological campaigns aimed at encouraging the people to leave the VC-controlled area and return to Government of Vietnam (GVN) control. According to the Division Psychological Operations (PSYOP) officer, standard leaflets and broadcasts which followed the theme of "move out now and begin a new life under the GVN" were normally used for this purpose. Some leaflets apparently implied that those who elected to remain in the area would be considered as VC or VC sympathizers. Even so, there was no indication that all the noncombatants had moved out of the area.

---

* AERIAL BROADCASTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Mar</td>
<td>3 Kms NW of Thuan Yen (My Lai (4))</td>
<td>20 min</td>
<td>Unite with GVN to build an economical powerful Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,4 Mar</td>
<td>3 Kms N-NW of Thuan Yen</td>
<td>20 min</td>
<td>Surrender to the just cause of the GVN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Mar</td>
<td>4 Kms NW of Thuan Yen</td>
<td>30 min</td>
<td>Chieu Hoi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LEAFLET DROPS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Mar</td>
<td>3 Kms N-NW of Thuan Yen</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>Reward for VC Weapons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Mar</td>
<td>4 Kms NW of Thuan Yen</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>(1) Chieu Hoi; (2) These planes will destroy you (3) Message for Infiltration Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Mar</td>
<td>2 Kms NE of Thuan Yen</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>Chieu Hoi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>