

# Anatomy of a Special Forces Camp (I)

GORDON L. ROTTMAN

Paintings by RONALD B. VOLSTAD

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During America's involvement in the Vietnam War, the men of the US Army Special Forces carried out many and varied missions. Hollywood fantasies notwithstanding, the backbone of the SF task in Vietnam was the leading rôle played by the 'Green Berets' in the Civilian Irregular Defense Group programme, and in the operations of the indigenous 'strikers' whose contribution evolved from that programme. In this serial article a veteran of these operations describes the actual design, structure, equipment, personnel and routine of a strike force camp, and the nature and combat operations of the strikers themselves.

Between 1961 and 1970 the US Army Special Forces (USSF) established and operated almost 200 strike force camps in the Republic of Vietnam, although there were usually no more than 40 or so in existence at any one time. The CIDG (pronounced 'cidge') programme began in 1961, sponsored by the USSF, as an effort to train various minority groups in hamlet defence. By 1963 it had expanded; and more ambitious tasks than local security were assigned. Besides 43,000 hamlet militia, there were another 18,000 CIDG involved in strike force, mountain scout, and border surveillance missions. This substantial force was advised and supported by only two USSF B Teams and 22 A Teams. The programme continued to grow; and by 1969, at its height, some 40,000 CIDG (equivalent to the combat elements of several divisions) were assigned to Camp Strike Forces (CSF), along with almost 50 USSF A Teams and eight B Teams.

## SPECIAL FORCES DEPLOYMENT

Initially USSF teams were deployed to Vietnam and attached to the US Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam. In 1962 US Army

Special Forces Vietnam (Provisional) — USASFV — was formed to control all in-country SF elements. The various teams were provided by the 1st, 5th, and 7th Special Forces Groups (Airborne) — SFGA. In 1964 USASFV was replaced by phasing in the 5th SFGA. Until 3 March 1971, when it was returned to the USA, the 5th SFGA controlled all SF elements in Vietnam. It was directly subordinate to Military Assistance Command, Vietnam — MACV — which controlled all US forces; it was not under US Army, Vietnam — USARV — which was responsible for most US Army units.

In 1969 the 5th SFGA was deployed as follows: **bold** type traces the chain of command down to our subject camp at Chi Linh: **Special Forces Operations Base (SFOB):** Nha Trang. The SFOB included the Group Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Company E (Signal), Logistical Support Center, and numerous Military Intelligence, Signal, and Engineer Detachments.

Companies C, B, A and D were responsible for USSF elements in I, II, III and IV Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) respectively. The company's C Team (company headquarters) provided command

and control as well as logistical support to its teams. One or more B Teams, usually located in province capitals, provided a command and communications link between the A Teams located at CSF camps.<sup>(1)</sup> One B Team was responsible for the Mobile Strike Force, or 'Mike Force', a regimental-sized airborne reaction force employed to reinforce or relieve threatened camps, as well as to conduct their own independent operations.

III CTZ, in which the author's camp was located, can be described as being in 'the northern half of the southern half' of South Vietnam. **Company A, 5th SFGA** was commanded by **Team C-3** from the ARVN Bien Hoa Military Base near Saigon; here too were located a Forward Logistical Facility and a CIDG hospital, a small number of CIDG support personnel, and a security company. Nearby was Team C-3 of the ARVN Airborne Special Forces (*Lac Luong* *Dac Biet* — LLDB).

Team B-36 was located at Long Hai, and comprised the 3d Mobile Strike Force Command. Three other B Teams were involved in the control of CSFs: B-32 at Tay Ninh, **B-33 at An Loc**, and B-34 at Song Be. Each B Team had about 30 USSF

*Chi Linh's main gate, looking north up the entrance road towards the camp. The gate guard post is on the right. The gate sign was green with white lettering, and insignia in their natural colours. The small sign on the right signpost is a Chieu Hoi ('Open Arms') poster, offering clemency to any VC who willingly surrendered to South Vietnamese government authority. (This, and all other photos not otherwise credited are from the author's collection.)*

personnel, and was co-located with an LLDB B Team. Each had in addition a CIDG CSF Company; and each B Team controlled four A Teams.

An Loc, the capital of Binh Long ('Peaceful Dragon') Province, was known as 'Ol' Fort Hon Quan' to the members of B-33, the self-styled 'Dirty Thirty of Thirty-Three'. Co-located with them was LLDB Team B-15. The four CSF camps and their related A Teams under B-33's control were Loc Ninh, A-331; Min Thanh, A-332; **Chi Linh, A-333**; and Tong Le Chon, A-334.

In 1969 Binh Long Province was one of the war's

(1) A, B and C Teams were officially designated SF Operational Detachments A, B and C. Normal assignments to a company were one C Team (six officers, 12 NCOs), one Administrative Team (two officers, 13 enlisted men), three B Teams (six officers, 17 NCOs), and 12 A Teams (two officers, ten NCOs). Teams were augmented with additional personnel, and the number assigned to any given company varied widely.

A late 1967 aerial photo taken by an OV-1 Mohawk of the 73d Surveillance Airplane Company. Many of the camp's structures had been completed by this time, but when compared with the accompanying plan it will be seen that many features in the inner perimeter had changed by 1969. In 1967 the wire barriers were far from complete. The winding line around two thirds of the camp's northern perimeter was a drainage ditch; veterans should be assured that it was much shallower than it appears in the photo, and was stuffed with concertina wire... (US Army)

#### Below:

A schematic sketch of the camp's barrier wire; it is not to scale, and the distances between belts are compressed — the total depth of the system was about 100 metres.

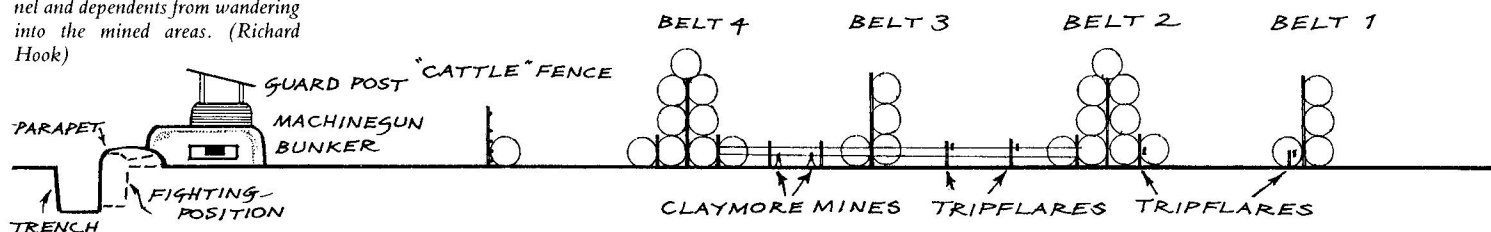
Belt 1: the outer barrier was constructed of single coils of concertina stacked three high with a fourth at the inside base. This 9-ft. high barrier was supported by long pickets reinforced by horizontal barbed wire strands and barbed wire guy lines.

Belt 2: this belt consisted of two layers of concertina stacked three coils high, with two more at the inner and outer base and a ninth along the top. This barrier, 11 ft. high, was supported in the same way as Belt 1.

Belt 3: as belt 1.

Belt 4: as belt 2.

Belt 5: this was a 5 ft. high 'cattle fence' of five barbed wire strands, placed out of grenade range of the perimeter; it had a coil of concertina along the outside base. Apart from providing a final barrier, it prevented camp personnel and dependents from wandering into the mined areas. (Richard Hook)



hot spots. It bordered Cambodia, with its infamous 'Parrot's Beak' and 'Angel's Wing' areas, as well as lying on the western edge of War Zone 'D'. Large portions of the US 1st Infantry and 1st Cavalry (Airmobile) Divisions, the US 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and the 5th ARVN Infantry Division were operating in the province.

\* \* \*

No two CSF camps were exactly alike, although there were many similarities. The early camps were somewhat crude, and living conditions spartan. Buildings were con-

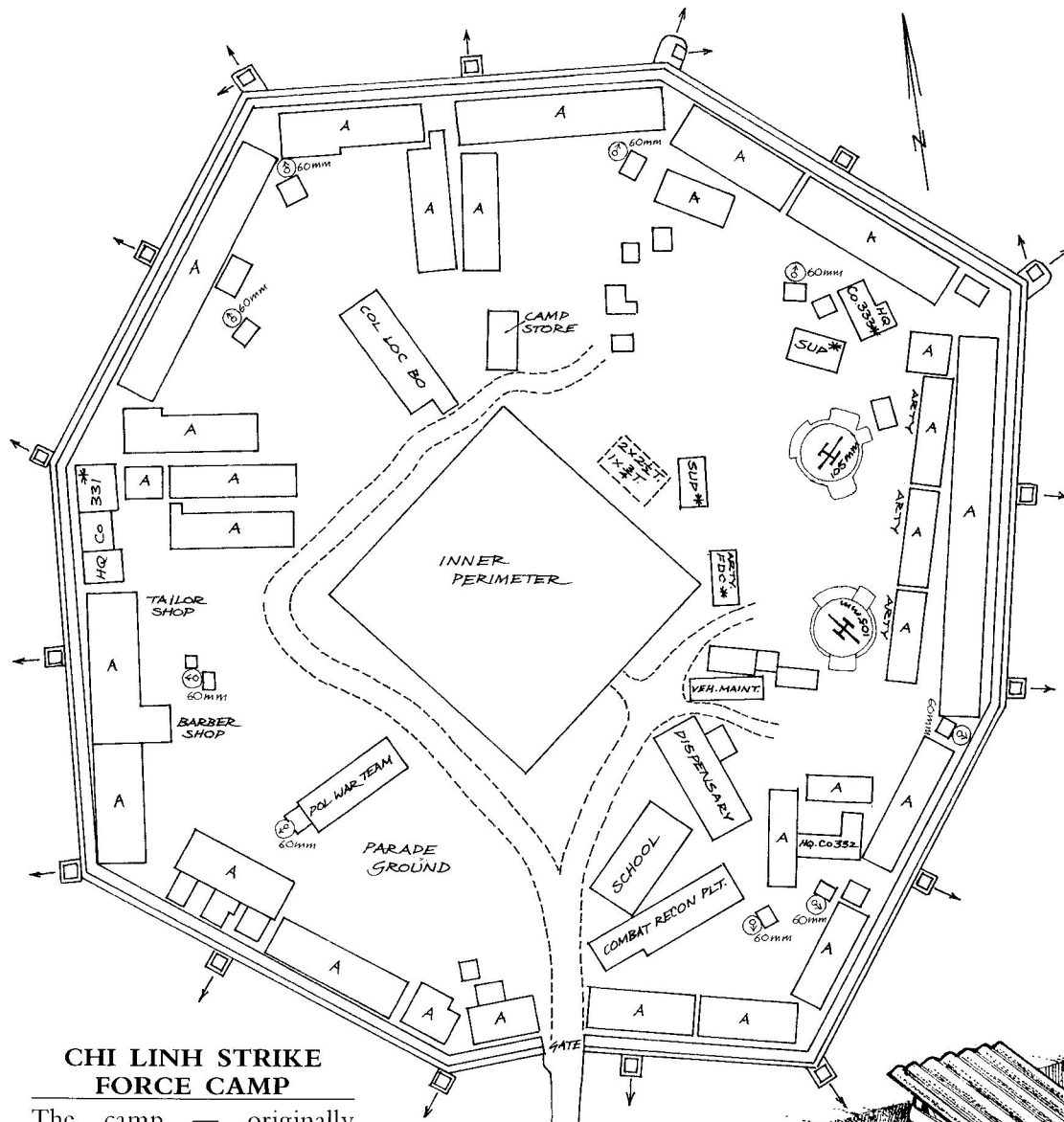
structed of local logs and thatch, scrounged corrugated metal, scrap lumber, and ammo crates. Weak defenses consisted of a few machine gun bunkers, light mortar pits, a surrounding trench or berm (earth wall), punji stakes, some barbed wire, and occasionally a moat.

In the mid-1960s the camps began to be 'hardened' and to be termed 'fighting camps'. Allocations of machine guns, mortars and recoilless rifles were greatly increased. Trench-connected bunkered fighting positions were improved, and masses of barbed and concertina

wire were made available. Other amenities began to appear, such as power generators, refrigerators (for medicine, fresh food and beer), and movie projectors (for CIDG morale).

The perimeter of a CSF camp, usually dictated by terrain, could be of almost any shape: triangular, rectangular (often with indented sides), square, five-pointed star, pentagon, hexagon, octagon — or amoeba! The exact siting of a camp took into account soil conditions, drainage, location of villages, suitable airfield sites, use of existing terrain features, and

the location of dominating terrain features of use to the enemy. The camps were usually located in remote areas, often in regions where ARVN and US units seldom operated. First-tier camps established on the border with Cambodia were tasked with border surveillance and interdiction missions. Those placed in the second tier, further into the interior of the RVN, were situated so as to be able to interdict infiltration trails and to conduct area combat reconnaissance.



## CHI LINH STRIKE FORCE CAMP

The camp — originally known as Cau Song Be ('Song River Bridge') but soon renamed to avoid confusion with B-34's Song Be Camp — was opened on 4 January 1967. (The author asked many Vietnamese what 'Chi Linh' meant, but nobody knew!) It was located about 18 km south-east of An Loc, on the north side of Interprovincial Route 14, and 3 km west of the Song Be River. Saigon was almost 90 km to the south.

The camp was established by USSF Team A-333 and LLDB *Toán* (Team) A-162, to interdict part of an infiltration trail known as 'Serge's Jungle Highway'<sup>(2)</sup>, an off-shoot of the Ho Chi Minh Trail running out of Cambodia. Its route followed the east side of the Song Be until it crossed over to the west some kilometres north of the camp, which was built directly on the trail. The Viet Cong and North

Vietnamese Army gave the CSF a rough time while the camp was under construction, including blowing up the Song Be bridge. Once completed, however, the camp was left in relative peace. The VC/NVA established new infiltration trails 5 to 6 km east of the Song Be in Phuoc Long Province, and these remained the CSF's principal interdiction mission.

Chi Linh was an octagonal camp about 200 m across. It

was built on flat ground in an area of very gently rolling low hills. The soil was red laterite, a coarse gravel offering good drainage. It was surrounded by dense bamboo growth interspersed with small patches of hardwood timber and brush. A study of Chi Linh Camp can best be accomplished by an orientation tour with one of the older hands, as given to personnel newly assigned to A-333.

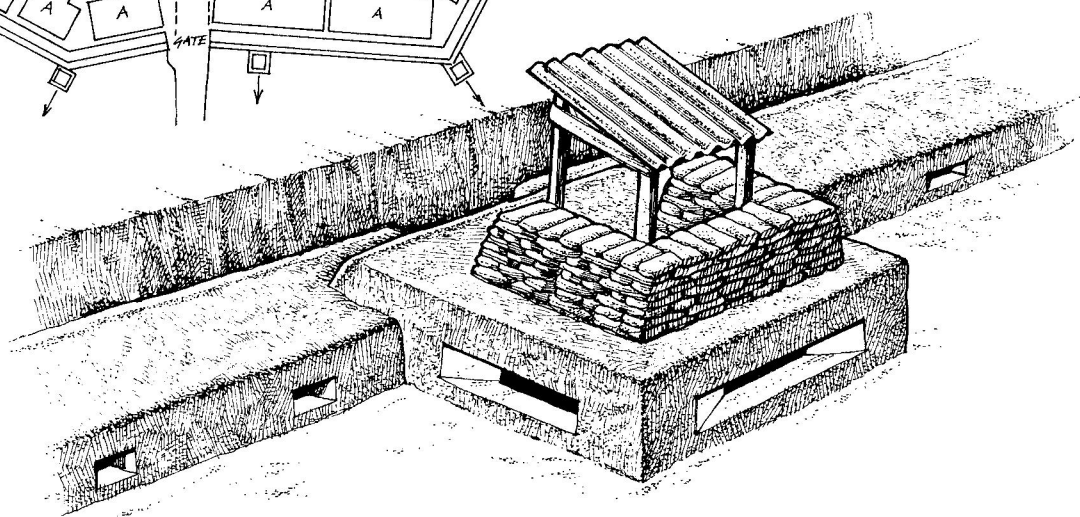
## In the Wire

Chi Linh was securely surrounded by an impressive array of wire obstacles. Beginning at the outermost barrier and working inwards through some 100 m of defences, we find that there are five belts, and two types of wire. Standard military barbed wire, not unlike its civilian equivalent, was issued in spools. Concertina

Plan of Chi Linh Strike Force Camp in September 1969. The inner perimeter details will be found in the accompanying drawing. Buildings marked 'A' were troop and family quarters, sunk about 2 ft. below ground level, with 2-ft. thick sandbag walls, and roofs of two layers of sandbags topped with corrugated metal. The other principal buildings are identified; buildings marked (\*) were also sunken for protection. Arrows by the perimeter machine gun bunkers indicate the principal directions of fire and number of MGs. It was thought that the most likely attack routes were on the north-west and north-east walls. (Richard Hook)

## Below:

Impression of outer perimeter MG bunker, with guard post and trench section. The bunkers had 2-ft. thick sandbag walls and three layers of sandbags on the roof, the whole capped with 2 in. of concrete. There was a wide frontal firing port, and on each side smaller ports covering the neighbouring bunkers. On top of each bunker was a small sandbagged guard post, one layer thick with 3-ft. walls, roofed with corrugated metal supported by 2 x 4 in. timbers. (Richard Hook)



(2) Named after the USAF Forward Air Control pilot who discovered it.



wire — spring steel wire — was wound in a coil 3 ft. in diameter, one coil giving a 50-ft. length when stretched out. Wire was supported by OD-painted steel U-shaped picket posts issued in several lengths.

Between belts 2, 3 and 4 was 'tanglefoot': a spiderweb arrangement of barbed wire tautly strung at heights of 6 in., 12 in. and 18 in. above the ground and secured to short pickets and barrier posts. Its purpose was to trip assaulting troops, and to make it more difficult to low-crawl through. Belts 1, 2 and 3 and the 'tanglefoot' had M49A1 tripflares emplaced: tripwire-activated magnesium ground flares, which burned for about one minute, illuminating an area up to 300 m in radius.

Between belts 3 and 4 were emplaced M18A1 Claymore anti-personnel mines. The Claymore is a fibreglass-encased 1½-lb. C4 Plastic Explosive charge fronted by 700 steel ball bearings. It is either detonated by tripwire, or command-fired by an electrical firing device through a 30-m wire. When it is detonated, ball bearings are blown in a fan-shaped pattern horizontally, lethal up to 250 metres. About 600 Claymores guarded Chi

Linh's wire. Some 200 of these could be command-fired in banks of six from switchboards in the Communications Bunker; the others were individually command-fired from the perimeter machine gun bunkers, where the firing devices were secured in clusters.

Belts 1 and 3 followed the eight-sided shape of the camp; the others traced a zig-zag pattern. The distance between the belts varied. The barriers were high in order to discourage the use of scaling ladders and bamboo mats. The greatest danger was posed by enemy sappers, specially trained soldiers whose task was to infiltrate through the wire, cutting a path and clearing mines and tripflares for the assault force. No height or thickness of barrier could stop them, and the only defence was constant vigilance. The quantity of wire used in such a camp barrier system was phenomenal, requiring thousands of coils of concertina.

### The Outer Perimeter

A sandbag parapet about 2 ft. high and 3½ ft. thick was constructed on the outer

edge of the perimeter trench. This was capped with about 2 in. of concrete — not for ballistic protection, but to prevent deterioration by weather and personnel. Individual firing positions were dug into the outer side of the 4-ft. deep, 3½-ft. wide trench; they were cut into the parapet so that its top provided overhead cover, and each had a small firing port. There were about 30 such positions along each of the eight walls. Centred in each wall and at each corner were a total of 16 machine gun bunkers, constructed of concrete-capped sandbags; each had one M1919A6 .30 cal. machine gun, and three of them mounted two MGs.

### The Troop Area

Behind the perimeter trench were quarters for the 394 troops and an almost equal number of their family dependents. (At some camps the dependents lived in a nearby village, requiring a permanent security force to guard them.) The quarters were built of sandbagged walls with floors sunk about 2 ft. below ground level. Supported by timbers, the roofs were covered with at

least two layers of sandbags, topped by corrugated metal anchored with sandbags. Each of the three CSF companies had a corrugated metal HQ building.

Other principal structures included a well-equipped dispensary, a vehicle maintenance facility, a schoolhouse for the strikers' children, a camp store, the *col loc bo* (a combined recreation room and café), a tailor shop, and a barber shop. Most of these were of wood, with corrugated metal roofs.

### Fire Support

A portion of the camp's north-east and east interior was occupied by an artillery platoon detached from the 5th ARVN Division. This platoon, with two M10A1 105 mm howitzers, were rotated every six months. They were emplaced in heavily sandbagged positions with adjoining ammo bunkers. The platoon had its own quarters, fire direction centre, and supply room. Of limited use for camp defence due to their inability to deliver direct fire, they were used to support CSF combat operations; their 11,000-m range covered most of the camp's area of operations.

Dispersed at intervals around the troop area were nine M19 60 mm mortars. The interior of the above-ground pits was about 8 ft. across; the sandbag sides were 3 ft. high and 2 ft. thick. Each had an attached ammo bunker. Visitors were usually surprised that any given mortar did not fire into the perimeter section closest

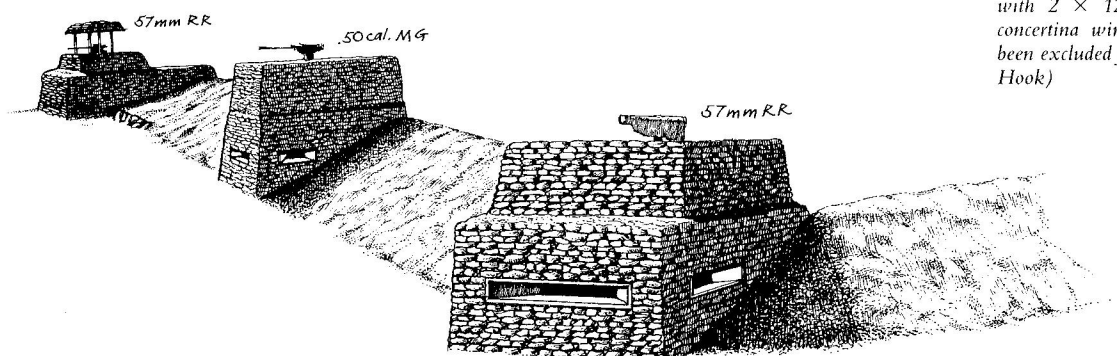


### Right:

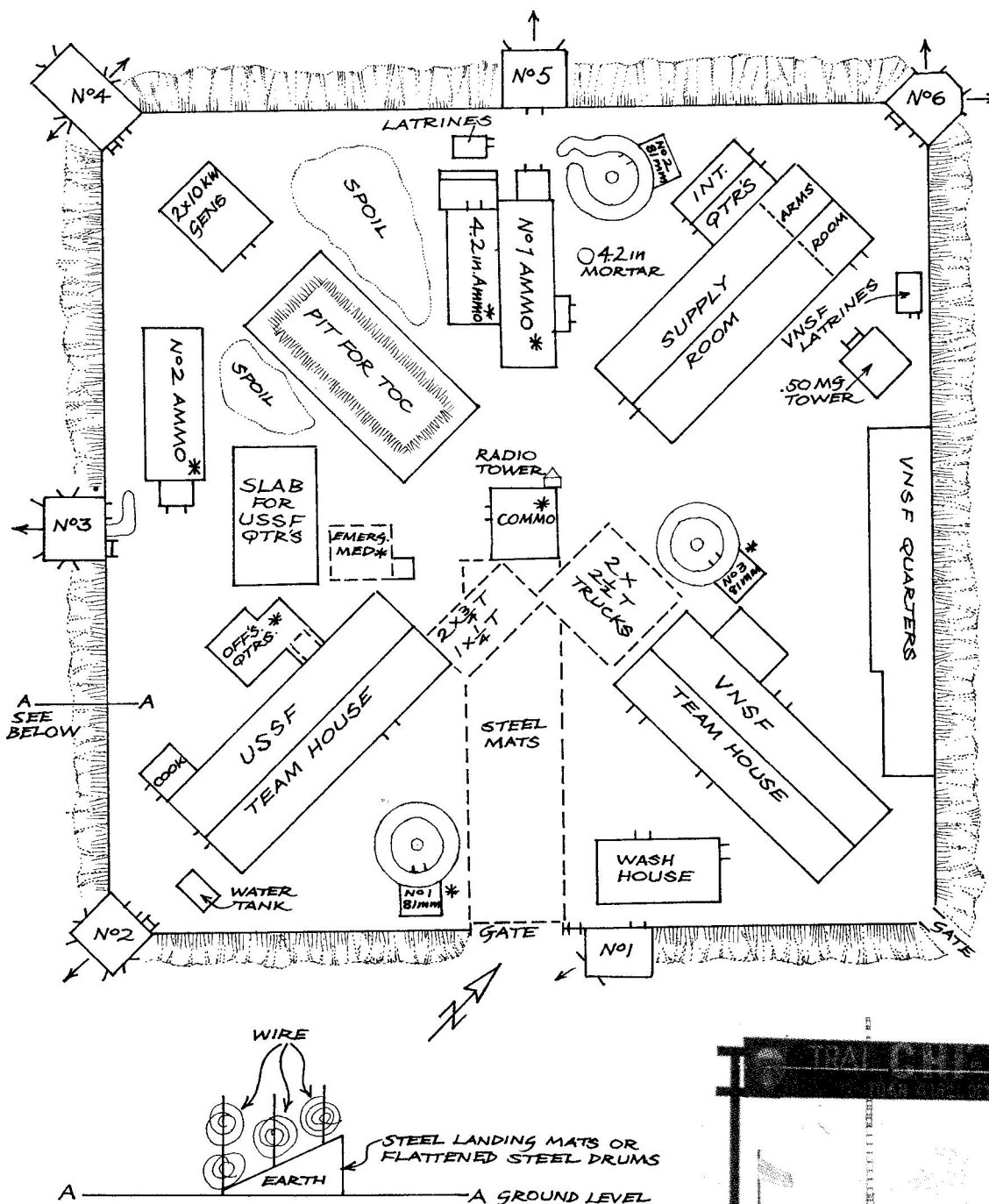
Looking south from the .50 cal. MG tower, the Commo Bunker can be seen in the right foreground, and to the left rear the USSF Team House. One of two M37B1 ¾ ton cargo trucks is parked near the Team House. The camp had an appearance simultaneously 'unfinished' and 'run down' — and both impressions were true...

Impression of the inner perimeter bunker line, south-west wall: from left to right, bunkers Nos. 4, 3 and 2. The bunkers were built of

sandbags, not concrete capped, with 2-ft. thick walls built around 7-ft. square steel CONEX shipping containers. Firing ports were cut with torches and then framed with 2 × 12 in. lumber. The concertina wire on the berm has been excluded for clarity. (Richard Hook)







Chi Linh's inner perimeter contained the heart of the camp. The structures marked (\*) were either underground or sunken. The USSF quarters had burned down in February 1969 and were in the process of being rebuilt behind the USSF Team House. A large Tactical Operations Centre (TOC) was also in the process of construction. Most of the USSF troops slept in the meantime in the Supply Room, Commo Bunker, or Emergency Medical Bunker. Each of the MG bunkers housed one or two M1919A6 .30 cal. MGs; bunkers Nos. 2, 4 and 6 each had an M18A1 57 mm recoilless rifle on the roof, and bunker 3 had a roof-mounted M2 .50 cal. MG. (Richard Hook)

#### Below:

The inner perimeter gate sign had yellow lettering on an OD ground, and insignia in natural colours. Behind the two M35 2½ ton cargo trucks can be seen the top of the supply room: we are looking almost due north. The 71-ft. radio mast is beside the Commo Bunker, above which flies the flag of the RVN: CSF camps were considered Vietnamese rather than American installations. Behind the 400-gal. 'water buffalo' water trailer is the end of the LLDB Team House.



to it, but rather across the camp into a sector on the far side. This was because the pits on the side attacked might be under direct fire; and because the minimum range of the mortars was 50 m, and their fire needed to be brought down CLOSE during an attack on the wire... Maximum effective range was 2,000 meters.

Additional fire support could be obtained from US fire support bases located to the north, south and west, in the form of 8 in. and 155 mm howitzers and 175 mm guns. Close air support and flare ships could be on station from Ben Hoa Air Base in 20 minutes; and 1st Cavalry

Division attack helicopters would follow shortly thereafter. A curtain of fire and steel could be placed around the camp; but in such cases the VC/NVA, being the soldiers that they were, could sometimes still get through.

#### The Inner Perimeter

An inner perimeter, capable of holding out even if the rest of the camp was overrun, was added in the mid-1960s to all camps not having them already. Chi Linh's was square in shape, with a slope-fronted, 5 ft. high earth berm, about 8 ft. thick at its base. The inside was vertical and supported by corrugated metal, held in

place by barbed wire posts; numerous coils of concertina wire were strung on the berm's outer face.

Inside were the USSF and LLDB Team Houses and quarters, supply and arms rooms, interpreters' quarters, a washhouse with showers, two main ammo bunkers, underground communications and emergency medical bunkers, and two 10

Kw power generators. The above-ground structures had either wood or corrugated metal sides and corrugated metal roofs.

Emplaced inside this area were three M29 81 mm and one M30 4.2 in. mortars, in large sunken pits walled with concrete-capped sandbags. The 81 mm had a minimum range of 70 m and a maximum effective of 3,650

One of the camp chores: CIDG troops assisting the author to fuse rounds and cut charges on 4.2 in. HE projectiles. To their rear is 81 mm mortar pit No. 2, behind which is inner perimeter machine gun bunker No. 5 — we are looking north.

#### Below:

Caught napping in the camp's only M151 ¼ ton utility ('jeep') is one of the combat interpreters, a former North Vietnamese. Behind the jeep is 81 mm mortar pit No. 1, on which two artillery forward observers attached from the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) rest up while waiting to depart on a combat operation. The corrugated metal supporting the inner face of the inner perimeter berm can be seen in the background, and beyond it the camp dispensary (left) and camp school.

metres. The 4.2's minimum range of 700 m made it useless for defensive fire (except for illumination), but its 5,500-m maximum was useful for supporting local patrols.

Inner perimeter MG bunkers served a dual rôle. One was situated on each corner and side wall (apart from the north-east wall and east corner, which had none). Each housed an M1919A6; and some also mounted on their roofs weapons capable of firing into the camp's outer wire. These included three M18A1 57 mm recoilless rifles and one M2 .50 cal. MG. Another .50 cal. was mounted on a 12-ft. tower near the north-east wall. (This was referred to as the 'CMH Tower', an allusion to the certainty of a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor for anyone who tried to climb up there during an attack. An alternative interpretation was 'Cas-ket with Metal Handles'.)

#### Outside the Camp

There was only one entrance to the camp, a road running from the south wall to the airstrip. On the west side of the entrance road was the POL (petrol, oil, lubricants) dump. A small guard shack stood near the outer barrier belt. At night the entrance was secured by several sets of wood frame and barbed wire gates, plus half a dozen coils



of concertina wire pulled across the road and rigged with tripflares and Claymores.

The most noticeable man-made feature outside the camp was a 3,500-ft. airstrip. The east-west runway was constructed directly on Route 14, which provided a substantial foundation. (Route 14 was not usable anyway, since the VC had long ago destroyed the half-dozen or so small bridges and culverts between the Song Be and Chon Thanh District Capital to the west, in order to prevent its use as an attack route toward their infiltration trail.) The packed laterite of the runway was tested to a compactness equivalent to 94% of concrete: it could handle any aircraft up to and including C-130s. There were turn-

around pads on the east and west sides of the camp, the latter doubling as a heli-pad.

Across the runway from the main gate was a small rifle range; near it was a demolitions pit where defective, dud, climate-deteriorated and captured munitions were blown up.

A village, Son La, stood just over 2 km to the east of the camp, about 300 m north of Route 14; its population was about 300 Stieng montagnards. This was the only populated place in Chi Linh's area of operations. **MI**

#### Recommended reading:

Rottman, G.L., *US Army Special Forces 1952-84* (Osprey Elite Series No.4; London, 1985)  
Simpson, Col. C.M. III, *Inside the Green Berets* (Presidio Press; Novato, CA, 1983)  
Stanton, S.L., *Green Berets at War* (Presidio Press; Novato, CA, 1985)

#### Ron Volstad's reconstructions opposite show:

(1) A member of Team A-333, wearing the typical 'garrison' uniform of olive green jungle fatigues with full-colour insignia. When working in the camp he would normally shed the shirt and wear — if anything above the waist — an OG or white undershirt. Subdued insignia were required to be worn from 1968 on, but each team member was required to have one shirt badged up in full colour to don when 'VIPs' (i.e. anyone from a US unit) visited the camp. Insignia include the LLDB patch on the pocket, the US Parachutist Badge, Combat Infantryman's Badge, and LLDB jump-wings honorarily awarded to USSF personnel.

(2) This CIDG 'striker' of Co.331 (Montagnard) wears olive green fatigues rather than the tigerstripe camouflage worn on combat operations. The only insignia normally seen was the CIDG Camp Strike Force patch; while there was a CIDG rank insignia system (horizontal stripes, worn in the French manner between the second and third buttons on the front of the shirt), it was seldom worn. The footwear are the popular 'Bata boots' made by that Canadian company. Note brass tribal bracelet.

(3) This 1st Lieutenant of LLDB Team A-162 wears standard LLDB (and ARVN Ranger) camouflage uniform, and the LLDB badge on a beret worn 'French style'. He wears subdued insignia, but full-colour equivalents were also common. He wears an honorarily-awarded US Parachutist Badge; LLDB jump-wings were correctly worn over the right breast pocket, and any foreign badges on the left. His privately-purchased .38 Special revolver would normally be worn even in camp: revolvers were considered a sign of officer status.

(4) These Stieng montagnard ladies are typical of the CIDG families living in the camp. Black clothing was favoured by the 'Yards' and was often decorated with bands of tribal colours: in the case of the Stieng, red and white. The child's clothing probably came from a US aid package; she carries a hammock, in which she napped while her mother cut firewood. The Stieng were the southernmost and least developed of the 18 montagnard tribal groups; an easy-going people who quickly developed bonds with the USSF personnel, they also proved to be excellent fighters due to their ability to live in harmony with their native jungle, and their many natural fieldcraft skills.



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# Anatomy of a Special Forces Camp (2)



GORDON L. ROTTMAN

Paintings by RONALD B. VOLSTAD

Part 1 of this article (*MP* No. 9) described and illustrated in detail the construction and defences of Chi Linh Special Forces Camp at the time the author served there in the late 1960s, and illustrated the dress of SF, LLDB, CSF and civilian personnel as worn around the camp. In this concluding part the author describes the operations of the camp's 'Strikers', and we illustrate combat dress and equipment.

The Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Camp Strike Force (CSF) was a battalion-sized unit. Strengths varied greatly according to recruiting potential in the area. Troop morale was an important factor in CSF strength: a lack of faith in the leadership of the Vietnamese Special Forces (LLDB), poor living conditions, or a series of defeats could cause troops to turn in their weapons — sometimes — and merely walk out of a camp, often signing up at another.

The Chi Linh CSF consisted of roughly 390 troops organised into three rifle companies, a combat reconnaissance platoon (CRP), and a political warfare team. Each company was composed of a different ethnic group; Co.331 consisted of Cambodians born in Vietnam's Delta region. These were members of the *Khmer*

*Serei* (Free Cambodia) political faction, which sought the overthrow of Cambodia's Sihanouk government — and of the Vietnamese government as well. Their conflict with the latter had its

origins centuries ago when the Vietnamese gained control of the Khmer Mekong Delta region. While their long-term objectives were not exactly in line with US and South Vietnamese policy, the Khmers were rabidly anti-Communist, and loyal (at least to USSF personnel). They were hired as a military unit with their own leaders:

Co.332 was made up of *Stieng montagnards*, the southernmost and least developed of the tribal groups. Their fieldcraft skills and easy co-existence with the jungle made them excellent fighters in that environment. Co.333 was composed of Vietnamese. *Montagnards* and Vietnamese did not normally

co-exist too peacefully, given their long-standing racial animosity. Chi Linh was fortunate in that the Vietnamese were 'country boys' from the small towns in Binh Long Province who had grown up in close proximity to the 'Yards'. The 'Cambods' got along well enough with the 'Yards', but were distant with the Vietnamese.

## Unit organisation

In 1969 a company was authorised 132 troops divided into an 11-man HQ, three 32-man rifle platoons (a five-man HQ and three nine-man squads), and a

### Above:

Company 332 (Montagnard) awaits the monthly pay parade. In camp CIDG troops chose to go virtually in rags for work and training details; here they wear a combination of CIDG olive fatigues, US jungle fatigues and 'tigerstripes', all so washed out and worn that they were pale green, the 'tigerstripes' bleaching out to a faintly greenish khaki. (All photographs are from the author's collection.)

### Left:

A collection of VC ordnance captured by Co.332 early in June 1969, including RPG-2 and -7 rockets and propellant charges, 60mm mortar rounds, home-made hand grenades, bangalore torpedoes, telephone wire, and AK-47 assault rifles — in fact, Type 56s, Chinese-made like most of these items. Two A-333 members who accompanied the operation pose rather reluctantly; the LLDB NCO in the doorway of the LLDB Team House was even less inclined to pose.



25-man weapons platoon (HQ, mortar and machine gun sections). Chi Linh's companies averaged 120 troops. There were no weapons platoons, since the 60mm mortars remained in the camp for defence and

proved impractical for tactical operations. This was partly due of the weapons' and ammunition's weight and bulk, but to the fact that

air, and attack helicopter support was so readily available. The machine guns were carried within the rifle platoons. Troops were assigned to the weapons platoon on paper, but they functioned as part of the rifle squads.

Rifle squads were organized using the US concept of two fire teams, which the Cambods called 'cells' following NVA/VC practice — a term which tended to bother visiting non-SF US officers. During operations about 20 troops remained in camp to provide security in the company's perimeter sector, and to ensure that other troops kept their distance from the women. Nonetheless, several 'amus-

ing' situations developed, since racial and political animosities were ignored during certain night non-combat operations within the camp . . .

Firepower was lean when compared to US and ARVN units, but adequate. In the spring of 1969 the CIDG were issued the M16A1 rifle, replacing a collection of M1 rifles, M2 carbines, and M1918A2 BARs. Although only one 40mm M79 grenade launcher was authorised per platoon, and two M60 machine guns per company, Chi Linh had managed to acquire enough M79s to equip each platoon with two. M72 light anti-tank weapons (LAW), M18A1 Claymore mines, and hand grenades were also carried.

The combat reconnaissance platoon was made up of 34 Cambods and 'Yards formed into an HQ and three squads with three M79s and an M60. The 16-man political warfare team consisted of Vietnamese tasked with psychological warfare and civil affairs operations within the camp and the nearby montagnard village.

### The mission

CSF operations were simple, consisting principally of interdiction missions directed at the infiltration trail system to the west of the camp, and sweeps of the rubber plantations to the north. Two USSF and one LLDB personnel accompanied each of the usually five-day operations. One company was always in the field, one provided internal camp security and work details, and the third conducted training and external security.

Preparations began the day before an operation. Orders, rations, and ammunition were issued. Most ammunition, beyond a basic load, was turned in after an operation, but much was socked away in hidden caches. This was tolerated, but the Khmers took it to the extreme, often needing to be resupplied with almost a full load. (It was suspected that

**Ron Volstad's reconstructions illustrate (top) US Special Forces NCO, 1969.** SF NCOs accompanying Strike Force operations outfitted themselves almost identically to the CIDG Strikers, both because the uniform and equipment items were most readily available, and because they did not wish to stand out from the troops any more than was unavoidable. Most were armed with the M16A1 rifle; few carried more exotic weapons, since ammunition resupply would have been more difficult — and since the enemy tended to concentrate their fire on weapons that sounded different. SF NCOs carried more than just the bare essentials to exist in the field: since they usually doubled as their companies' medics, medical supplies were important, as were various air/ground marking devices.

**(Bottom) Grenadier, CIDG Strike Force, 1969.** This Khmer platoon grenadier is armed with the 6.2lb. M79 grenade launcher, one of the most effective weapons used in Vietnam. It could lob its 40mm HE projectile out to an effective range of 350 metres, although local conditions often restricted its use to less than 100 metres. The HE round had an effective casualty radius against standing targets of 25 metres, but a danger radius of up to 130 metres — which meant it had to be used with caution. The HE round armed itself within between 14 and 27 metres after leaving the barrel, but even an unarmed round actually striking a human target at close range was devastating. Various signal rounds were also available. Ammunition was carried in canteen covers and in tan bandoliers — here the straps are cut off and a cluster of bandolier pockets is attached to the pack. Note very faded 'tigerstripe' clothing.





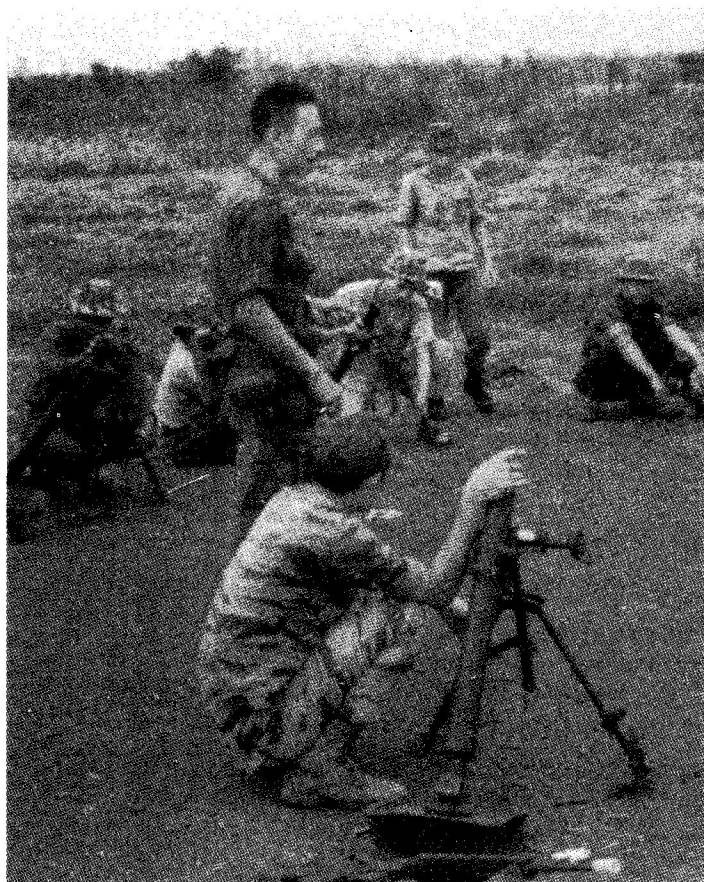
they maintained caches outside the camp, which found their way to *Khmer Serei* stockpiles.)

The company assembled on the morning of the operation to be briefed; this was followed by a pep-talk from the LLDB team CO, the political warfare team chief, and the company CO. The Vietnamese company listened alertly, nodding and applauding; the 'Yards nodded off with boredom (since the harangue had to be translated into Stieng), wondering what Vietnamese goals had to do with them anyway; the Khmers ignored the Vietnamese speeches (which they understood), chatting among themselves in Khmer — but listened raptly to their CO tell them how they were going to kill lots of *Vietnamese Communists*, and responded with their war cry.

While the platoon leaders formed their men into helicopter-sized loads, the USSF NCOs, LLDB NCO, CIDG CO, and interpreter would cluster together over a map and decide how the operation would really be conducted — usually somewhat differently than envisioned by the B team, but close enough not to affect other plans. The interpreter was an essential individual, trained at the eight-week Combat Interpreters' Course; each CSF had three or four in civilian employee status. It was not uncommon for a company to walk to their area of operations (AO) and back, but as often as possible a helicopter insertion was executed. The same choppers would then extract the company already in the field.

#### OPERATION 69-22

While Operation 69-22 was not a particularly spectacular one, it was typical. It was conducted in June 1969 in an effort to exploit the success of 69-21, executed in the same area a few days earlier, when Cos.331 and 332 killed 51 NVA while suffering a loss of three CIDG and one USSF, and about a dozen wounded. Co.331 was to



undertake this operation, since they knew the area and were out for revenge.

Eight UH-1H 'Huey' choppers of the 12th Aviation Group arrived at 0800 hours. The first lift boarded, leaving a litter of soft drink cans on the runway. Each man was clothed in 'tiger-stripe' uniform (see 'MI' Nos. 6 & 7), wearing standard US load-bearing equipment with two or three canteens and at least nine 20-round M16A1 magazines. Grenadiers carried about 30 M79 rounds, and the squads distributed

800 rounds for each M60 between them. Each man also carried enough Patrol Indigenous Rations (PIR) for six days, consisting of a plastic bag of instant rice, some form of dried meat or fish, dried fruit bits, hot peppers, and a vitamin pill. The USSF subsisted on them as well since they were not issued C-rations (but given 'rations not available' pay). A few of the CIDG would carry live chickens for the first night's meal. PIRs were carried in a simple rucksack with a poncho, hammock,

Members of the different companies' mortar sections train on the 60mm M19, of which Chi Linh had nine. The instructor, standing, was a medically-retired ARVN artillery captain hired by Special Forces to provide mortar training at the camps; he had learned his trade as a gunner under the French. The squatting 'Cambod' in the foreground demonstrates just how faded 'tigerstripes' could become.

#### Below:

Four men of LLDB Team 162 pose in front of their Team House at Chi Linh. Left to right: Team Sergeant Major, Team Commander (a first lieutenant), Team Medic and Team Weapons Specialist. Apart from the last, who has fatigues made from US leaf-pattern camouflage fabric, they wear uniforms of LLDB and Ranger camo pattern. Note the two shirt styles. Rank insignia were seldom worn; three wear their jump wings, and the Team Sergeant Major his US wings. All wear green berets, French style: see colour illustration, 'MI' No. 9.

and a change of socks — little else was required.

OPN 69-22 was conducted in the southern fringes of the massive Terra Rouge rubber plantation, 10km north-west of Chi Linh. The first lift secured the landing zone; it was seldom that LZs were 'hot', as there were simply too many areas for the enemy to cover. Less than 40 minutes later the second lift arrived. One USSF NCO accompanied each lift, with the LLDB NCO on the first. The USSF NCOs usually had a 'serious' discussion as to who got to go on the first.

Once assembled the unit moved out in a 'box' formation consisting of one platoon on-line across the front and the others in column on either side, thus forming an open-ended box; a few riflemen were placed across the box's 'bottom'. M60s were placed at the forward corners, and the command group in the centre. This allowed a simple formation in open terrain, such as the rubber, while permitting maximum firepower to the front and flanks. In the event the unit was surrounded, the two flank platoons would close in to form a triangular perimeter.

The rubber plantation's terrain was gently rolling hills of gravelly red laterite



neck of rubber the unit had recently passed through. A conference among the command group concluded that someone had miscalculated how long it would take the unit to pass through the neck, and that the unit had been, and might still be under observation. The sound of the mortar firing was not heard, so it was some distance away in an unknown direction.

The unit was quickly on its feet and moving. After one click, it turned south for 1½ clicks. The pace was fast, and another was break called. The weather was typical for July: partly cloudy, with both temperature and humidity in the high 90s. The unit was now in a neglected area of the rubber with some underbrush (most of the plantation was still being worked), and overlooking several roads running along the edge of the rubber on both sides of an abandoned rice paddy. Another, on which scouts found fresh NVA boot tracks, crossed the open area. One platoon established an ambush overlooking this area while the others settled down for their break.

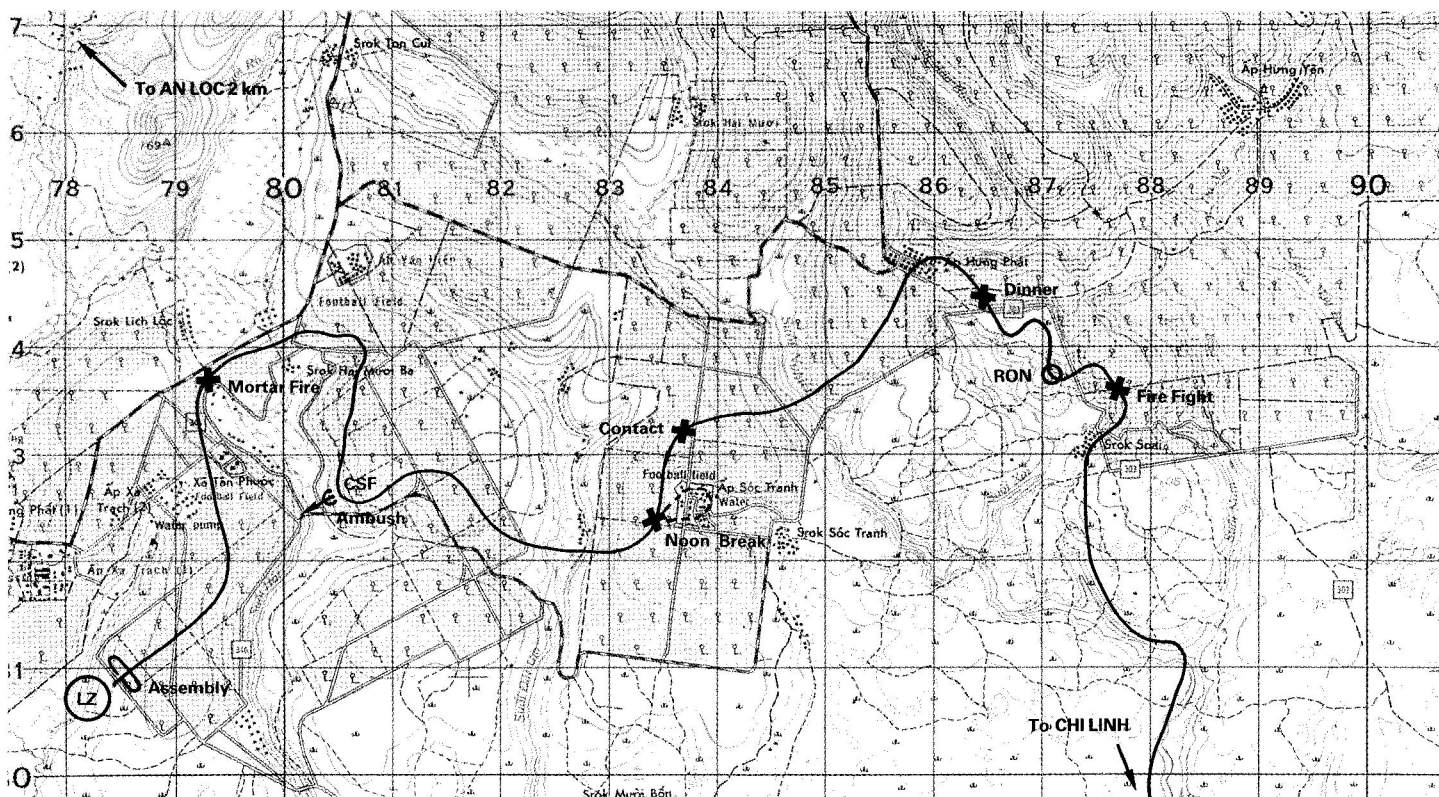
Ears perked up when six 60mm mortar rounds crumped into the narrow

The M60s were no sooner set up than ten VC emerged

immediately. Others plunged back to the rubber, with more falling; the survivors disappeared into the rubber followed by M60 tracers. When the firing began, the second USSF NCO rushed one of the other platoons to the north flank of the ambush site; but it was all over by then, and some good-natured insults greeted the late arrivals.

contained two or three magazines for their Chinese-made Type 56 (AK-47) assault rifles, several palm-leaf-wrapped rice balls, and a plastic sheet. A couple of US M26 hand grenades were also found. Each also had a US or Chinese canteen (water-bottle), or a glass soft drink bottle carried by a cord. No documents were found. They were probably from C-45 VC Local Force Company, known to operate in the area with a strength of about 60 troops. A contact report, required within 20 minutes of the action, was radioed by AN/PRC-25 (of which three were carried) to Chi Linh. This included: time of contact; grid coordinates; who initiated and at what range; friendly and enemy casualties; captured weapons; direction enemy withdrew; and what actions would take place next.

The next action was to get out of the area. This may seem none too valorous, but past experience had often proven this to be the best decision, especially since substantial NVA forces had been in the area only a few days before. It was not known what other enemy forces were in the immediate vicinity, while they now



knew where the intruders were. The unit moved rapidly to the north-east for one click, and turned south-east for another. A 700-metre-wide weed-choked rice paddy faced the unit — an obstacle which did not please the Strikers, as it placed them in a similar situation to that which their enemy had just faced. Scouts were sent across followed by each platoon, covered by the others.

Turning north, the unit moved a short distance and established a perimeter. By now it was early afternoon, and the hottest part of the day. A two-hour break was usually taken at this time for lunch and rest. One platoon conducted a search of *Ap Soc Tranh*, a French-built plantation workers' village. They maintained contact with the company by means of HT-1 walkie-talkies, a civilian model not used by the US Army; each platoon had one and there were two more in the HQ. Moving out at 1430 hours, the unit headed north for a click. It was in this area that Cos.331 and 332 had engaged elements of the 141st NVA Regiment a few days before. The rubber had suffered much damage from small arms fire, M79 grenades, and RPG-2 rockets; and was littered with thousands of empty cartridges and other munitions residue; but the NVA had clearly returned and 'policed' it with a fine-tooth comb, causing an eerie feeling among the Strikers.

The unit was beginning a turn to the east when a single shot rang out from their front. Two Strikers opened fire on a green-uniformed man darting through the trees. All 100 troops ducked behind rubber trees, with four to six lined up behind each. There was no return fire, no movement. Everyone began to chuckle as it dawned on them how ridiculous they looked lined up in queues behind the trees.

Scouts checked the area prior to the unit crossing a road . . . Another click down the side of a ridge,



quickly across a brush-lined stream, and back into the rubber . . . Another 1½ clicks brought the unit to the burned-out village of *Ap Hung Phat*, where there were signs of foraging in the long-overgrown gardens. Several patrols were sent out in different directions in search of enemy activity, returning with nothing to report.

The unit moved half a click to the south-east where it formed a perimeter on the rubber's edge. Here dinner was eaten, and a site selected on the map to RON — 'remain over night'. Dinner was always eaten in a different spot from where the unit RONed, so as to mislead an enemy who might think they would stay there. Crossing CR 303, the unit now found itself among thick bamboo and dense underbrush. Contact was rare in such dense vegetation, so two columns were formed, only 20 metres or so apart: this eased control, allowed more speed, and caused less noise. Following a zig-zag course to make their track difficult to follow, it took the Strikers over an hour to move a click to the RON site. They arrived after dark, intentionally, so that uninvited observers could not see how the unit

deployed; a perimeter was established, fire sectors were designated, and the night's guards assigned.

CIDG discipline was demonstrated when a platoon leader brought a young Striker before the CO complaining of some infraction. The offender was ordered to leave his rifle and load-bearing equipment; was given a grenade, and marched 200 metres to CR 303; and was left alone for the night to contemplate his sins while outposting the road.

### Ambush

The night passed uneventfully and the entire unit was alert before sunrise. A breakfast of cold PIR rice was eaten, and the unit was soon on the move. Crossing CR 303 into the rubber, the unit automatically went into a box formation. Turning south to parallel the road, they ambled through brush-overgrown rubber; they were relaxed in the cool morning air, some with rifles over their shoulders.

Some sixth sense seemed to ripple through the Strikers as they alerted and dropped to the ground before a shot sounded. Green AK-47 tracers, from the left front, swept through the formation. The left flank platoon returned fire as the front



*Co.331 crosses an abandoned rice paddy in column formation — a practice followed only in 'secure' areas.*

### Left:

*A break in the field; an LLDB NCO, with map, sits among Co.331's platoon leaders. On the right is a combat interpreter; and behind the LLDB a standing Striker snacks on 'PIRS'.*

platoon pivoted in an attempt to outflank the enemy, who had been forced to open fire early. M60 tracers began a fire which raged through the dry brush. Keeping up a high rate of fire, both platoons, led by USSF NCOs, advanced through the flames. The fire tapered off, but the platoons became disorganised due to the smoke and general confusion of a firefight. Once sorted out, it was found that there were no friendly casualties, but three dead VC were discovered — two burned, though killed by small arms. Fourteen hasty firing positions were located, indicating that the VC had attempted to ambush the unit. The place where they had spent the night was also found to the south of the ambush site.

The unit again moved out, crossed CR 303 into long-destroyed *Srok Soai* village, and began foraging, though little had been left by the VC. They were preparing to move east and then north when the order was received from Chi Linh to return to camp: the unit was needed to take part in a joint operation on 'Serge's Jungle Highway'. No helicopters were available. Co.331 trooped through the camp's gates the next morning. **MI**