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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
Headquarters, 3d Battalion 187th Airborne Infantry  
APO San Francisco 96383

AVDG-CD-C

5 May 1969

SUBJECT: After Action Report Fire Base Jack

Commanding Officer  
3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division  
APO San Francisco 96383

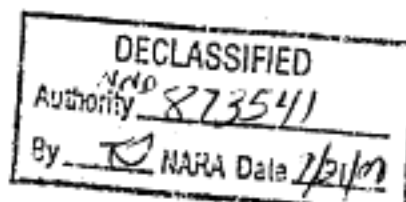
Fire Base Jack, located East of the Song O Lau, Rao Cao River junction and South West of Camp Evans was initially constructed by the 1st Air Cavalry Division. After the 101st Airborne Division moved to its present Area of Operations, the Fire Base was further developed by the 2nd Battalion 506 Infantry and supported 3d Brigade and ARVN operations. Located in the rolling terrain of the flatlands, it is bordered on the West and South by a wide plain and on the North and North East by a low, grassy ridge line. A road runs North East from the Fire Base to Camp Evans. The base is ringed with two aprons of triple concertina wire 25 meters apart. Twenty meters inside the secondary apron of tactical wire is the bunker line. The bunkers are low profile wood and sandbag structures, each surrounded by an anti-RPG net.

FB Jack was occupied by a 155mm Howitzer battery of the 2-11 artillery when Company A 3d Battalion, 187th Airborne Infantry arrived to secure it on 21 March 1969. Attached to Company A for base defense purposes were two twin 100mm self propelled "Dusters" and an 81mm mortar section. An AN/FPS-4 radar section maintained surveillance of the surrounding terrain. Upon occupation, the defense was so arranged that the perimeter, covering a distance of approximately 700 meters, was manned by three platoons. There had been no indications of enemy activity until the 24th of March when intelligence information, based primarily on an agent report and radar sightings, revealed that there was a Viet Cong Sapper unit in the area between Fire Base Jack and Camp Evans and further, that either of those two installations, or the district headquarters at Phong Dien, could expect an attack within the next few days.

The morning of March 27th was clear with the first quarter moon providing pale illumination. Company A, maintaining its vigil, was unaware of the impending assault until 0315 hours when a trip flare, ignited at the secondary wire on the Eastern side of the perimeter, marked the beginning of the attack. Immediately enemy mortar bombardment began. Base defenders who had been at 50% alert in their bunkers remained there while the fire continued. The initial mortar fire was augmented and then supplanted by RPG's, most of which were being fired from the East and South East sector of the perimeter.

The enemy, in an effort to keep the defenders in the bunkers, were launching RPG's and continuing their mortar attack while attempting to breach the wire. A Company elements took them under fire; but in the darkness target engagement was difficult. The difficulty further aggravated by uncertainty, on the part of some of the troops, about the LP's. Since there had been no warning from them, about the impending attack, it was thought that they were making their way into the perimeter and would be shot by their own element. In addition, the third platoon CP sustained a direct mortar round injuring a number of personnel, destroying the platoon radio thereby disrupting control and allowing the sappers to cut through the wire before being taken under fire.

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While the enemy's thrust was being countered with small arms fire, the Company Commander was requesting ARA and artillery support and trying to establish the status of the LP's. The problem was most critical in the 3d platoon where there was no means of communicating with the LP located to the front of that area. Finally, contact was established through one of the company radios and the men were instructed to maintain their positions.

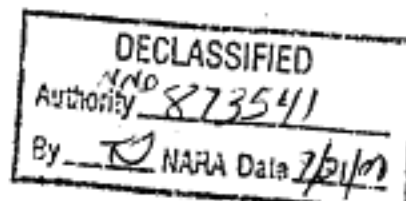
By 0330 hours, members of Company A were directing a heavy volume of fire against the attackers and when the mortar began firing illumination rounds, they started exacting an even greater toll from the enemy.

At 0340 hours, when the Battalion Commander and members of his staff arrived to observe and control the tactical situation, the base was still under mortar and RPG fire; and even though the enemy was not yet clear of the wire the momentum of the assault had been halted. One of the key defensive measures proved to be the illumination of the fire base. Once the enemy was visible they were aggressively engaged and driven from the wire.

The most significant penetration occurred in the northern, 3d platoon sector, where the artillery battery was located. Since the platoon CP had been destroyed, the platoon leader initially had some difficulty rallying his forces and the sappers managed to reach an area some 10 meters beyond the outermost bunker before they were killed. The deepest penetration was made by one sapper who reached a point short of the artillery area before he was trapped and killed. Indicative of the high level of motivation and fanaticism of the attacking force was the fact that he was unarmed and wearing only a blue loin cloth with numerous explosive detonators and satchel charges tied to his body. It appeared that his was a suicidal mission.

When the LP's returned, it was disclosed that they had heard no movement prior to the attack; but the LP located in the Eastern sector reported hearing 8 to 11 sappers running past their position during the retreat. Claymores were not employed until after the attack had been repulsed. In their assault, the enemy moved so quickly that they were past the defensive string of claymores before Company A was aware that a ground attack was in progress. By the time the sappers were again in the killing zone, during withdrawal, only a few claymores were blown because most of the detonators were inside the bunkers while the defending troops were in slit trenches adjacent to them.

An After Action analysis indicated that Fire Base Jack had been attacked by 2 or 3 platoons of sappers but suffered no serious damage. Both mess halls had been hit with 60mm mortar rounds, one artillery vehicle was damaged by an RPG and some of the bunkers had been ripped by shrapnel. The 40mm "Dusters" were not damaged but had not been employed initially because most of the crew members had been injured by a mortar round. The "Dusters" were employed later using Infantrymen as crew members. A total of eighteen friendly casualties were reported, one of whom subsequently died. A daylight search of the area around the perimeter disclosed fifteen enemy bodies, 257 satchel charges, 24 RPG rounds, 1 RPG launcher, and other miscellaneous equipment. An additional body was found, under a pile of leaves, by a work detail some 2½ weeks later.



Lessons Learned:

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1. The most salient of the lessons learned was the reaffirmation of tactical operations involved in a sapper attack. The assault on Fire Base Jack followed very closely the identified and established patterns of attack used previously by the enemy. Identification of enemy techniques allows proper planning of defenses to specifically prevent such attacks from succeeding.
2. Cyclone fence RPG nets. Anti-RPG nets are an effective means of preventing the destruction of defensive bunkers by rocket propelled grenades. The fence, erected 12 to 15 feet from the bunker prematurely detonates the round, dissipating its explosive force thus decreasing the number of friendly casualties. Although numerous RPG rounds were fired, not one bunker was destroyed; all RPG's were detonated at the nets.
3. Emplacement, and employment of claymore mines and detonators. Claymores were only partially utilized in the defense of Fire Base Jack for the following reasons:
  - a. They were emplaced in only one primary string.
  - b. Most detonators were located inside the bunkers. The enemy had passed the first string of claymores before they could be detonated, and once defending personnel had vacated the bunkers and had occupied defensive positions near them, the mines could not be detonated because most of the electrical initiators were inside the bunkers.
4. Sappers will employ RPG's to augment the initial mortar bombardment to keep the defenders in the bunkers while they are breaching the wire. The sapper is most vulnerable during this phase of the assault and will seek to keep personnel in the bunkers to prevent his discovery and engagement by small arms fire.
5. The most effective defense against a sapper attack is sustained small arms fire directed into and around the defensive wire and bunkers.

Recommendations:

1. Establish base defense SOP's through drill and rehearsal and make all personnel familiar with sapper tactics. Study previous sapper attacks closely to identify patterns and prepare for the eventuality of such attacks incorporating specific anti-sapper measures, to include a base illumination plan.
2. Construct anti-RPG nets around all defensive bunkers. Be sure that the cyclone fence is an adequate distance from the bunker to insure full dissipation of the RPG explosive force.
3. Employ claymores in "primary" and "secondary" strings establishing defense in depth. Position all but two electrical initiators in fighting positions adjacent to the bunkers to allow their use throughout the attack. The two inside the bunker will provide an "initial strike" capability while personnel are moving to fighting positions.
4. Insure that personnel vacate bunkers and cover the tactical wire by fire. Foxholes and slit trenches are much more effective fighting positions than bunkers. They provide almost as much protection against shrapnel as do bunkers, and yet allow much greater observation and cannot be as easily seen by the enemy.

/s/ W. F. HONEYCUTT

/t/ W. F. HONEYCUTT  
LTC Infantry  
Commanding

