

The Activities of 274 and 275 VC Regiments during the Tet Offensive

The following article may help to explain why the operators at 547 Signals Troop heard little or nothing of the radio stations serving elements of 274 and 275 VC Regiments in the lead up to and during the TET Offensive of late January 1968. How fortunate were we at Nui Dat?



Defending Long Binh

By William E. Rowe

During Tet 1968, the 856th Radio Research Detachment went from listening to the enemy's radio traffic to fighting the enemy firsthand.

At 0230 hours on January 31, 1968, a red alert sounded for the entire Long Binh compound, better known there as "LBJ," a play on words on the initials of President Lyndon Baines Johnson and the U.S. Army Vietnam confinement facility known as "Long Binh Jail." At 0300, everyone in my unit took up fighting positions either in the operations building or along our bunker line. Half awake, I stumbled around my sleeping area trying to find my clothes; I was the last operator to take up a fighting position along the bunker line. At 0330, a rocket and mortar attack began zeroing in on the LBJ compound and the Bien Hoa Air Base. The Tet Offensive of 1968 had begun.

More than a month earlier, my direction finding team had set up a listening post (LP) on top of a star bunker overlooking the hamlet of Ga Ho Nai. The concrete bunker contained gun ports for two .50-caliber machine guns and several slots for smaller automatic weapons was located about 1,500 meters below the unit operations building. We used the call sign of

Lima-Papa- Charlie (LPC) to bring up our "Driftwood" network. The Driftwood net consisted of three LP sites that formed a triangle. We located the second LP site to the right, in front of a guard row that overlooked Ga Ho Nai. The third LP site, located to our left, sat on the perimeter of the Bien Hoa Air Base near the 175th Radio Research Company.

The Morse-code intercept operators, or "ditty-boppers" as we were known, determined the location of enemy communication devices - enemy transmitters, usually hand-held 3 crystal radio sets. The Viet Cong sent their coded messages to one another using these devices. We determined the coordinates of a transmitter by using triangulation methods among the three LP sites. We then called the coordinates in to our operations building, where the transmitter's location was then verified on a topographic map by our unit commander. If there were no friendly forces within the area, the identified transmitters were fired upon from a nearby fire support base (FSB). The FSB's artillery walked their howitzer rounds out every 10 meters in a north-south and east-west pattern for up to 100 meters in each direction.

On January 4, 1968, members of our unit, the 856th Radio Research Detachment (RRD), began constructing two combat bunkers along our unit's perimeter. The bunkers were to house two M-60 machine guns, with an 81 mm mortar resting on the top of each bunker. Beyond the bunker line, we extended several rows of concertina wire - three on the bottom row, then two, and then one on top. We placed many Claymore mines in the middle of the wire, right in front of our bunkers.

Then strange things began happening around our barracks and our LP site. On January 13, a barracks adjacent to ours blew up: a Claymore mine ripped one half of it apart. Later that same day an explosive device destroyed an ammo bunker near our barracks. On the 15th my team took heavy sniper fire while working our equipment on top of the star bunker. We were trying to get a fix on an enemy transmission that seemed to be coming from right under our bunker. I told myself, "This guy is close!" The enemy transmitter, a squawker came over the airways as if he were going to knock the headset right off my head. "This guy is situated where he can watch us work our equipment." That thought kept buzzing through my head. Every time I tried to get a fix on him, he would stop sending. Then he would start again. This dog and pony show went on for about 30 more minutes. As he started sending, his buddy, a sniper, would take several pot shots at us. Sometimes the sniper fire became so intense it made us dive off the top of our LP site and take cover inside the star bunker. We finally called detachment headquarters over the Driftwood net and told them about our situation. They calmed us, saying they would take care of the sniper for us.

A few minutes later, several choppers landed in an open area in front of our bunker. We told them the sniper fire was coming from a house, or hooch, with a blue roof, about 770 meters to the left and out in front of our LP site. Soldiers from the 199th Light Infantry Brigade (LIB) got out of the choppers and started to sweep the area. A firefight broke out about 10 minutes into the sweep as the grunts approached the sniper's hooch. Then the

firefight proceeded westward toward Saigon along Highway 1. For about an hour, fierce fighting took place hooch to hooch. That night, after the fighting ended the 199th LIB counted xx dead enemy soldiers. The transmitter and his sniper buddy were gone.

The 199th learned from its intelligence-gathering efforts and from information supplied to it from the 350th's tracking teams that the enemy dead were from the 274th and 275th 7th Viet Cong regiments, whose objective was to overrun the Long Binh compound, the Bien Hoa Air Base, and several other locations in and around the Saigon area.

The 275th Viet Cong Regiment included a good number of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars. Just coming off the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they provided well-trained replacements to the regiment. The province local force battalion (the D445 Viet Cong Battalion of Phuoc Tuy province) also supplied needed replacements to the 275th VC Regiment. No one knew anything about the 274th VC Regiment a possible sister unit to the 274th VC Regiment. Everyone figured it contained the same organizational structure and troop strength as the 275th.

After the firefight we passed this information to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) located in Saigon at the Tan Son Nhut Air Base. We also told MACV headquarters personnel about reports of the planned attack on the Bien Hoa Air Base and several sites in Saigon such as the MACV headquarters building, the U.S. Embassy, the relay station, the radio station, and the Phu Tho racetrack.

We reported that the Viet Cong regiment planned to attack the Long Binh complex and the II Field Forces headquarters located in the LBJ compound. MACV headquarters personnel sloughed off this information. They ignored intelligence reports indicating the Viet Cong were assembling in tunnels, caves and foxholes in a graveyard located in front of the guard tower LP site that looked over the village of Ga Ho Nai.

On January 21 1968 the 856th RRD got a new company commander, Captain Walker M. Runyon. As his first order, he assigned Meg I sound-activated LP team in front of the graveyard area. Runyon hoped to verify the whereabouts of the reported enemy positions in the area. Ian Campbell and a guy named McBain were the two ditty-boppers assigned to the LP site. Campbell had taken an advanced course in direction-finding techniques at Fort Lewis Wash. before arriving at the unit. Campbell and McBain had worked together for several months

The two members of the noise/voice LP reassigned to the guard tower site were Martin and Browning. They were new to the unit and had been in-country for a short time and had taken their in-country training at a centre located on the LBJ compound. They used electronic listening devices buried or set up along NVA or Viet Cong supply routes to determine enemy movements and the content of enemy voice transmissions. In addition to listening for Viet Cong voice communications, Campbell said he used a special direction

finder-calibrating transmitter that transmitted on an even frequency in the band between 285 and 315 kilocycles or on a frequency of 480 kilocycles [Explanation?]. For two days .Martin and Browning tried to intercept enemy transmissions in the graveyard area but heard nothing. No enemy movement was detected.

Early on the morning of January 30 1968 Charlie (the Viet Cong) struck along a 600-mile front. More than 100,000 NVA and Viet Cong, cadre members attacked cities and military installations with Hue, Saigon, Phu Bai, Bien Hoa, and Long Binh taking the brunt of the attacks. Two main force units of the Viet Cong 5th Division, the 274th and 275th Viet Cong regiments attacked the Bien Hoa Air Base and the II Field Forces headquarters at the Long Binh compound. Both sites were hit with heavy rocket and mortar fire, automatic-weapons fire and intense small-arms fire.

The rocket and mortar attacks came from two locations, Thu Duc and a village named Hoa An. The rockets and mortars coming from the Thu Duc site were right on the money, walking those mortars and rockets across the LBJ compound toward the 199th's helipad and our unit's bunker line. Brigade intelligence located the rocket launcher. Aerial observation, on station over the Bien Hoa Air Base at that time, pinpointed the exact location of the launch site. An artillery barrage, called in from the 2nd Battalion, 40th Artillery, destroyed the Thu Duc site with a direct hit.

Part of the aerial observation team was an AC-47 gunship, or "Spooky". They located the Hoa An launch site by observing muzzle flashes coming out of the area. The enemy rocket barrage had followed a path down Highway 1 instead of walking their rounds at an angle across the LBJ compound toward our bunker line. When the Viet Cong gunners (at the Hoa An site) realized they were walking their rounds in the wrong direction, they changed the direction of fire and aimed them toward our bunker line. A lightning-quick burst from Spooky's Gatling guns destroyed the Hoa An launch site before any of the rockets or mortars reached our bunker line.

Coinciding with the rocket and mortar attacks were probing attacks by another Viet Cong battalion along the eastern and south eastern perimeter boundaries of the compound. The probing attack units included Viet Cong sapper squads. Another Viet Cong battalion infiltrated near the area of the 3rd Ordnance (Long Binh) ammunition dump. In a few moments, the huge dump became a fireball, the shock of the explosion echoing over an area of 50 miles. As the ammo dump burst into flames, secondary explosions erupted in other storage areas and, for the next three days, fires burned out of control. The 199th LIB let each storage area explode until the entire dump blew itself up and out.

All told, five or six Viet Cong battalions attacked the LBJ compound. Another unit assaulted the 12th Aviation Group and its helipad from the west, and a Viet Cong machine-gun company infiltrated southwest of the 199th Brigade's main base, with orders to wipe out the helicopters that rested on the brigade's helipad. Several battalions of the 275th Viet

Cong Regiment assembled in front of our unit's bunker line for a frontal assault. They had been hiding in tunnels and foxholes in the area for about two weeks, awaiting orders from Hanoi to start their attack on the compound. If successful, their attack could take them all the way into Saigon.

For the next 2 1/2 hours, the Viet Cong initiated probing attacks against our bunker line and other positions along our perimeter. A signal company and a military police detachment manned two or three other perimeter bunkers with fewer than 10 soldiers. Our unit numbered 51 members. Most of my buddies were in the operations building setting satchel charges and incendiary grenades to all the filing cabinets, equipment (radios and receivers), maps and reports-everything that should not fall into the hands of the enemy. We were stationed at the weakest section of the perimeter and outnumbered by who knew how many. We didn't like the odds.

The Viet Cong approached our unit's bunker line about five times trying to get through the wire about 50 meters out in front of the bunkers. Each time they attacked some would get hung up on the wire. Each time they attacked, we went crazy, yelling expletives as we went out to meet them; yelling and firing each time they approached. A mound of enemy dead was forming in front of the concertina; body upon body.

The frontal attacks lasted for another two hours. After each advance, we would pace up and down the bunker line, nervously anticipating the next attack. After each attack, the mound of enemy dead got bigger and bigger.

By this time, several unit members were running low on ammunition. Two sergeants went to look for more ammo in the motor pool area and in our storage conexas, but returned empty-handed. When the word went around that we were running out of ammunition, the guys along the bunker line went manic. Those not swearing loudly were praying, preparing for close-in fighting. We knew if we did not get more ammunition it would be a one-on-one struggle for each of us.

Suddenly, it was unnervingly quiet. We waited as the great mass of crouched figures steadily approached. What remained of the 275th Viet Cong Regiment came at us over the mound of dead VC one more time! Our orders were to hold our fire until the Viet Cong came up on the wire. The waiting was agony. When we could wait no longer, we started to run toward the wire to meet them head on.

Soon, though, we had reason to race back toward our bunkers. We heard them before we saw them Spooky and six Huey gunships, coming in low from behind our operations building. Spooky made a pass at the rear of the advancing Viet Cong and let loose with a seven-second barrage from its mini guns. The Hueys from A Troop, 3rd Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry, came in from the front, firing their machine guns and rockets. Spooky circled and came in for a frontal assault on the paralysed Viet Cong, then made a second pass, spraying

the area with another seven-second mini gun barrage. The Hueys circled the area and attacked the VC from their rear, firing their machine guns and rockets.

On the ground, there was more bad news for the VC. A platoon of armoured personnel carriers (APCs) from D Troop, 17th Cavalry, and a platoon of tanks from the 11th Armored Cavalry came up and took firing positions along our bunker line. The APCs and tanks fired at point-blank range directly point-blank range directly into the mound of enemy dead. Jeeps with rear-mounted M-60 machine guns raced in and out of the mound of enemy dead. The Jeeps raced in and out of the area all night long, creating havoc in the rear of the fleeing horde of Viet Cong.

Two companies from the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry (of the 199th LIB), smashed into the rear of the fleeing Viet Cong, cutting off their retreat. For the next three days the 199th LIB remained in blocking positions.

On February 5, 1968, we woke up with our backs resting against the inside baggie wall of the second combat bunker. We looked at each other as we silently passed a canteen of water around. Our shirts were hanging open, soaked with sweat. Every so often we blinked, trying to orient ourselves as to time and place.

Our First Sergeant stuck his head into the bunker, told us to go out to the mound of enemy dead and take part in the body count. When we got out to the mound, we stared in horror. A puff of smoke came up and out of the middle of the mound as we looked at the twisted bodies of dead Viet Cong. I turned my back and vomited. We staggered back to the bunker line, unable to perform the body count.

About 0930 the next day, we again went out to help with the body count. And again, as we approached the mound of enemy dead, we backed off. Once again the stench stopped the body count. The mound still smouldering after five days, disappeared when they brought in the Rome plows to bury the dead. The plows pushed about 400 dead Viet Cong into a low drainage area to the right and in front of our bunker line.

Captain Runyon closed down the Driftwood net right after the Tet Offensive, as there were no ditty-boppers left to man the PRD- 1 direction finders. Fort Devens (my advanced individual training school) had stopped graduating ditty-boppers; there were then no replacements for the Morse Code intercept operators. Fort Devens told the research units to make do with what they already had.

We could feel the concept of the war changing. We were told we were going back on the defensive once again. After Tet, the Viet Cong became less important. Most VC units ceased to exist after the fighting ended. Countrywide, more than 38,000 enemy soldiers died; 7,000 became POWs. The NVA regulars who did not take part in the fighting in great numbers became the predominant fighting force.

More than 400 Viet Cong died in front of our bunker line. More than 960 Viet Cong died around the LBJ perimeter during the first 18 hours of the Tet Offensive of 1968. Viet Cong losses also included 32 POWs, and another 42 became detainees. The 199th LIB captured many VC weapons, including 78 semiautomatic and 68 crew-served weapons. Nine members of the 199th LIB died during the attacks; 55 were wounded. None of the 856th RRD members was killed or wounded.