



# THE LAND WARFARE PAPERS

No. 118 FEBRUARY 2018

## Walks in the Midst of Trouble: Allied Patrols in War Zone C, October 1966

John M. Carland

A National Security Affairs Paper  
published on occasion by

**THE INSTITUTE OF  
LAND WARFARE**

ASSOCIATION OF THE  
UNITED STATES ARMY  
Arlington, Virginia

**Walks in the Midst of Trouble:  
Allied Patrols in War Zone C, October 1966**

**by**

**John M. Carland**

**The Institute of Land Warfare**  
ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY

## AN INSTITUTE OF LAND WARFARE PAPER

The purpose of the Institute of Land Warfare is to extend the educational work of AUSA by sponsoring scholarly publications, to include books, monographs and essays on key defense issues, as well as workshops and symposia. A work selected for publication as a Land Warfare Paper represents research by the author which, in the opinion of the Institute's editorial board, will contribute to a better understanding of a particular defense or national security issue. Publication as an Institute of Land Warfare Paper does not indicate that the Association of the United States Army agrees with everything in the paper but does suggest that the Association believes the paper will stimulate the thinking of AUSA members and others concerned about important defense issues.

### LAND WARFARE PAPER No. 118, February 2018

#### **Walks in the Midst of Trouble: Allied Patrols in War Zone C, October 1966**

by John M. Carland

From 1985 to 2013, John M. Carland was a United States government official historian. He is the author of *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965–October 1966*—the official history of the Army's first 18 months of combat in Vietnam—which he wrote for the Army Center of Military History. Later, at the Historian's Office of the State Department, he compiled, edited and published two documentary histories: *Vietnam, January–October 1972* and *Vietnam, October 1972–January 1973*. In retirement, he completed a third documentary history for the State Department, *Vietnam: The Kissinger-Le Duc Tho Negotiations, August 1969–December 1973*, which was published online in late 2017. This volume contains transcripts of the meetings between Kissinger and the North Vietnamese—68 over a four-year period. Carland has also published and delivered numerous articles and papers on the combat history of the United States, the Vietnam War and the higher conduct of the war.

Carland holds an undergraduate double degree in political science and history from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, an MA in political science from the City College of New York and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Toronto.

This paper represents the opinions of the author and should not be taken to represent the views of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, the United States government, the Institute of Land Warfare, the Association of the United States Army or its members.

© Copyright 2018 by  
The Association of the United States Army  
All rights reserved.

Inquiries regarding this and future Land Warfare Papers should be directed to: Director, AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare, 2425 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington VA 22201, e-mail [ncurry@ausa.org](mailto:ncurry@ausa.org) or telephone (direct dial) 703-907-2636 or (toll free) 1-800-336-4570, ext. 2636.

# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction.....   | 1  |
| War Zone C: Why It Was Important to the Enemy.....  | 2  |
| How Allied Unconventional Warfare Reconnaissance Patrols<br>Operated in Hostile Territory ..... | 3  |
| Operation Fondulac: Planning through Implementation .....                                       | 4  |
| Team 5's Story: Things Fall Apart.....  | 9  |
| Team 5's Fall: The Reason Why.....  | 14 |
| Operation Fondulac: An Assessment.....  | 17 |

*I am grateful to Eric Van Slander, Martin Gedra and Cliff Snyder of the National Archives for their expert assistance in researching this paper. My gratitude also extends to Ellen Toner of the Institute of Land Warfare, who edited this paper with imagination, skill, tact and speed.*

## Walks in the Midst of Trouble: Allied Patrols in War Zone C, October 1966<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This is the story of eight Allied (American and South Vietnamese) reconnaissance patrols that were inserted into and operated briefly in War Zone C, northwest of Saigon, in late 1966. While focusing mainly on one of the patrols, Team 5—essentially the story of its destruction at the hands of the enemy—this narrative also contains accounts of the other seven patrols sufficient to provide context and round out the larger operational story.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, the activities of the patrols constitute Operation Fondulac, 12–25 October 1966. An additional source critical to fully understanding the Team 5 story, and one rarely available, is the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (or Viet Cong’s) After Action Report of the same event.<sup>3</sup>

The Fondulac story is a complicated one with many working parts. Yet it is worth studying and analyzing because it explains in detail how these “working parts” functioned when American unconventional warfare patrols operated in a hostile environment in Vietnam. The narrative and analysis suggests that Special Forces teams in such instances failed to rise above the tactical and operational in terms of roles and achievements, despite exhibiting great skill, bravery and resourcefulness in carrying out their missions. This paper also calls into question

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of this article is adapted from Psalm 138:7, King James Version. The verse in its entirety reads: “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me: thou shalt stretch forth thine hand against the wrath of mine enemies, and thy right hand shall save me.”

<sup>2</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Detachment B-56 (Project Sigma), 28 October 1966, Entry A1 1699, RG 472, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Hereafter referred to as After Action Report, Operation Fondulac. Pages 1–8 contain the report. Pages 10–38 hold 12 attachments, called inclosures. The inclosures include reports by all teams inserted during Fondulac plus reports on communications, air support, reaction company and an intelligence map overlay. A thirteenth inclosure—a copy of a message from II Field Force that contained an assessment of documents found on the enemy soldier killed by Team 6A—is not in the folder. Finally, there is no page 9 in the Fondulac file at the National Archives and no indication that there was one in the original.

<sup>3</sup> *Circular: Experiences of U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich [Commandos]*, 13 November 1966, attached to a message from Lieutenant Colonel Henry Ajima, U.S. Army, Army Intelligence and Security Agency, Director, United States Element, Combined Document Exploitation Center, Saigon, to Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, 2 May 1967. This document is a translation of the account of the 1st Platoon, 921st Company, U-80 Artillery Regiment, People’s Liberation Armed Forces of detecting, tracking and ambushing Team 5. As such, it is as valuable as it is rare. Obtained by Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, in an operation on 24 February 1967, and turned over to the Combined Document Exploitation Center in Saigon, the document, despite being called a “circular,” is in all its essentials an After Action Report. The author discovered a copy of this document at the United States Army Center of Military History in the mid-1990s while employed there. Its first citation here is, *Circular: Experiences of U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich [Commandos]*, 13 November 1966, Historians Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC. Another copy can be found at the Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Hereafter referred to as *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*.

judgments and assessments made in Operation Fondulac's After Action Report. Additionally, the reader will see no references to strategic significance here because, to put it bluntly, Fondulac—and the reconnaissance patrols that defined it—had no strategic intent and no strategic accomplishment. It is true that various scenarios might be imagined that would transform such reconnaissance patrols into ones strategically significant, but that did not happen in this operation or ones similar to it during the Vietnam War.

### **War Zone C: Why It Was Important to the Enemy**

As the war expanded in 1965–66, defending War Zone C against incursions by American and/or South Vietnamese forces became a primary responsibility of all Viet Cong units in the war zone.<sup>4</sup> The aim of doing so was straightforward: to preserve a key safe haven, one in which major military command and control organizations existed as well as civilian and Communist Party organizations responsible for prosecuting the war against the Americans and the South Vietnamese. By so doing, the Viet Cong enemy also preserved his ability to launch offensive operations and campaigns from War Zone C's strategic location near Saigon into the heart of South Vietnam. As such, it offered an almost existential threat to the Republic of (South) Vietnam.

A good indication of the role, function and importance of the base area to the enemy can be found in his *Military Encyclopedia of Vietnam*, an official publication of the Military Encyclopedia Center of the Ministry of Defense, Hanoi. Its entry on the war zone reads:

Used during the Vietnamese people's resistance wars against the French and against the Americans. It was located in the mountain jungles of northern Tay Ninh in Eastern Cochin China. The Duong Minh Chau War Zone covered an area of approximately 1500 square kilometers, bordered on the east by the Saigon River, on the west by the Vam Co Dong River, on the south by Provincial Route 13, and on the north by the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. The war zone was formed during the early days of the resistance war against the French, and it was the base area of the Cochin China Party Committee and the Eastern Cochin China Sub-Interzone [Phan Lien Khu Mien Dong]. During the resistance war against the Americans, it was developed into a base area organization of Tay Ninh province and was divided into many combat areas which were called "districts," "villages," and "hamlets." Many of the South Vietnamese revolution's most important headquarters agencies were located there, including COSVN, the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front, the COSVN Military Party Committee, the COSVN Military Headquarters, Liberation Radio, etc. It was a node on our strategic supply line from North Vietnam into Cochin China and was the site where our first main force regiment was formed during the resistance war against the Americans. Relying on the mountain jungle terrain and our people's war posture, the armed forces units stationed in this war zone defeated many sweep operations conducted by American and Saigon Army forces . . . thereby helping to create a solid foundation

---

<sup>4</sup> War Zone C, which will be used throughout this paper, was a term the Americans inherited from the French, who had coined it during the Indochina War, 1946–1954. The Communist enemy called it not War Zone C but the Duong Minh Chau War Zone, named for Duong Minh Chau, the first Chairman of the Viet Minh Communist shadow government in Tay Ninh Province, killed by the French Army in 1947. Email, Merle Pribbenow to Author, 8 September 2016. Pribbenow, a Vietnamese linguist as well as a subject matter expert on the history of the Vietnam War, served in South Vietnam, 1970–1975, as an operations officer for the Central Intelligence Agency.

for the revolutionary movement in Cochin China that enabled the Vietnamese people to win victory in their war of resistance.<sup>5</sup>

In its 1500 square kilometers, a little over twice the size of Fort Benning, War Zone C contained much more than just the senior organizations and commands mentioned above. It held troop training centers, rest and recreation areas for troops just arrived from the North or between operations in the South, hospitals for the wounded, storage facilities for food and supply depots for weapons, ammunition and other military equipment. All in all, it was in 1966—and remained so throughout the war—an advantageous sanctuary and base camp area for the enemy. Because of its terrain, location and defensive setup, it was difficult for American conventional forces to operate successfully in the war zone. Nonetheless, they did on occasion manage to operate for short and longer stays in the war zone, sometimes successfully, sometimes not as successfully.<sup>6</sup>

### **How Allied Unconventional Warfare Reconnaissance Patrols Operated in Hostile Territory**

To frame the narrative and analysis which follow, a few generalizations about the nature of Allied patrols in unconventional warfare operations in Vietnam are useful. The source here is Colonel Francis J. Kelly, who commanded 5th Special Forces in South Vietnam from June 1966 to June 1967.

Regarding the role of surprise in the insertion of patrols into a hostile area, and how to insert them, Kelly pointed out that: “Much of the success of unconventional operations depended on surprise. In addition to stringent security to safeguard plans, numerous measures were employed to deceive the enemy. Deception was most important at the outset of the operation. In the manner common to Vietnam, the force infiltrated by land, air, or water. . . . The helicopter was, however, the usual means of infiltration.”<sup>7</sup>

On the insertion, or infiltration, of a patrol, he stated that:

Experience in Vietnam showed that infiltration by helicopter was best accomplished at last light when the pilots could still see well enough to insert the force and have a few minutes to slip away from the landing zone as both force and helicopters were enveloped by protective darkness. Since the enemy was familiar with this method of infiltration, it was necessary to deceive him in regard to the exact point of landing. The helicopters therefore often set down briefly at three or more points in the vicinity of the primary landing zone to create uncertainty in the enemy’s mind as to the exact point of insertion.<sup>8</sup>

Despite “last light” being the preferred time of insertion, weather conditions and other factors sometimes dictated that teams be inserted at first light or at varying times during the day.

---

<sup>5</sup> Do, Tran, “Duong Minh Chau War Zone,” *Military Encyclopedia of Vietnam* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1996), p. 148; *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, eds. Hoang Van Thai and Tran Van Quang, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), pp. 197–199.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in Operations Birmingham (May–June 1966), Attleboro (October–November 1966) and Junction City (February–May 1967), as well as in operations of the 1st Cavalry Division from early 1969 through early 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Francis John Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961–1971* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1973), pp. 142–43.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Once landed, Kelly emphasized that stealth was a critical and indeed principal characteristic of a patrol's movement in enemy territory. On this, he wrote,

Though the enemy might soon become aware of the presence of the men, it was essential that he remain ignorant of their exact location. Movement had to be as silent as possible. Hand and arm signals were used instead of voice commands; voice radio contacts were held to a minimum; weapons and equipment were padded or taped to prevent rattling or metallic sounds when they were brought into contact with rocks or underbrush; and march silence was strictly observed.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this careful approach,

The enemy proved quite adept at detecting and tracking such forces even when these precautions were taken. His countermeasures consisted mainly of placing guards at such places as trail junctions and stream crossing points to signal information on the movement of the force by means of a simple code of rifle fire and by having a few trackers follow the force at a safe interval to chart and report on its movements. The enemy also monitored voice radio frequencies normally used by friendly forces for tactical command and control. Feints, ambushes, booby traps, frequent changes in the apparent direction of movement of the force, and strict radio silence were used against the enemy countermeasures.<sup>10</sup>

In short, Colonel Kelly admitted that the virtues conferred by surprise, previously mentioned, were often neutralized by the Communist enemy's systematic approach to challenges posed by the Allied intruders.

### **Operation Fondulac: Planning through Implementation**

It all began in late September or early October 1966 when II Field Force, Vietnam, gave Lieutenant Colonel Richard D. Reish, commander of its long-range reconnaissance and reaction organization, Project Sigma (Detachment B-56), a verbal warning order to plan for an operation.<sup>11</sup> The operation, called Fondulac, would "infiltrate and conduct reconnaissance and surveillance in assigned reconnaissance zones . . . and . . . capture enemy personnel [to interrogate later for intelligence]." The second objective, the primary one, specified that the patrols bring back a soldier or soldiers from the People's Liberation Armed Forces's 9th Infantry Division, a major enemy unit that operated north and northwest of Saigon. In between campaigns/operations, the division spent time in the war zone to rest and regroup. To achieve its objectives, Project Sigma would insert six (later increased to eight) patrols into War Zone C.

The Fondulac operation order, issued by Project Sigma tactical operations center on 12 October, initiated the active phase of the operation. It directed the establishment of a task force to conduct the operation from a forward operating base (FOB) adjacent to the Quan Loi airstrip in Binh Long Province. To this end, and on the same day, three C-130 sorties from Bien Hoa Air Base transported to Quan Loi the task force advance party—made up of logistics and communications personnel, the operations sergeant and forward air controller, plus 120 South

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.

<sup>11</sup> Project Sigma's base was at Special Forces Camp Ho Ngoc Tao, located about 15 kilometers south of the American Air Base at Bien Hoa and a little northeast of Saigon.

Vietnamese troops belonging to Sigma's Commando Company—to establish the FOB. The Commando Company would act as a reaction force, if needed, and provide FOB security. Also on 12 October, II Field Force, Vietnam, attached a helicopter aviation assault company to the operation. The following day, the Sigma command group and three of the six reconnaissance teams arrived at the FOB, making it operational at 1700. The other three teams would arrive a few days later. Typically, but not always, each team consisted of six Soldiers—two from Army Special Forces and four from Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group units. Ethnically, the non-American members of each team were Cambodian or Chinese. However, they were South Vietnamese residents or citizens in the South Vietnamese Army. In this paper they will be referred to as “Vietnamese” or “VN” because that is what the Fondulac After Action Report and its attachments, or inclosures, called them. An American was always patrol commander.

Plans were quickly made to insert the three teams (Teams 2, 3 and 4) at the FOB into War Zone C. After a helicopter reconnaissance into the war zone on 14 October, the three teams received target assignments. Next, each team, via helicopter, conducted a reconnaissance of its sector, after which it presented to the commander/command group what the Special Forces called “briefbacks.” A briefback, according to Colonel Kelly,

amounted to a detailed presentation of the operational plan [by the team being inserted] and was designed to insure that every tactical commander, and for small teams every member, knew precisely what his responsibilities were as well as how, when, and why he had to discharge them under the widely differing sets of circumstances that could be encountered during the operation.<sup>12</sup>

After the briefback came the insertion.

Standard operating procedure to mislead the enemy as to the actual landing location in insertions required that helicopters make false landings in the general target area as well as the true landing where the team debarked and from which it deployed. This drill was followed when Team 2 was inserted about 24 kilometers west southwest of Quan Loi at 1310, Team 4 almost 40 kilometers west of the FOB at 1325 and when Team 3 was inserted about 30 kilometers west of the FOB at 1849. Upon landing deep in the enemy stronghold, the teams began to conduct their mission. What happened to each post-insertion is as follows.<sup>13</sup>

Team 2, after almost two days of covert patrolling and observation, having failed to capture a prisoner, requested removal. The team leader reported that his “people had colds and their coughing was endangering the team.”<sup>14</sup> Extraction occurred at 1535 on 17 October.

Team 4's experience was more exciting. Once on the ground it immediately began moving to the south southeast. After going about 100 meters, the patrol began to see numerous signs of the enemy, raising their hopes of capturing a prisoner to take back. For example, they found a trail, boot prints on the trail, heard the bolt of a carbine behind them, heard chickens and also heard hammering sounds nearby. And then they discovered another trail, wide enough for oxcarts, apparently used frequently, and yet another trail, a meter wide, joining the oxcart path. Taking a break at 1605 behind a mound of dirt a short distance off the junction, they

---

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961–1971*, p. 142.

<sup>13</sup> The time for the same event sometimes differs in the Fondulac After Action Report and the relevant team report. All eight team reports are attached to the After Action Report. When this time difference happens, the time will come from a team report.

<sup>14</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 3.

heard someone coming down the trail “not paying too much attention to noise discipline.” The noisemakers turned out to be three Viet Cong traveling south southeast armed with carbines and wearing faded khaki shirts and shorts. Shortly after the three passed, two more Viet Cong appeared, similarly clothed and armed with M-1 rifles, apparently following the first three. A short while later team members heard a shot from the south southeast and a few seconds later an answering shot from the northwest.

Realizing from the two shots that the enemy was following, probably using the “simple code of rifle fire” noted by Colonel Kelly, and probably bracketing them for an ambush, the Allied patrol scooted away from that busy junction and the danger it posed. Soon they saw another trail. When they were about 30 meters from it they observed a Viet Cong pushing a bicycle along this trail. He stopped just in front of Team Leader Sergeant Walter L. Miller, hidden in the brush, and bent over as if to adjust the bicycle chain. Next he drew a pistol and appeared about to enter the brush moving toward Miller, as if he had seen the American. Miller drew his .22 caliber pistol and aimed it at the approaching Viet Cong, preparing to fire. He didn’t, fearing that the dense foliage would deflect his lightweight bullet, and, fortunately, the enemy soldier stopped approaching and instead continued down the trail. The likelihood is that he saw or sensed the patrol’s presence and wisely decided to get help before taking any action against the intruders. Team 4 next heard substantial movement—coming from the south southeast, the direction in which the various Viet Cong had been going—toward the Allied patrol. Consequently, Miller called for extraction at 1710. The forward air controller soon arrived on station and directed the team to a nearby landing zone where helicopters, under fire from the Viet Cong that had been approaching Team 4, exfiltrated the team at 1812.<sup>15</sup>

After its early evening insertion on 15 October, Team 3 established its night position about 300 meters east of the drop off point. The next morning they pushed off to the northeast. Within the hour they began to hear isolated shots from the north and south of them. This continued most of the morning. At one point they ran across a cardboard sign that stated, in Vietnamese, “Anyone entering this area will die.” As they continued to move northeast, the team leader saw signs of enemy soldiers and concluded that they had been discovered and were being followed by Viet Cong. Then, not long after a meal break at 1015, Team 3 reported hearing bamboo clicks to the front and rear of its column, suggesting they were being bracketed for an attack by two groups of enemy soldiers. The team leader then requested fire support and extraction, later observing that “Mission was aborted because of contact with larger enemy force.” Helicopter gunships soon arrived to provide fire while a helicopter pulled out the team at 1142, getting it back to the FOB by 1200. Shortly afterward, American fighter-bombers arrived and hit the site with cluster bomb units, killing two Viet Cong soldiers and possibly four more.<sup>16</sup>

In the next phase of Operation Fondulac, the other teams arrived at Quan Loi and followed the same insertion drill into War Zone C that the first teams had.

Team 1 infiltrated about 33 kilometers west southwest of Quan Loi via helicopter at 1300 on 18 October. While the 18th was quiet, the next day was not. The impersonal tone of the After Action Report fails to convey the gritty, tension-filled and dangerous reality of a reconnaissance patrol in hostile territory. The following does. The incident began when Team

---

<sup>15</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 5, Team 4 Report, pp. 22–23.

<sup>16</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 4, Team 3 Report, pp. 19–20, quoted words from p. 20; See also, After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 2.

I approached Highway 244, a major north-south road deep in the war zone. There the team leader, Sergeant First Class Clinton D. Myrick, believed that the patrol might capture a Viet Cong soldier. Myrick's narrative carries the story forward.

We saw two VC [Viet Cong] walking north, talking and not very alert, after taking photos of repair materials strewn along road, [we] decided to set up ambush at this spot. As we were moving into position, two more VC passed moving south. At 1415 hours two more VC approached our position from the south. One was about 20–25 meters in front of the other. I decided they were too far apart to try to capture so I reached over to stop SSG Stallings from shooting him. I was too late. He fired a .22 with silencer and struck the VC in the chest. The VC turned around and yelled to the other one and Stallings shot him two more times in the chest. The VC started running north down the road, the second VC fired his weapon and I shot and killed him. SSG Stallings then shot and killed the VC he had previously shot, with his M-16. At this time approximately 30 VC to the south of us along the road opened fire and started to flank us to the west. We moved northwest flanking the road approximately 150 meters and came to a bomb crater. We then took up a circular defensive position and waited for FAC [Forward Air Controller; Myrick had called for extraction.] After the first minute of action the firing stopped until the first helicopter came in. At this time the firing started to our south, west and east. There were at least ten automatic weapons firing and I estimate there were 30 VC in the engagement. The helicopters started at approximately 1510 hours and we exfiltrated [all six] by sling ropes in this order: two VN [Vietnamese], two VN and two USASF.<sup>17</sup>

During the extraction, helicopter gunships provided suppressive fire. The last helicopter, the one carrying the Special Forces members of the team, departed under fire at 1548.<sup>18</sup>

The next team to enter War Zone C was Team 4, called on its second go-around Team 4A. Infiltrated at 1315, 18 October, to a location about 38 kilometers west of the FOB, it had a specific mission over and above that of surveillance and capturing a Viet Cong soldier—locate a landline previously noted in its short stay on 15 October and tap and record any conversations heard over it. As it turned out, they were unable to find the landline because, as the team leader Sergeant Miller, later reported, “we were dropped onto the wrong LZ [landing zone].” Moving north northwest from that landing zone for almost 800 meters, the team found a location Miller later said contained “foliage thick enough to hide us for the night.” They remained there overnight and at midnight heard “people stumbling about” approximately 75 meters southeast of their position. After that they heard nothing. As the sun rose on the 19th, the team stayed in place to watch and listen. At 0900 the radio relay aircraft pilot gave the team a new destination, a landing zone 900 meters away, from which they would be exfiltrated at 1300. And so they began a slow, careful move toward the landing zone. After 1100, they began to see and hear signs that the enemy might be near. To their rear they heard birds being frightened and flying away, next they smelled meat cooking, after that they walked by a small hut, which appeared to have just been vacated and saw, but did not investigate, a tunnel entrance. Next the team walked past another small hut. “We proceeded on our azimuth,” Miller later wrote, “and started hearing movement from our rear and the bird calls started coming faster.” Sergeant Miller then

---

<sup>17</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 2, Team 1 Report, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 3.

called for an emergency extraction at 1207. By this time helicopter gunships had arrived on station to protect their departure and had begun firing at the huts, a likely enemy location. The Communists responded with semi-automatic rifle fire, but the exchange did not interfere with the extraction. The team arrived at the landing zone at 1220. Five minutes later they had all been picked up and were on their way back to Quan Loi.<sup>19</sup>

No insertions occurred on the 20th, but on the 21st the two Fondulac teams that had not yet been in War Zone C helicoptered in. Team 6 did so at 1200 to a location about 28 kilometers west southwest of the FOB, Team 5 ten minutes later to a site about 37 kilometers west southwest of Quan Loi. (Team 5's story will be covered in detail in the following section.) Meanwhile, Team 6, about three hours into its mission, ambushed two Viet Cong who were walking on a path, probably killing one but, according to the team report, "the body was not found and situation didn't warrant looking for him." The other Viet Cong, wounded by American fire, became a prisoner. The team seemed close to accomplishing its primary mission objective—capturing an enemy soldier for interrogation—and so requested extraction. Soon three helicopters arrived and pulled out the team by rig, while a fourth, the command and control helicopter, was to take the prisoner. However, "Attempts to exfiltrate the wounded VC by a sling failed when he became entangled in the tree tops and had to be cut loose from the chopper." The fall from about 100 feet in the air killed the prisoner.<sup>20</sup>

Fondulac's last insertion, again of Team 6, called Team 6A for its second time in the field during the operation, took place on 24 October at 1200. The team composition varied from the norm—it contained four Americans and two Vietnamese. At 1400, the team ambushed a lone Viet Cong on a trail near their insertion point. During the brief action, one of the Americans placed a "well-aimed shot through the VC's foot, knocking him to the ground." It appeared again that the mission objective was to be achieved. Then, to the team leader's surprise and no doubt chagrin, one of the Vietnamese shot and killed the prisoner. "Later investigation into the incident discovered that the VN was afraid of what the VC's future action toward the team might be so he shot him." This unconvincing answer hardly makes sense, given the primary mission of these patrols on which all members had been briefed, but there was no more detailed explanation offered. This essentially ended the patrol; the team leader asked for extraction, which occurred at 1417, and they were back at Quan Loi by 1430. The team did bring back the Viet Cong's body and the documents on it. The documents gave the team leader a little leverage in assessing the achievement of his team. That is, when asked if the mission had been accomplished, he concluded that the team had achieved "50% [of the mission]. POW died, but information gained in captured documents he was carrying proved to be valuable." As a diversionary maneuver during the Team 6A exfiltration, the FAC called in air-strikes on nearby pre-selected targets, killing at least six Viet Cong soldiers and perhaps ten more.<sup>21</sup>

As a last act against the Viet Cong in War Zone C during Fondulac, the FOB at Quan Loi at 1630 on 24 October sent three helicopter gunships into the war zone and instructed them to place fire on all targets identified by the patrols. The gunships did so and returned to base

---

<sup>19</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 6, Team 4A Report, pp. 24–25; see also, After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 8, Team 6 Report, pp. 30–31.

<sup>21</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 6; After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 9, Team 6A Report, pp. 33–34.

at 1800, orders carried out. Later in the evening, the operation's command and control and support elements returned to Project Sigma Base Camp Ho Ngoc Tao. On the next day, 25 October, the bulk of Project Sigma personnel, American and non-American, by air and then road, made it back to the base camp. Operation Fondulac was over.

### **Team 5's Story: Things Fall Apart**

Team 5's experience in Fondulac—being on the receiving end of a successful enemy ambush—obviously differed from those of the other patrols in the operation. Perhaps the best way to tell the story is to begin with a brief look at the Allied patrols as the Viet Cong did, i.e., as intruders, and work from there to the Team 5 narrative.

Every Viet Cong unit in War Zone C had a responsibility to defend its sector against American and/or South Vietnamese incursions. For that purpose, the Communist authorities had well-established standard operating procedures and organizations. For example, when Teams 1 and 4 had earlier infiltrated by helicopter into War Zone C on 18 October, the noise of the helicopters did not go unnoticed among enemy observers. They assumed from previous experience that the helicopters' presence meant Biet Kich (Vietnamese for Commandos) were infiltrating into their territory and up to no good. The two teams landed in the sector where responsibility for security fell to the U-80 Artillery Regiment of the People's Liberation Armed Forces. Its commander immediately implemented procedures developed for such incursions. "Through experiences cadre and soldiers knew," as the After Action Report later pointed out, "that Biet Kich were operating in the area. They immediately rushed out in search of them while at the [U-80] home-base, PRC 10 radios were turned on to detect them." The radio traffic of the Americans seemed to suggest that they were approaching the regimental base. However, after searching that day and the next two days, U-80 patrols "could not discover any traces [of the Biet Kich], so they became discouraged."<sup>22</sup>

A few days later, on 21 October, Team 5 infiltrated War Zone C. The team consisted of two Americans and three South Vietnamese, one fewer than the standard six-member team. The After Action Report gave no explanation for this. In any case, Special Forces Sergeant Boyd W. Anderson was Team Leader and the other American, Special Forces Staff Sergeant Michael R. Newbern, served as second in command. Of the three Vietnamese, the name of one is unknown. The other two were Thach Sa Van Dinh and Son Nghinh.<sup>23</sup>

After landing at 1210, Team 5 moved west southwest from the insertion point for 200 or 300 meters and stopped for about 15 minutes. Then they backtracked 70 meters to set up an ambush. After about two hours, during which time no Viet Cong appeared, the team moved again, this time in a more southwesterly direction. They came upon a well-used trail about 18 inches wide. They set up a second ambush, probably at 1430 or 1500, a short distance off the trail. After 30 minutes in place and no action, the team moved southwest alongside the trail. Later in the day, as they took a break, the team member bringing up the rear saw two black-clad, armed Viet Cong cross the path behind them. Whether the Viet Cong saw the team is not clear.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> The names of the Americans come from After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 5; the names of the Vietnamese from After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 7, Team 5 Report, pp. 27–28. This inclosure is not a team report like the others. It consists of a summary statement, drafted by an unknown person, based on debriefings of the two surviving South Vietnamese members of Team 5 and quotations from the debriefings. The date of the team's insertion was Sergeant Newbern's 22nd birthday.

Then the team started again and soon came upon what one of the South Vietnamese described as a big bomb; the other thought it a wing tank. Sergeant Newbern took photographs of the item while Sergeant Anderson made radio contact with the FOB. The time was either 1756, according to the Fondulac After Action Report, or 1830, according to Thach Sa Van Dinh's debriefing. As this occurred, one of the Vietnamese heard an estimated 7 to 10 enemy soldiers about 200 meters to the south of the team's position and an unknown number to the north. Anderson ordered the team to move in the direction of the sound, possibly to the south. Then, because the Viet Cong seemed close by, the team went on high alert and went into a defensive position. At this point, the two Americans discussed the team's next move and decided to shift to a hill nearby. Although Newbern wanted to remain quietly where they were, Anderson advised moving to the hill because it would be easier to defend. During the night, team members heard people walking around them, presumably Viet Cong—and also, of all things, what sounded like chickens. Some of the Viet Cong (if they were Viet Cong), were close enough to be overheard discussing where to go and where to sleep. At 0100 they seemed particularly close, all around the Allied patrol, but the patrol remained alert, awake and undiscovered throughout the night.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the Viet Cong continued to hunt for the intruders. Earlier on the same day, 21 October, an enemy patrol searching for Allied patrols found a clear indication that such a patrol had been and probably still was in the neighborhood. That is, a U-80 patrol came upon "tracks of Biet Kich shoes"—which were noticeably different from prints made by Viet Cong footwear—approximately two kilometers from the U-80 base. Consequently, the Viet Cong soldiers now believed that an Allied patrol was probably in the area. "That night," as the enemy After Action Report later stated, "the unit commander held a conference to motivate additional members for the search and set up a plan for the ambush in the direction in which the enemy might pass."<sup>25</sup>

The Viet Cong search for the Allied patrol on the next day, 22 October, began with a false start. Patrols searching for the Allied patrol departed their base at 0430. Fifteen minutes later they returned because it was still too dark to search. The real search began in the immediate pre-dawn period when, according to the enemy After Action Report, "[A]t 0530 hours they [four-man patrols] started to move in the direction where tracks had been discovered. They advanced secretly in measuring-worm method." In tactical terms, the measuring-worm method meant that "[T]wo comrades moved 50 m[eters] apart, stopped to observe and waited for two others to move up. . . ." Then they repeated the maneuver as they searched for the Allied patrol or patrols. Thus, each two-man team that moved forward was protected in its movement by the other two men in the patrol.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 5; After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 7, Team 5 Report, pp. 27–28.

<sup>25</sup> *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> According to Robert Destatte—Vietnamese linguist, Army intelligence officer (1959–1979) and Senior Analyst for Southeast Asia, Department of Defense (1979–2001)—a better translation of the Vietnamese would be the "inchworm" method of advance. He cites for this translation *Rice Bowl Vietnamese–English Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. Jim Fleming (Fort Meade, MD: National Security Agency, April 1995), p. 1554. Destatte to Author, 7 November 2016. Readers should note the similarity of the measuring worm method to the U.S. Army overwatch method. Field Manual 3-90-2, *Reconnaissance, Security, and Tactics, and Tactical Enabling Tasks* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), p. 3-8 states, "Bounding overwatch is a movement technique used when contact with enemy forces is expected. The unit moves by bounds. One element is always halted in position to overwatch another element while it moves. The overwatching element is positioned to support the moving unit by fire or fire and movement."

At 0700, the Allied patrol Team Leader Anderson checked in with the FOB via radio. Apparently unaware of any danger, other than the danger always associated with operating in a hostile environment, he ordered the team to move west southwest toward a road.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, enemy patrols continued their hunt for an Allied patrol; at 0730 a Viet Cong searcher patrol suddenly hit pay dirt. They “heard a heavy sound and recognized three Biet Kich moving parallel to them fifteen m[eters] away.” However, despite the closeness to the Americans and South Vietnamese, “[t]hanks to advantageous terrain they were not discovered.” The Viet Cong patrol followed and carefully monitored the Allied patrol’s movement for a little more than half an hour.<sup>28</sup> By this time, the American-South Vietnamese patrol had moved 100 meters (according to one of the South Vietnamese survivors) or 300 meters (according to the other) from its overnight position.<sup>29</sup>

Not quite ready to spring the ambush, the enemy platoon leader “observed carefully to define the number of Biet Kich but he only noticed three.” Having done this, but obviously having not seen the other two members of the Allied patrol (presumably nearby but not visible), he made the decision to conduct a hasty ambush. He ordered his troops to move forward into position and to be ready to act. Responding, “[t]hey hid behind earth mounds or trees and waited for the enemy to pass.” When the three visible members of the Allied patrol had moved 10 meters beyond them, the Viet Cong opened fire. The time was 0810. In a very short time it was over. “After a series of AK shots,” the enemy account later observed, “two Americans were killed and one puppet soldier wounded, but he still resisted. The platoon leader appointed one of his troops to move to the right to kill him,” which he did. Consequently, “After one minute of combat,” the enemy report concluded, “we thus killed three Biet Kich, seized two AR-15s, one carbine, one pistol, one PRC-25 radio, one HTI [an outdated American ground-to-air radio], two compasses, documents, clothing and equipment.”<sup>30</sup> To the victor belonged the spoils.

At this point, the American-South Vietnamese situation transitioned suddenly from an ordered, apparently undetected and careful move in hostile territory to one characterized first by chaos and violence and then by death and destruction. One of the patrol survivors, Thach Sa Van Dinh, wounded in the leg in the brief melee, later recalled:

When in VC ambush VC shot from the rear. Me and security man move to east, no trail. Two US move to west to protect flank. Point man move forward about 3 meters. VC fire from rear and right, many VC too many to count. Two US receive fire from flank. They fall back to two VN. When they start to move out Andy [Sergeant Anderson] got hit in the leg, the VN got killed. Andy crawl to reach for side, then Sgt Newbern call on radio and then get killed. Andy then tried to get radio handset—he get killed. Point man then try to shoot back. When all three get killed I move to find other VN. All this time VC shout and yell. I shoot one VC in rear end [sic].<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Which road and for what purpose is unknown. Source is one of the South Vietnamese on the team, Thach Sa Van Dinh. After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 7, Team 5 Report, p. 27. No road shows up on Army’s 1:50,000 topographic map.

<sup>28</sup> *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 7, Team 5 Report, pp. 27–28.

<sup>30</sup> *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 1; After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 7, Team 5 Report, pp. 27–28.

Thach Sa Van Dinh's account indicates that the five members of the Allied patrol were closer to one another than the enemy report indicates; it also noted only three Biet Kich. But in the main, the two accounts agree—the Viet Cong had set up an ambush, allowed the Allied patrol to walk through their positions while they remained undetected and then triggered the ambush with an attack on the patrol's rear.

Sergeant Newbern's radio transmission, referred to in the account above (the only one he got off) was, "We need a Bulldog [term for immediate extraction] and Airstrike, they are all over us." After that, nothing but firing was heard on the radio.<sup>32</sup>

The other survivor, Son Nghinh, who became point man after the first point man's death, added to the account. When the firing began, he hit the ground, believing they had been attacked by a company-sized Viet Cong force. Then, when Anderson got shot, Nghinh attempted to take Anderson's weapon from him so that he could more easily move him to a safer location. Anderson would not let him take the gun away. Again, after Newbern was shot, Nghinh also tried to take his weapon for the same purpose, still to no avail. Shortly thereafter, hostile fire killed the two Americans. Next, Nghinh said: "Rear man get shot [and killed]. So other VN [Dinh] get shot, jumped near body, VC assault. I move back five meters, VC assault second time. I grabbed the other VN. VC try to catch but we run faster than VC [sic]." He ran, dragging the wounded man toward a clearing that would function as a landing zone. The Viet Cong pursued them, but when an American aircraft arrived and flew toward the action at a low altitude, it distracted them; they began firing at the aircraft. This gave the two survivors time to reach the landing zone safely.<sup>33</sup>

Although identified by Nghinh as the FAC aircraft, it is more likely to have been the radio relay aircraft, already on station. (Both aircraft were L-19 Bird Dogs.) The enemy report also noted an L-19 hovering over the ambush area.<sup>34</sup>

There is a slight divergence in the two narratives regarding what happened in the immediate aftermath of the ambush. According to the enemy After Action Report:

[W]e guessed that there had been 6 Biet Kich (4 puppet troops and 2 Americans) divided into two groups. The first group which we did not encounter might be composed of 3 puppet troops. When it learned that the second group had been attacked, it took refuge and waited until the shooting stopped. It went to the clearing to call the L-19.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the above, we know from the American report that the team did not divide into two groups. It is hard to absolutely reconcile these two views. The so-called second group referred to in the enemy report had to be the two Team 5 survivors who sped away from the ambush site moving toward the clearing. This would suggest—though it cannot be confirmed—that those ambushing the Allied patrol had lost track of the two survivors and now saw them as the second group. An additional misapprehension was that there were six Allied soldiers in the patrol. Team 5 contained only five members, not the standard six. That said, the enemy did have the

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the American belief that the Viet Cong were firing at the L-19, the enemy After Action Report noted that "An L19 was hovering in the north-west, five minutes later it lowered on the combat site in an attempt to make contact with the Biet Kich but it was in vain." Yet, it said nothing about firing. See *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

overall notion about the aftermath of the ambush for the Allied patrol correct, namely, that the surviving commandos had fled to a clearing to be picked up by helicopter.

The larger story post-ambush, however, is that of the Project Sigma response to Newbern's emergency extraction appeal. The response was swift, efficient and perfectly executed, but still too late.

Within minutes of Newbern's call, the FAC in his L-19 and rescue helicopters as well as helicopter gunships were in the air from Quan Loi, speeding toward the ambush site.<sup>36</sup> At 0825, the pilot of the radio relay aircraft, already in the area, saw the two surviving men in a clearing east of the ambush site. At 0833, the FAC also saw them, and at 0836 they were picked up and flown safely back to Quan Loi. Two minutes later, at 0838, Project Sigma commander Colonel Reish activated a reaction force made up of the 1st Commando Company, a ten-man Vietnamese Killer Team, and five Special Forces personnel and ordered its move to the area on a rescue, reaction or recovery mission, depending on what they found. The force had assembled on the airstrip at Quan Loi by 0900, was in the air in eight UH-1Ds by 0912 and arrived in the ambush area by 0930 or 0935, landing in a clearing about 400 meters north-northeast of the ambush site.<sup>37</sup>

Unseen enemy watchers observed the American response, noting that "About one hour later [i.e., about one hour after the ambush; actually it was closer to an hour and twenty minutes], one L-19, five helicopters and jets arrived and strafed the area nearby, then landed about one b ["b" was enemy short-hand for a company] to pick up bodies for we did not take them away. We only returned to our base with trophies for report. We intended to go back to the scene to bury them."<sup>38</sup>

The on-the-ground force commander, Captain Deacon,<sup>39</sup> deployed his men, some to provide security, others to search to the west and south for the missing two Americans and one Vietnamese. Their bodies were soon found near one another at the base of a tree about 200 meters northwest of the ambush site and about 300 meters southwest of the landing zone. The Commando Company's later report noted that: "Sgt. Anderson was face down, harness straps had been cut across his back. SSG Newbern was on his back, all of his equipment was gone. The VN was only a short distance away with all equipment gone." Taken were two M-16 rifles, one M2 Carbine, one 9 mm pistol, one PRC 25 radio, one HT-1 radio and the team's signal operating instructions.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Information in this paragraph and the next on the organization and implementation of the reaction/recovery effort comes from After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, pp. 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> The Fondulac After Action Report and the The 1st Commando Company Report differ on the movement of the rescue/recovery force. The former states that two helicopter lifts were organized to transport the force but that the second lift was called back to Quan Loi in mid-flight because the missing men's bodies had been recovered. The latter makes it clear that all of the Commando Company arrived at the landing zone and participated in the search for the missing men. With some misgiving the author has decided, absent further information, to go with the Commando Company Report because the Company was on the ground and would have known who was there; After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 5; After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 10, 1st Commando Company Report, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> First name unknown.

<sup>40</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 10, 1st Commando Company Report, p. 35. Not unexpectedly, the enemy list of what was taken essentially matches what was lost.

On being informed at 0945 that the three bodies had been moved to the nearby landing zone, Colonel Reish ordered the Commando Company to close down the recovery operation and bring the bodies back. The last helicopter departed the landing zone, headed for Quan Loi at 1044. Immediately thereafter, the helicopter gunships that had been providing air support to the search for the missing men, and then for the helicopters extracting the Commando Force, gave any Viet Cong soldiers or observers in the area an explosive goodbye, saturating the ambush site and the landing zone “with fire.” Three minutes later, the FAC called off the gunships and brought in on-station tactical aircraft for seven sorties against the same targets.<sup>41</sup> After all Americans had departed, the Viet Cong inspected the site, noting that: “When we went to the clearing nearby we saw traces of landing helicopters, smoking grenades and a box of machine gun rounds.”<sup>42</sup>

To complete the narrative of Team 5 from the American perspective, it only remains to relate how quickly Project Sigma focused on closure for those who had participated in the mission—the dead as well as the living. At 1200, all who had been in the field and were now back at Quan Loi attended a memorial service on the airstrip for the fallen. A quarter of an hour later, the bodies of the Americans—Anderson and Newbern—were transported to the 93rd Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh, while the Vietnamese, name unknown, was taken to a Buddhist Temple in Saigon. Then Colonel Reish focused on the next and final operational requirement of Fondulac—the insertion of Team 6A into the war zone, as told above.

### **Team 5’s Fall: The Reason Why**

Two explanations for what happened to Team 5 are worth considering. First, a potentially reasonable and convincing approach directly assigns fault to the two Americans, making them responsible for the unnecessary disaster. This is the view of the Project Sigma chain of command and expressed clearly in the After Action Report: “It is felt that the over-confidence of the two USASF [United States Army Special Forces] members of team 5 [Anderson and Newbern] led to their being killed.” The three sentences immediately following offer evidence leading to this conclusion:

It was discovered after talking to the two surviving VN, that the team’s presence in the area had been detected at 211900 Oct. The team tried to elude the VC during the night and made no report of this to the FOB, nor did they request that the team be extracted. If the FOB had been aware of their situation during the night of 21 Oct the team would have been extracted at first light on 22 Oct 66.<sup>43</sup>

If true, the two Americans richly deserve the After Action Report’s condemnation. But according to material in the body of the After Action Report, the debriefings of the two Vietnamese survivors and information from the enemy’s After Action Report, such condemnation might have been premature and its accuracy questionable.

In the Fondulac After Action Report’s brief mention of Anderson’s radio contact at 1756, he “reported that no enemy contact had been made.”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps this informational tidbit is

---

<sup>41</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

irrelevant since the call occurred a little more than an hour before 1900, when the alleged attempt to “elude” the Viet Cong took place. However, this radio contact is likely the same one Thach Sa Van Dinh’s debriefing reports as taking place at 1830 (since no other communication is mentioned in the After Action Report or the team report). To be sure, Dinh acknowledged that the times he reported in his debriefing were approximations. In the same time frame as this radio contact, Dinh and the rest of the team heard movement of what they assumed were Viet Cong. For the team, and this is an important point to make, the consequence of that discovery was not to attempt to evade an enemy that had discovered them, but only to go on high alert where they were. While this was going on, the two Americans were debating whether to move to the top the nearby hill. As mentioned earlier, they did make the move; this comes closest to suggesting an attempt to “elude” the Viet Cong, but it is hardly convincing.<sup>45</sup>

In short, neither of the two survivors directly or indirectly suggested that the enemy discovered the team in the middle of the night or that, as a result, the team acted to “elude” the enemy. One survivor said he heard people nearby during the night, but clearly nothing untoward happened. The other noted that the team stayed awake all night and heard around 0100 what were likely Viet Cong nearby, but after that did not hear anything else.<sup>46</sup>

What about the Viet Cong After Action Report? Does it in any way suggest that its patrols had found Team 5 before 0730 on the morning of 22 October? Does it provide support for the “over-confidence” argument? A careful examination of the report reveals that it does not support that argument. In fact, the reverse may be true; it can be seen to indirectly argue against the “over-confidence” thesis, and this is why. If the Viet Cong patrol had discovered and chased the Allied patrol late in the day on 21 October, the report would have mentioned this. After all, the report was not written as propaganda but as a straightforward document for internal consumption to tell the story of ambushing the Allied patrol. It addressed in an honest manner problems encountered, things done well and lesson learned in this process. As such, this report weighs powerfully against the “over-confidence” thesis. While a second search team in the area could have been hunting for the Allied patrol and even chased it, this is not likely. After all, the search area was the U-80 Regiment’s responsibility; if another unit had joined the search, or even searched independently, this would have been mentioned. It was not.

Therefore, absent more and better evidence about the team’s “over-confidence,” there is a lot of room to doubt the charge against Anderson and Newbern. Why the Fondulac report made such a serious accusation without substantive supporting evidence is not known.

A final word against this accusation: it is true that if the patrol had called for extraction at first light on the 22nd it would not have been ambushed and all would have survived. However, and this should be emphasized, there was no apparent reason to request extraction. According to Thach Sa Van Dinh, one of the survivors, as dawn came “they adjusted their perimeter and

---

<sup>45</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 7, Team 5 Report, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> Those who made the noise and moved around Team 5’s position in the night are unknown. Were they, as the team’s two survivors assumed, Viet Cong soldiers? Perhaps. Yet, the enemy soldiers responsible for the area, those belonging to the U-80 Regiment, were in their base camp overnight and did not venture out to search for the Allied patrol until 0530 on the morning of 22 October, so it was probably not them. The voices and movement heard could have been caused by other U-80 Regiment personnel or soldiers from other Viet Cong units, but if so the After Action Report would likely have mentioned this; it does not. The noises and movement could have been caused by Vietnamese civilians surreptitiously passing through the war zone, or the noise could have been imagined by the team due to pressures inherent in a dangerous mission into hostile territory.

just looked and listened until 220700.”<sup>47</sup> This indicates that while the team no doubt appreciated the need to be alert and careful, their situation did not seem to represent immediate danger. Put a little differently, although any Allied patrol in the war zone could be in danger at any time, this Allied patrol did not see a specific risk at this particular moment.

A second explanation for what happened to Team 5, possibly the most convincing, focuses on the enemy’s approach to detecting and eliminating Allied intrusions into War Zone C. Generally speaking, the enemy had organized War Zone C so that each unit stationed in the war zone had the responsibility to secure a given area from hostile operations. Doctrine and practical experience guided how the units carried out their responsibilities.

In terms of detecting the Allied intruders, for example, when the enemy observed American helicopters in any area, as they had in Operation Project Sigma’s Operation Fondulac, the Viet Cong had good reason to suspect that an Allied patrol was being infiltrated. This understanding dictated two immediate steps. Assigned Viet Cong teams quickly moved out from the home-base to search for the infiltrators while other personnel at the home-base used captured American PRC 10 radios to monitor any communications emanating from the Allied patrol. Despite its rapid move into the field, the Viet Cong reconnaissance patrol did not do this rashly. According to the Viet Cong report: “The [searcher] unit had a close plan for the search, proper assignments and adequate equipment. While the unit was on bivouac in the forest, cadre and soldiers kept perfect silence and were always on the alert.” Each unit’s knowledge of its home-base area of operation allowed searcher patrols to pinpoint likely landing zones and head for them. If they failed to find the intruders at a landing zone, the searcher cells’ familiarity with the area aided them in an expanded search for the Allied patrol or patrols. The enemy report further observed that:

During the search, each cell was in charge of its respective area so there was no overlap. A signal system was closely organized to avoid any mistake in firing at night or in the twilight when the unit returned to the base. Cadre and soldiers were indoctrinated to search secretly without making any noises. . . . When they discovered enemy traces they studied them and followed them.

All in all, this simple, almost primitive approach evidenced a shrewd use and allocation of resources. It was this drill the enemy followed when Team 5 and the other teams infiltrated.<sup>48</sup>

In terms of confronting and eliminating Allied patrols, once again a straightforward method worked well. That is, once the Allied patrol was discovered, followed and observed via the “measuring-worm” tactic, the die was cast for an attack. To that end, doctrine and experience told them to:

[T]ake advantage of the terrain, [and when given the order] conduct proper fire at fixed targets, coordinate the main front attack with a flank attack to create conditions for a quick, systematic attack. Avoid hazardous attacks, firing from long distance, and wasting ammunition without proper targets.

Another instruction given was that if a choice existed, killing Americans was the first priority.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 7, Team 5 Report, p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> *Experiences of the U-80 [Regiment] in Killing Biet Kich*, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

Even after the ambush had been successfully sprung, the Americans and one South Vietnamese killed, the dead stripped of weapons and all useful equipment taken away, the enemy's standard operating procedure recommended one more step to possibly inflict injury or death on the intruders. "When the Americans are killed," the After Action Report urged, "the enemy usually drops his troops to pick up their bodies." If this happened, Viet Cong troops should "[o]rganize an attack by any way." For example, they could: "Lay grenades near enemy bodies. Deploy cells to fire at aircraft and landing troops. Use DH10 [mines] to attack the first troops to get out of the aircraft and shoot at aircraft flying at low altitudes." Fortunately for the American-South Vietnamese reaction force, the Viet Cong troops arrived too late at the landing zone to do any of the above.<sup>50</sup>

In summary, it was not the Americans' "over-confidence," if such existed, that brought about the patrol's destruction, but the enemy's effective approach to dealing with hostile intrusions. The enemy's well-thought-out standard operating procedures, ably executed by trained and motivated troops, the troops capably led by seasoned officers, almost inevitably placed intruders on the defensive from infiltration to exfiltration. The logic of this approach, which might be called one of all-around pressure, made an Allied patrol's discovery more likely than not. Discovery was but a step away from ambush, and ambush but another step to death and destruction of the patrol. That the Viet Cong in War Zone C possessed a coherent plan to react to infiltration and the ability to pursue it relentlessly essentially explains the destruction of Team 5 and the enemy's success on 22 October 1966.

### **Operation Fondulac: An Assessment**

Did these walks in the midst of trouble in War Zone C by the Allied reconnaissance patrols that made up Operation Fondulac add up to mission success? The After Action Report immediately offers a seemingly frank answer: "No. The primary mission of capturing a prisoner of war was not accomplished." Despite this admission, the report in the very next sentence argues the opposite—namely, that the operation was a success for two reasons. First, the mere fact of being able to insert eight reconnaissance patrols permitted a claim of success. Second, while on the ground the teams generated useful area intelligence.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the first part of this argument, it should be understood that the very real insertion capability of the Americans generated a roughly equivalent counter-capability in the Viet Cong.<sup>52</sup> As a result, the enemy's standard operating procedures allowed its soldiers to detect, confront and, in effect, drive out of the war zone four of the eight patrols (Teams 1, 3, 4 and 4A), destroy a fifth (Team 5) and motivate a sixth (Team 2) to exfiltrate since at least one of its members had a cold and his coughing might attract the Viet Cong. The other two teams (Teams 6 and 6A) exfiltrated shortly after each captured an enemy soldier, the mission's main objective. Neither was able to bring its prisoner back because both prisoners died—one in the exfiltration accident (Team 6) while the other was shot and killed after being wounded by another member of the Allied patrol (Team 6A). In short, inserting the teams into the war zone, while a necessary condition of success and a demonstration of talent, training and capability, did not and could not guarantee it. Therefore this argument does not carry much weight.

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>51</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> A military manifestation of Newton's Third Law?

The second reason in the argument for success is similarly unconvincing.<sup>53</sup> Intelligence acquired in the operation, as reported in the Fondulac After Action Report, while not without value, was low-level. Here are three examples from the After Action Report.

(1) “The heavy use of provincial routes 246 and 244 by the VC is very evident from not only the ground but from the air. The numerous bombed out bridges along these routes may have hindered transportation but in no way stopped it. As is evidenced by many by-passes and even rebuilt bridges.”

(2) “Sightings of cultivated plots were not numerous, however, there were a few. The sighting of numerous groups of water buffalo along route 246 indicated VC could be using them for transportation rather than farm production. Trails are so numerous in the area it’s impossible to plot every one. . . . All trails seem to have been heavily used. It is to be noted in individual team reports that the VC tend to use their roads and trails even in broad daylight.”

(3) “The VC in the AO [area of operations] have a feeling of security. They walk the trails with no apparent regard for security, taking cover and/or concealment only when aircraft appear or when they are aware of a recon patrol’s presence. The area is full of well used trails, many of which are so well hidden beneath the forest canopy they cannot be detected from the air.”<sup>54</sup>

Such observations and conclusions, as noted, did have value because they added to the store of general knowledge possessed by the Americans and South Vietnamese and might be exploited for future operations in the war zone. Nevertheless, the information scarcely counted as hard, actionable military intelligence, and was hardly a reason to declare operational success.

When push comes to shove, the claims made in the After Action Report are weak reeds on which to base an assertion of mission success. To adapt an Aesopian maxim to this assessment, Operation Fondulac patrols labored mightily but, regrettably, brought forth only a mouse.

---

<sup>53</sup> Supposedly, the documents found on the Viet Cong killed by Team 6A contained intelligence that “proved to be valuable” when forwarded to higher headquarters. However, since neither the After Action Report nor the team report backed this up with any evidence, the statement means little. See After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, p. 6; After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, Inclosure 9, Team Report 6A, p. 34.

<sup>54</sup> After Action Report, Operation Fondulac, pp. 6–7.