

# EMPLOYING the RECON PATROL

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## *The conflict of stealth vs. force has been resolved in the application of reconnaissance procedures in 3dMarDiv's area of operations.*

FROM Quang Tri City north to the Demilitarized Zone; from the South China Sea west to the Laotian border beyond Khe Sanh—this is the 1,300-square-mile area of operations of the 3rd Marine Division.

The terrain varies greatly. The coastal flat lands are interlaced with rich delta farm country and flat sand wastes. Extending westward to Camp Carroll is the piedmont with its low rolling hills and scrub growth. In the west are mountains.

This area is secured by mobile forces ranging rapidly into areas where intelligence indicates the presence of enemy forces. But at any one time, less than 40 per cent of the total area is covered by these operations. The remainder must be covered by reconnaissance, and the principal instrument is the Marine reconnaissance patrol.

During 1968, about 1,600 such patrols operated in the 3rd Marine Division area, roughly 120 to 130 patrols a month. One out of three expects to make contact, and two of three expect to find evidence of recent enemy activity. Rarely does a patrol go out on an uneventful mission.

Patrol contacts have occurred throughout the entire area from Quang Tri City into the DMZ, and in the mountains near the Laotian border. On a typical day, approximately 30 patrols are used, including 20 in the field. The remainder are preparing for insertion or are in the process of extraction and debriefing. Of the 20 in the field, four usually are in contact with the enemy, and

three of these will result in emergency exploitation by the insertion of additional forces or will require emergency extraction.

Exploitation operations are undertaken when it is apparent that the patrol is in contact with a sizable force, usually 100 or more enemy troops. Emergency extraction is normal in remote areas beyond the range of friendly artillery fire.

There are two general concepts to patrol operations. Within range of friendly artillery—the artillery fan normally covers 70 per cent of the entire area—a patrol concept called STING RAY is employed. In the outer reaches, beyond friendly artillery range, a different concept called KEY HOLE is used.

These two types of reconnaissance patrols accommodate the variety of missions given to the total effort in the 3rd Marine Division. Regardless of the breakdown into STING RAY and KEY HOLE categories, the 3d Marine Division's reconnaissance effort is considered as one cohesive effort.

Though they differ in several ways, the *essential* difference is that the mission of the STING RAY patrol is to strike at the enemy, while the mission of the KEY HOLE is to observe him.

### STING RAY PATROLS

The basic concept of this form of patrolling is carried over from the earlier days of reconnaissance. Though today's tactics may differ somewhat, the mission remains essentially the same: to find, fix and engage the enemy with all available

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supporting and small arms.

The size of STING RAY patrols depends on expected enemy contact. This patrol consists of a team leader, assistant team leader, one or two medical corpsmen (depending on the size of the patrol), any special personnel necessary to accomplish the mission (e.g. demolition experts), and patrol members themselves.

The STING RAY patrol is heavily armed and organic arms are supplemented with weapons capable of sustaining heavy enemy contact. Members also carry quantities of hand grenades, claymore mines, etc.

This patrol operates under the cover of the artillery fan. Artillery is continuously on call and gives the patrol constant protection even in adverse situations when air or reinforcements are not available, particularly in poor visibility.

### KEY HOLE PATROLS

The KEY HOLE concept is based on secrecy and stealth; its function is pure reconnaissance. This type of patrol is engaged by the enemy more often than its STING RAY counterpart, because the KEY HOLE patrol operates in more remote areas. It is much smaller, and armed only with essential weapons and ammunition.

Of late, the division's effort to totally annihilate enemy activity has resulted in extensive use of the STING RAY patrol, coupled with rapid reinforcement and exploitation. The success of any form of reconnaissance remains contingent upon the division's ability to respond immediately to particularly urgent requirements. Thus, the use of reconnaissance in the 3d Marine Division is a product of the needs of unit commanders. The challenge is the same as that which faces the commander with all of his assets: how best to employ them and support them.

#### Planning

The principal ingredient in successful reconnaissance is continuous, careful, detailed planning—with the over-all intelligence collection effort a key factor in determining where and when reconnaissance patrols are best employed. In an area as active as that of the 3d Marine Division it is necessary to employ the full capability of the Division Reconnaissance Battalion plus the Force Reconnaissance Company to exploit available intelligence. The Division G-2 coordinates the over-all effort and plans the allocation of teams to areas controlled by major units, with detailed planning normally done at subordinate task force or regimental level.

Full coverage of the division areas is planned well in advance to ensure frequent detailed explorations of all areas. However, immediate reaction

to intelligence from other sources is also essential. This necessity for immediate reaction requires carefully designed SOPs and around-the-clock planning and execution.

Reconnaissance missions in the 3d Marine Division are developed from requests submitted by subordinate units to the division G-2. Based on the division appraisal of the over-all enemy situation and immediate tactical requirements, these requests are appropriately included in the reconnaissance plan.

Once a request is approved for a patrol mission, a reconnaissance unit is notified and directed to prepare the patrol in detail: briefing, instruction and preparation, insertion, contact, reporting, protection, exploitation, extraction and debriefing.

In undertaking a mission, all support elements must respond effectively and timely to ensure early and complete coordination. The support package for a reconnaissance team is a successful combination of both air and artillery. It includes delivery aircraft (usually CH-34 or CH-46), armed rotary cover aircraft (UH-1E), aerial observation aircraft (OV-10A), fixed wing cover aircraft (F-4, A-4, etc.), a responsive reaction force, and finally, direct support of all available artillery when the teams are operating within range.

Before the team's insertion, the team leader and insertion pilot conduct an overflight of the assigned reconnaissance zone. This enables the team leader to study the terrain and permits the pilot and team leader to agree on a suitable LZ, one which can be approached by the insertion aircraft and which is tactically desirable for the team. A primary and alternate zone are selected during the overflight to add flexibility to the insertion plan. It cannot be over-emphasized that the pilot who makes the reconnaissance flight is the same pilot who flies the delivery helicopter.

The delivery aircraft with an accompanying search and rescue ship will be escorted by two UH-1E gunships. These four rotary aircraft with the team constitute the reconnaissance package.

In both planning and execution no detail is too great to be overlooked. Since the focal point of the entire operation is the reconnaissance team itself, the team must undergo careful preparation before the mission.

Once the reconnaissance unit receives the division requirements for a specific mission, it issues a warning order and tasks one of its elements, normally a company, with the mission. The company then designates the appropriate team. The warning order is a preliminary effort to provide as much initial information as possible to assist the reconnaissance team in its over-all preparation. From this order the reconnaissance team leader can determine where his team is going, how it will get there and the method of insertion and extraction. Meanwhile, the reconnaissance battalion

staff prepares a more detailed operations order for both the company and the team.

### **Preparation**

Once the operations order has been issued, the team leader and his assistant are briefed by the battalion S-2 and S-3. Then the patrol leader formulates his order and issues it to his team, following up with several rehearsals and inspections. Meanwhile, the Aircraft Wing has been alerted on requirements of the mission, and the pilots concerned come to the reconnaissance battalion COC to be briefed. A copy of the warning order is sent to artillery units concerned with the area where the reconnaissance team will be inserted.

The most important aspect of the team's preparation is its briefing. This briefing follows no set pattern and is based partly on experience and precedents. One basis is to consider actual reconnaissance debriefing reports such as this example:

1. Recon team: Pathfinder 6-11, 3d For Recon Co.
2. Time inserted/extracted: 301400H/311800H (28 hours).
3. Route: From (YD 843576) to (YD 863594) to (YD 886613) to (YD 895624).
4. Terrain: Steep hills with triple canopy. Rate of movement: 75 meters per hour.
5. HLZ (helicopter landing zone): (YD 843576). Site can accommodate one CH-46. Site is on the top of a hill. Best approach: East to West. High canopy to the south of the zone. (YD 865598) will accommodate 8 CH-46s. Site is a ridge line, 360-degree approach with no obstacles.
6. Enemy: None.
7. Comments: None.

A detailed debriefing report is maintained on every reconnaissance team that is launched. These reports are filed and are available for reference. When a patrol leader is assigned a mission in a specific area, he receives in his brief the latest enemy intelligence available and the most current friendly situation (including a weather forecast), all of the debriefs by prior patrols into that area, the latest aerial observation reports and information available from the civilian population and POW interrogation. Thus he has at his disposal a vast amount of information. A careful study of this information gives the patrol leader a sound basis for his order, which should basically follow the standard five paragraphs used in operations: situation, mission, execution, administration and logistics, command and communications/electronics. Within this order the standard infantry outline is followed, with various adjustments to the needs of reconnaissance.

The patrol leader's order, when issued orally, is usually a 45 to 60-minute undertaking. The patrol leader must cover every conceivable difficulty that the patrol may encounter. He is responsible for ensuring that there is no doubt on the course of action the patrol will take when faced with a critical situation.

To minimize potential problems, the patrol leader conducts a series of rehearsals, repeated until he is satisfied that every man knows exactly what is expected.

The rehearsals cover such items as movement order, medical evacuation procedures, immediate action drills and the plan for insertion and extraction.

The team leader also makes a detailed inspection before the mission, to ensure that every man



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When preparations are complete, the team assembles at the loading zone. Meanwhile, the pilots for the mission have been briefed and have coordinated with the patrol leader as to exactly how the insertion will be made. A recon officer briefs the pilots and the team leaders and covers a variety of information, including team's call sign, aircraft call sign, various FM and UHF frequencies to be employed, the size of the team, LZ coordinates and elevation, various thrust points and the specific techniques of insertion, extraction and reinforcement.

After the general briefing, the pilots plan approach and return routes and receive a detailed brief on the actual mission.

### Insertion

The time between the request for an insertion and the actual execution varies from 36 to 48 hours for a routine mission. However, the reconnaissance battalion can respond much more quickly to a priority mission.

The insertion is a critical moment for the entire mission, for often the LZ is not entirely clear of enemy and the team is met by ground fire and forced to abort the mission. For example, five minutes after insertion of one KEY HOLE patrol, the team heard voices and equipment rattling within 30 meters to their east, south and west. In addition, the team had radio communication only with the insert helicopters. Because of the situation, the patrol was extracted within 20 minutes of its insertion, and the helicopter took fire as they went to extract the team. This also is a good example of NVA counter-reconnaissance techniques—they sometime recognize a reconnaissance insert but will not fire on the insert itself, reserving heavy fire for the departing helicopters and then closing in on the reconnaissance team.

After a successful insertion and after establishing communication with the team, the gunship pilot confirms to them their exact location using thrust points. Upon receiving an "all secure" from the team and after the team has established radio communications with its base, all aircraft leave the area.

The initial moments on the ground after the aircraft leave are critical, for a reconnaissance team usually will be engaged within the first hour if the insertion has been detected. The first priority is to set up a hasty 360-degree defense to determine whether the enemy is in the area. As a case in point, consider this sample debriefing report:

*1. Recon Team: Red Dancer 1-5, 3d For Recon Co.*

*2. 250830H the team was inserted at YD 816528. After deplaning the insertion helo the team observed 25 enemy approximately 30 meters to the west. The enemy wore mixed green and brown utilities, cartridge belts and bush covers, and carried SKSs and AK-47s. The team initiated small arms fire resulting in two NVA KIA confirmed. Gunships made four rocket and strafing runs on the enemy with excellent coverage of the target. The team was extracted 250915H at YD 816528.*

Either the transport helicopter pilot or the team leader may abort the mission at any time before the insertion. The LZ may be changed during the overflight if both the pilot and team leader agree on another.

### Reinforcement and Extraction

If at any time the reconnaissance team's presence is detected by the enemy, a decision must be made concerning possible extraction or reinforcement. If a team is compromised, immediate plans are drawn and transports and gunships are 'fragged' for extraction. At the same time an alert is issued for possible reinforcement.

En route to the area the aircraft establish radio communications with the team. When they arrive in the area, visual contact is established. The gunships make gun runs on the suspected enemy positions during the pick-up.

The extraction of a recon team is at best risky, because the team and the extracting helicopter are both very vulnerable to enemy attack when the team abandons its position on the ground to board the aircraft. During this critical maneuver, the enemy usually makes his main thrust at both the team and helicopters. This effort can vary from an all-out assault to intensive small arms fire supported by accurate mortar fire. The gunship escorts, which are strafing suspected positions, must ensure that the transport helicopters and the reconnaissance team are always within sight and support range at the moment of extraction. Once the reconnaissance team is aboard, the transport helicopter departs and climbs out at the discretion of the pilot.

Concurrently with the planning and preparation for extraction, a unit is readied to reinforce the team. Normally the team will be reinforced and the force built for combat if more than small patrol or screening enemy forces are present and if the patrol is within effective range of friendly artillery. As soon as enemy presence is discovered the reaction force is alerted, and plans for its insertion are completed along with plans for emergency extraction. As more information becomes available, the decision is made as to which course will be followed. In any event, supporting air strikes and artillery fires are employed while a decision is being reached.

The reaction force is inserted into an LZ

secured by the reconnaissance team if practicable; otherwise, a new LZ must be prepared quickly. In many situations elements of the reaction force can be inserted in several LZs to provide maximum shock and increase opportunities for destruction of the enemy force.

After successful extraction from the objective area, the reconnaissance team is returned to the battalion for immediate debriefing by a reconnaissance S-2 officer; other interested units often are represented also. The debrief consists of a verbal question and answer period followed by a written summary of the patrol's activities and findings. The patrol debriefing report follows a standard pattern and is best illustrated by an actual report (see box).

## RECON DEBRIEFING REPORT

1. Recon Team: Alpha Bravo 31 3d Force  
Recon Co. OpO 313F 68  
(120 hours)

2. Date inserted/extracted: 100000/150000H

3. Route: (YD231414) to (YD250121) to  
(YD19401) to (YD293241) to (YD221210)

4. Terrain: Low rolling hills with 1 to 3-foot elephant grass. Poor cover and concealment. Rate of movement at the patrol leader's discretion. Any hill in the area is a good OP site. There are numerous well-used trails in the area which can be seen from the air. Trail at (YD220190) is 5 feet wide and runs from north to south. This trail cannot be seen from the air.

5. HLZ's: (YD1400).

6. Enemy: 120915H (YD201920) team observed 6 enemy at (YD200915) moving north. Enemy wore white or khaki uniforms, bush covers, no packs, cartridge belts, and unknown type weapons. The enemy was spread out like a recon team. 131200H (YD231713) the team observed an unknown size enemy force at (YD231610). Enemy wore green utilities, bush covers, web gear, and were armed with AK-47's, SKS's and RPG's-3. Enemy opened fire on an army observation helo with AK-47's. The helo took hits and landed at A-4. The team set out claymores and observed 4-7 enemy moving south in two columns about 90 meters north of the team. Team set up a 360-degree security inside a building. AO came on station and observed enemy strung out for 400 meters moving in groups of 5-9 men. Team initiated small arms contact and the enemy returned fire with small arms, automatic weapons and grenades. Fixed wing began making runs on the enemy with excellent target coverage. Gunships came on station and fired on the enemy. 140911H (YD244450) the team observed three enemy 30 meters NW of the team moving south. Enemy wore green utilities, bush covers, web gear, packs and AK-47's. The enemy was heavily loaded. The team requested gunships and directed them on the enemy. The enemy re-

Reconnaissance patrols have made a significant contribution in the overwhelming defeat of large North Vietnamese Army forces in the 3d Marine Division area in recent months. Regardless of this success, efforts are under way to refine and improve their operations primarily in terms of responsiveness. One major improvement needed which is beyond present capability is in helicopter lift. The Bell UH-1H is a far superior helicopter for reconnaissance insertion and extraction. It has more power, requires smaller zones, provides easy loading and off loading carries two side gunners.

In any review of over-all helicopter requirements the support of an active, aggressive reconnaissance patrol effort should be seriously considered. The payoff can be high.

USMC

turned fire. When the gunships were finished only one AK-47 was still firing. The team then fired 50 rounds of artillery with excellent target coverage. 141150H reaction force from A-2 arrived to reinforce the team. The team directed tanks as they swept north for 900 meters. While they were moving north the team, tanks and reaction force were exchanging fire with the enemy. Results of the contact were 4 friendly WIA's, and 14 NVA KIA (C). The team returned to A-2 with the friendlies. 141400H the team moved 80 meters east and observed an estimated company. The enemy was moving south through elephant grass approx 150 meters north of the team. The team could only observe the heads of the enemy and they wore green bush covers. The teams called a fire mission of approx 50 rounds with excellent target coverage. Gunships came on station and fired on the enemy. While the gunships were firing the team moved SE to vic (YD257051). 141515H (YD261990) team in a security halt received one incoming grenade resulting in one USMC WIA minor. The team returned fire and the enemy continued to throw grenades and fire AW. The enemy pulled back and fired an RPG round and continued sporadic SA fire. The team continued with 360-degree return fire. AO, gunships and fixed wing came on station and fired on the enemy. 141700 the team was extracted and received no fire upon the extraction. Results of the team's contacts with the enemy were (1) USMC WIA minor and 17 NVA KIA (C).

7. Miscellaneous: All the enemy observed by the team had new gear, fresh haircuts and new uniforms. The enemy was well disciplined and well trained. In contact the enemy used grenades and RPG's primarily and SA fire was well disciplined and accurate. The team discovered a corral 200 meters NE of (YD194015). There was a 30-meter-square fence of bamboo. When discovered by the team there were no cattle in the corral. Team believes that the corral is used for pack animals. It can be seen from the air and the area was hit by an airstrike.