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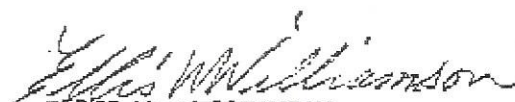
29 November 1968

COMMANDERS COMBAT NOTE NUMBER 20

SUBJECT: Combat Action Analysis Number 6

1. Reaction a key word in our combat environment. As soldiers, we are trained individually to react automatically and positively to any enemy action. As a fire team, battalion or division, we are prepared to react collectively to any enemy initiative. And, when we are required to react, we are faced with the sternest test for any soldier or any military unit -- in quick order to blunt the enemy's initiative, to seize that initiative ourselves and to punish the enemy decisively for daring to strike at us.
2. There have been many fine examples provided to us on the subject of reaction, and the attached combat action analysis stands as one of the most prominent. As you read and in turn discuss it with others, pay particular attention to the speed and decisiveness which a unit can and must apply to a reaction situation. Here a commander demonstrated the classic defense against an enemy attack. He attacked.

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ELLIS W. WILLIAMSON
Major General, USA
Commanding

In the early stages of this war, there existed doubt that armor and mechanized forces would play a significant role in the fighting. The terrain and the environment which characterizes South Vietnam and the guerrilla nature of the warfare here were factors which argued against the employment of armor and mechanized infantry. As a precedent, the French before us had attempted the use of such forces with less than acceptable results.

There were those, however, who held that armor and mechanized infantry did have a valid contribution to make to the combat that was taking place. Accordingly, armor and mechanized units were committed to battle in order to test their application to the situation which existed. The record shows the combat success we have enjoyed in the use of the potent weapons of armor.

The combat action we are about to review serves well to illustrate the devastating effect of armor's shock action, firepower and mobility and mechanized infantry's superior maneuverability in this environment. It will also demonstrate how good commanders and good subordinate and junior leaders, by the calm and professional application of the combat power that is immediately available to them, can win in a fluid and doubtful combat situation.

In fact, for those of us who study the chronology and history of the significant actions of this war, the action we are about to consider may well prove to be one of the key turning points in the fighting that has taken place in the last seven years.

Exactly what was happening was for the most part unknown and the situation at the moment could best be described as confusing. But, there was no doubt in the mind of the cavalry squadron S3 that something big was taking place and in short order his unit was going to be in the thick of it.

The 0400 hours call from the division tactical operations center (DTOC) gave him the be prepared mission to move one troop southeast to a strategic town on the northwestern outskirts of SAIGON and the huge TAN SON NHUT Airbase complex.

The S3 immediately alerted C Troop (minus one platoon) which was available at the division base camp. The squadron's other two ground troops were deployed along the main supply route (MSR) to the northwest of the base. B Troop was located at a bridge site 15 kilometers up the road and A Troop was positioned at an artillery fire support base 28 kilometers away. The detached C Troop platoon was providing security for a critical MSR bridge 10 kilometers to the southeast in the vicinity to which the remainder of the troop was preparing to move (see sketch #1).

Having no contingency plan for a reaction mission to the town to the southeast and with no information concerning what was taking place there, the S3 immediately drove to the DTOC to discuss the situation with the division C3. Information available to the operations officer and his staff at the DTOC was sketchy. The division had received a be prepared mission from its higher headquarters to react to an enemy threat in the vicinity of the town, but the exact nature of that threat had not been defined.

While the S3 was at the DTOC, division received the order to send immediately one cavalry troop into the town. There it would be met by a representative of the major command headquarters for the area who would provide further instructions. This mission and special instructions were passed to the squadron S3, and at approximately 0430 hours the tanks and armored personnel carriers (APC) of the Headquarters element and two platoons of C Troop moved in column formation through the main gate of the division base camp and turned southeast down the MSR.

Since the area to which the troop was moving was not in the squadron's normal area of operations, few maps of the vicinity were available within the squadron headquarters. As the troop commander moved out he was able to locate one map of the area. He personally had been in the area only once during his tour and was only vaguely familiar with the terrain and surroundings in which he would be operating.

As the troop wheeled southeast along the MSR, the troop commander ordered his vehicles off the highway to move cross-country parallel to the roadway. He reasoned that if anything big was taking place to his southeast, the enemy might well attempt to interdict the MSR with mines, road blocks and ambushes to cut off reinforcements.

While the troop was racing towards the town, a message was received at the division TOC from higher headquarters changing the unit's original mission. The troop was to proceed with all haste beyond the town and further south to TAN SON NHUT Airbase which was under attack from the west by an estimated 300 enemy troops. The troop would be met on the MSR before

it reached the airbase by a jeep which would guide the unit to the location where it was needed.

In response to this message, the DTOC requested information concerning the situation at TAN SON NHUT; namely, on which side of the road was the enemy located, what information was available relative to the enemy units which were in the area, and did the troop have clearance to fire all its organic weapons in this heavily populated and developed area? In the confusion which existed at the time, no direct reply to these questions was forthcoming before the troop was joined in battle.

As C Troop approached the town, the change of mission message was flashed to it over the squadron command radio net. With these new instructions in effect, the troop commander ordered his column to roll past the town and remain on the road to push the remaining nine kilometers to the western approaches to TAN SON NHUT. As it moved down the road, the column encountered no resistance. The troop commander noted, however, that the several villages and populated areas along the way were deserted (see sketch

Approaching the airbase at approximately 0700 hours, the column found no jeep waiting along the road to serve as its guide. The troop commander directed his unit to continue moving. In the vicinity of the west gate to TAN SON NHUT, the tanks and armored personnel carriers came under heavy automatic weapons and small arms fire from a large textile factory on the west side of the highway (see sketch #3).

Returning this fire as it moved, the column continued approximately 200 meters south of the factory where the lead tank was struck by a

rocket propelled grenade (RPG). The crippled tank came to a halt blocking the highway and stopping the remainder of the column behind it. Immediately the troop came under heavy fire from both sides of the road. The cavalrymen dismounted and deployed to the ditches along the road to return the enemy's fire. The mounted cannon and 50 caliber machine guns on the tanks and APCs also swung into action laying down a heavy screen of fire to both the east and west.

Unknown to the troop commander at the time was the fact that his unit had sliced directly across the path of a three battalion enemy assault on TAM SON NHUT Airbase from the west. His column had come to a halt in such a position as to cut off an estimated 300 enemy troops who had breached the airbase perimeter and occupied the western end of the active east-west runway from the main body of the enemy force which was moving in from the west in anticipation of throwing a knockout blow at the airbase.

The crossfire in which the troop found itself was intense. One tank and three armored personnel carriers were knocked out by the initial outburst of fire and were aflame. Within five minutes, the troop commander was seriously wounded and unconscious on the deck of an APC and the other officers in the formation were either killed or wounded. Command of the troop was taken by a sergeant-first-class who directed the unit's actions until the arrival of reinforcements. One of the sergeant's first actions was to radio a situation report to his squadron commander and request reinforcements and supporting fires.

The squadron commander's reaction to this call was immediate and

threefold. A request had earlier been placed with the division G3 to release the detached C Troop platoon from its bridge security mission so that it could join its parent unit at TAN SON NHUT. This request had initially been denied. When he learned that C Troop was in heavy contact and the situation at TAN SON NHUT was extremely critical, the squadron commander again made the request which this time was quickly approved. At approximately 0710 hours, the platoon at the bridge was ordered to move immediately down the 14 kilometers separating it from the contact area to reinforce the troop.

Secondly, B Troop which was located at the bridge site northwest of the division base camp and 39 kilometers from the contact area had been given a be prepared mission at 0430-hours to react to the C Troop move to the south should that maneuver develop a contact. At approximately 0710 hours, B Troop was given the order to reinforce C Troop at TAN SON NHUT. Already mounted and ready to move, B Troop was on the road and racing to the southeast at maximum speed within minutes.

Thirdly, as soon as the C Troop contact was reported, the squadron commander requested and received permission from the DTCC to scramble the helicopter gunships from D Troop, the squadron's organic air cavalry unit. Within minutes of the request for supporting fires, these gunships were airborne for the five minute flight to the airbase.

The C Troop platoon located on the bridge to the northeast of TAN SON NHUT mounted up and pushed down the road towards the airbase on order. At approximately 0730 hours the platoon was approaching the

contact area. At this point, the platoon leader was contacted over the radio by the squadron commander who had arrived over the contact area in his command and control (C and C) helicopter only moments before. The squadron commander had made a rapid estimate of the situation. Fully aware of the forces that were available to him, he quickly devised a plan to destroy the massive enemy force he could now observe moving on C Troop and the airbase from the west.

Instead of ordering the platoon to link up with its parent troop by driving straight down the road, the squadron commander directed the platoon column to turn east off the MSR at an airbase gate several hundred meters north of the contact area. He then guided the platoon to the western end of the active east-west runway where a base security force was engaging the enemy troops who had penetrated the perimeter. Bringing the platoon on line facing the enemy, the squadron commander ordered the column to drive through the enemy formation to link up with the troop several hundred meters away on the road (see sketch #4).

Without hesitating, the platoon moved forward at high speed rolling over the startled enemy to its front. This maneuver, in addition to killing many enemy, created havoc with the enemy formation causing it to disperse and scatter. As the platoon rolled to its link up, the enemy force to the rear of C Troop was no longer an effective fighting formation and was easily handled by the airbase security personnel who counter attacked to exploit the situation.

While the platoon was executing this maneuver, four armed helicopters

of D Troop arrived on station over the contact area. The squadron commander ordered the gunships to concentrate their automatic weapons and rocket fire on the large number of enemy troops now congested in the large open field to the immediate west of C Troop's position on the road. At this point, C Troop's fire had pinned down the lead elements of this enemy force, and the remainder continuing its advance was piling up directly behind the stalled lead elements. Large groups of enemy suddenly found themselves in an exposed position as the four helicopters raked them with repeated strafing passes up and down the field.

The sudden appearance of the armored column across his route of advance, the maneuvering of the platoon to link up with its parent troop and the devastating attacks of the helicopter gunships served to throw the enemy attacking forces into general confusion. At approximately 0815 hours, the B Troop commander advised his squadron commander that the lead vehicles in the troop column were rapidly approaching TAN SON NHUT.

The column had raced the 39 kilometers between its original position and the contact area in approximately one hour (see sketch #5). In route the troop had encountered no resistance by fire but did smash through several hastily constructed roadblocks that appeared across the road. The troop commander did not have a map of the area, and he was requesting instructions from the squadron commander. With this the squadron commander still over the battlefield in his command and control helicopter was ready to apply the final blow to his hastily devised plan to destroy the enemy attack (see sketch #6).

Coordinating all elements on his squadron command radio net, the commander directed the helicopter gunships to take up positions on the southern flank of the battlefield and to seal that escape route by fire.

He then directed B Troop to execute a column right off the MSR on to the unimproved road which formed the northern flank of the battlefield. The lead platoon of the troop was to continue approximately 1,000 meters to the west, do a column left and come up on line. There the platoon was to establish a blocking position sealing the battle area on the west to destroy enemy attempting to escape in that direction.

The headquarters element of B Troop was instructed to direct its fire on the enemy located in the factory complex to the north of the contact area. The remaining two platoons were ordered to come on line along the enemy's northern flank and from that position attack to the south through the enemy. The two platoons were to push to the southern end of the battlefield, turn about and attack back to its starting position. In the meantime, C Troop was to maintain its position on the road and support B Troop's movement across its front by fire.

Within minutes all elements were in position, and the squadron commander ordered the attack. The speed with which the maneuver developed, the crushing effect and firepower of the tanks and armored personnel carriers attacking into his midst and the presence and firepower of the cavalry elements on three sides created chaos in the enemy's formation causing it to disperse and scatter. The two platoon line pushed through the enemy, wheeled about and again rolled over the enemy positions. By the time the

tanks and armored personnel carriers returned to their initial position, the enemy attack was broken and his troops were withdrawing in all directions.

Sporadic fighting in the contact area continued throughout the morning and into the afternoon. Pockets of enemy troops had dug into hastily prepared positions within the contact area and had to be dislodged in close fighting. In addition, the squadron turned its tanks to the task of blasting and crushing airbase perimeter bunker positions that had been occupied by the enemy and were being stubbornly defended.

The squadron also oriented its fires on the enemy occupied factory. Late in the morning and throughout the afternoon U.S. and South Vietnamese Air Force fighter bombers delivered repeated strikes against the enemy lodged within the several buildings which made up the complex. By the time these attacks were completed, the factory had been leveled and was aflame, and the enemy had been forced out.

These later actions notwithstanding, however, the squadron had won its battle several hours earlier with the destruction of the enemy assault on the airbase.

A reorganization and muster of the squadron's units on the west side of the airbase late in the afternoon revealed that 15 cavalymen had been killed in the intense fighting while 23 were wounded. The squadron also lost one tank and three armored personnel carriers. A police of the battlefield over a two day period turned up over 400 enemy bodies, 348 of which were attributed directly to the squadron's actions.

LESSONS LEARNED

Planning and advanced preparations are two principles of military operations which are taught to us from our first day in the Army. Properly, we consider them essential elements to a successful military operation. Yet, we must be prepared to strike swiftly on the spur of the moment, so to speak, and win without the benefit of detailed plans and preparations. In the final analysis, the challenge to a unit to do so represents the most critical test of the commander, the unit's leadership and its fighting spirit and ability. Let's reconsider some of the salient points that present themselves in the action we have just reviewed.

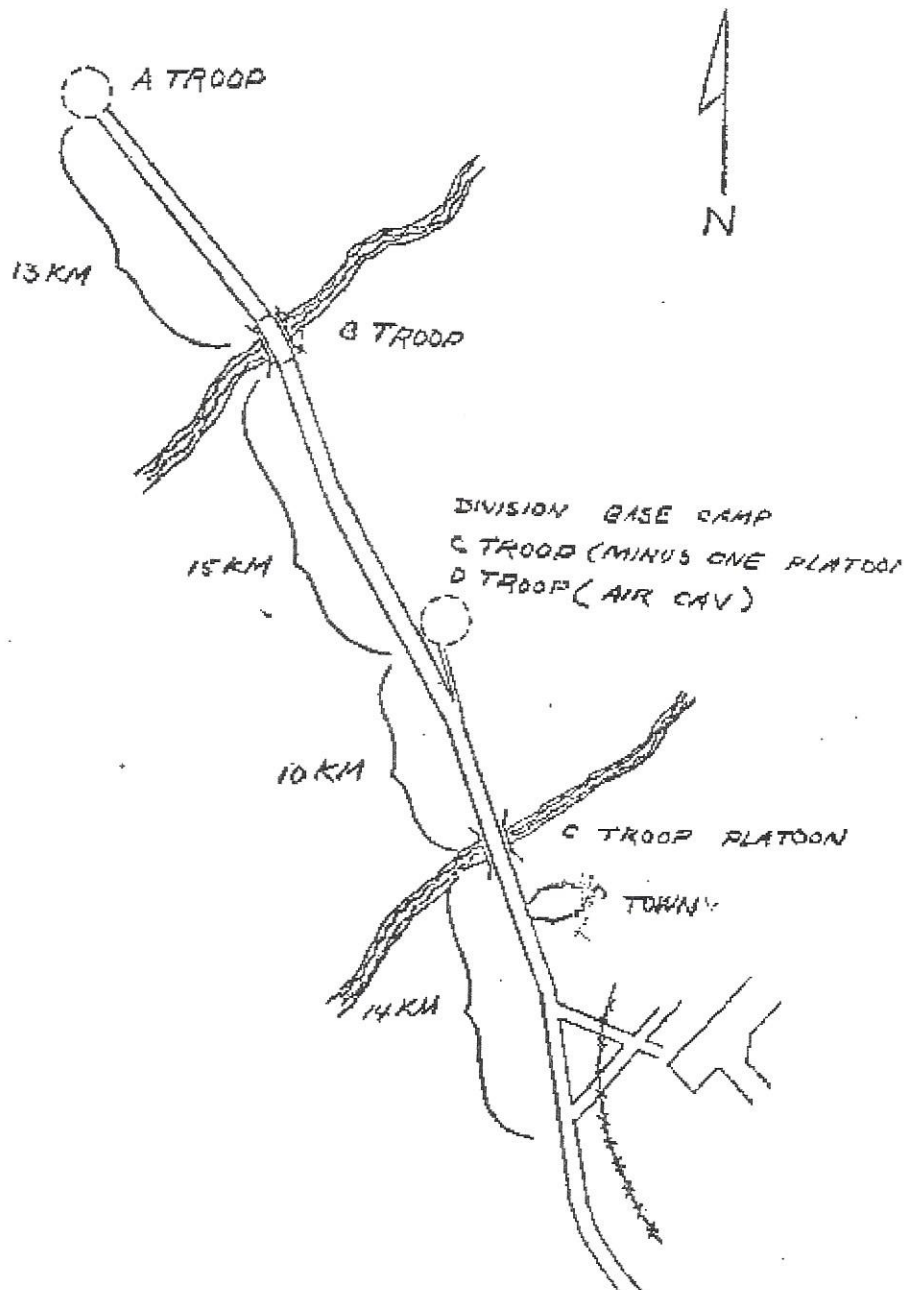
The commander acted swiftly and boldly because this is what the situation demanded. No prior planning was involved, but the commander quickly realized that an all out counterattack with all the combat power he possessed was the only solution to a critical situation.

Although he was striking directly into a numerically superior enemy force, he was aware that the enemy infantry exposed in an attack posture was vulnerable to the firepower and maneuverability of the armored force under his control provided that the armor struck swiftly. To have hesitated to take detailed stock of the situation would have resulted in a disaster.

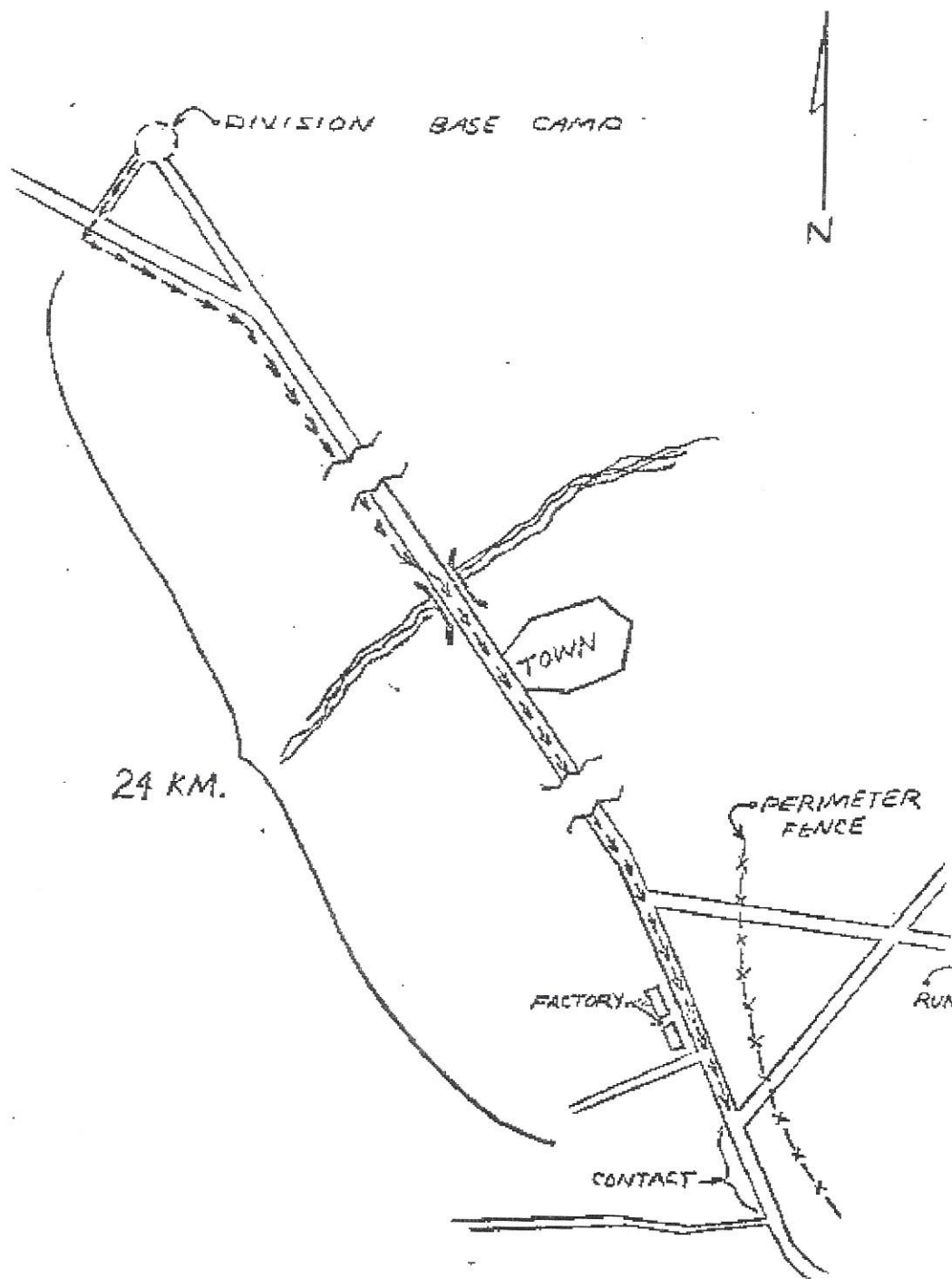
The manner in which the commander maneuvered the reinforcing platoon correctly relieved the pressure on one side of the threatened troop on the road and enabled that unit to concentrate all its resources in the direction of the principle enemy effort. Never allow a situation to stand where the enemy has the ability to force a unit to divide its firepower in more than one direction!

The commander's actions, however, in dividing the striking power of his second ground troop was a calculated risk that could only be justified by quickness on the part of his attacking force. Here, though, it becomes apparent that the commander was confident in the ability of his subordinate units to strike with the speed that was required. The corollary of the previous lesson then presents itself: divide your forces and your fire-power when you know your dispersed forces possess the capability of overpowering the enemy.

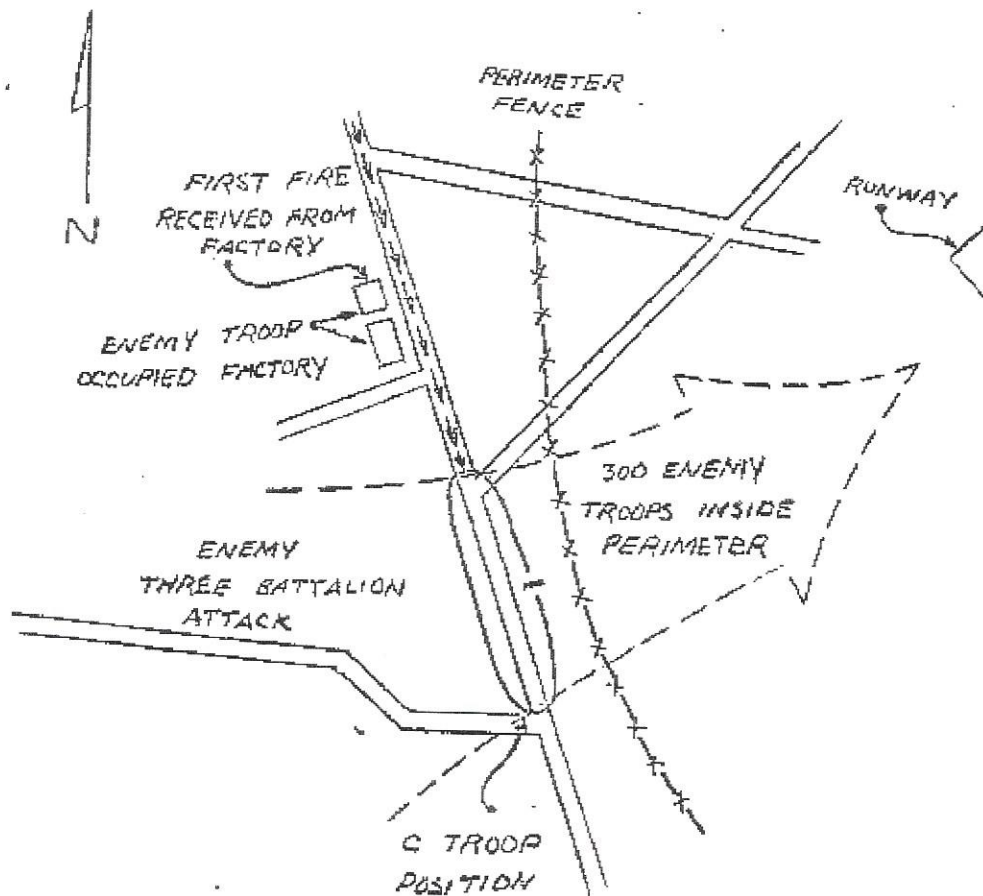
A word about the single factor that underlies the entire action by the cavalry squadron -- seizure of the initiative. We must always keep foremost in our minds the vital concept of taking the initiative. If the enemy at any time has the initiative, we must concentrate on taking it away from him and punishing him severely for daring to attack us. The deciding factors in the squadron's victory over a larger enemy force, in my opinion, were the powerful physical and psychological momentum that the reinforcing elements developed as they raced to the contact area and the wisdom of the squadron commander in not slowing down the rolling effect of these units as they literally crashed into and rolled over the enemy in their path. This is initiative mechanical and human forward motion in its purest form and it won this battle and will win many others for us. We want always to think in terms of hitting the enemy fast and hitting him hard!



SKETCH #1
DISPOSITION OF SQUADRON BEFORE BATTLE



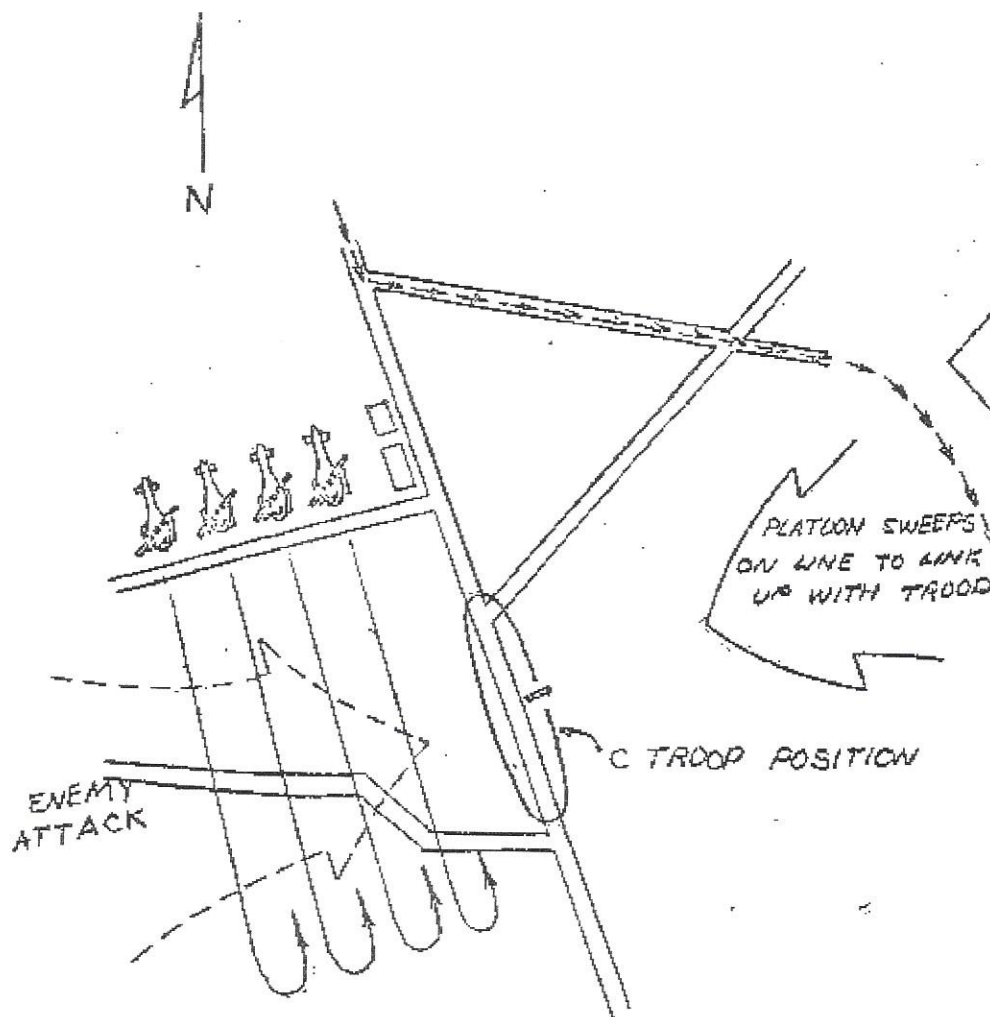
SKETCH #2
MOVEMENT OF C TROOP TO CONTACT ,



SKETCH #3

SCALE: 800M

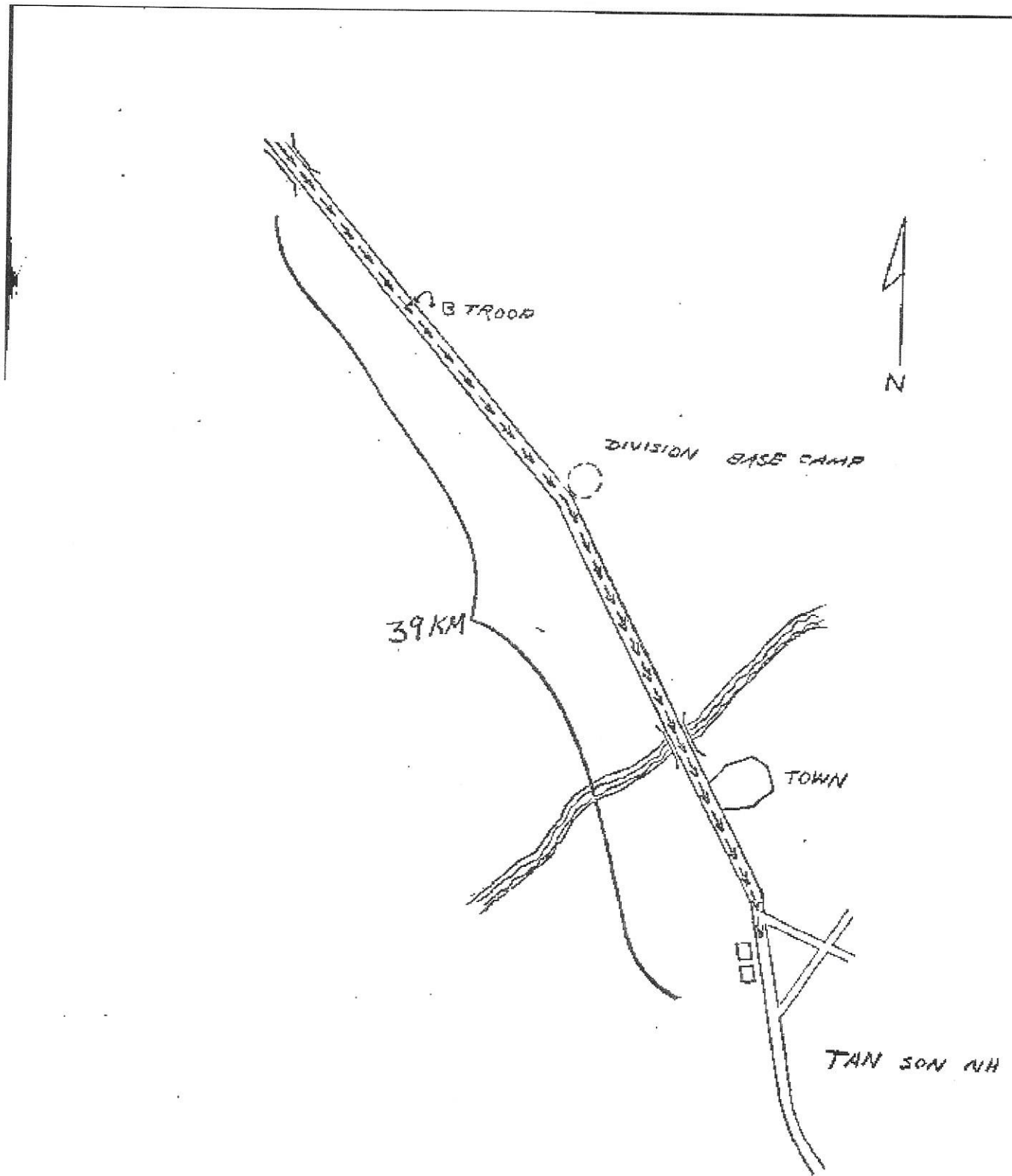
POSITION OF C TROOP IN CONTACT AR.



SKETCH #4

SCALE: 800 M

MOVEMENT OF PLATOON FROM BRIDGE TO AIR BASE TO REINFORCE TROOP, AND ACTION OF HELICOPTER GUNSHIPS.



SKETCH #5
B TROOP ROUTE TO CONTACT AREA