

OPERATION CHECKERBOARD

While the 1st Brigade had been settling in at Phan Rang, significant enemy activity was taking place northwest of Saigon in the vicinity of the Iron Triangle near Ben Cat and Lai Khe. There the ARVN 7th Regiment, operating in the Michelin Plantation area, had inflicted a serious defeat on the 271st VC Regiment only to be overrun several days later by the 272d VC Regiment. These two regiments comprised the 9th VC Division, the formation of which in 1964 had been an important factor leading to U. S. troop commitment in Vietnam. The opportunity to close with this division was an important one, and USMACV was quick to call upon the 1st Brigade to assist in engaging it. The effort was to involve not only the 1st Brigade (-), but the 1st Infantry Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate), and Australian and ARVN troops.²²

The 1-327th and the 2-502d assumed defensive responsibility for the Bien Hoa air base on 30 November. Until 8 December, the battalions patrolled their perimeters with light enemy contact. On 9 December, the two battalions conducted motor marches to Lai Khe, where they were attached to the 1st Infantry Division for Operation CHECKERBOARD. The 1-327th encountered enemy command detonated mines approximately ten miles outside of Ben Cat on Highway 13. Three vehicles were destroyed, five troopers killed, and ten wounded. Upon reaching Lai Khe, the battalions prepared defensive positions and readied for offensive deployment.

Operation CHECKERBOARD consisted of three phases. In the first, the 1-327th conducted an air assault, secured a landing zone, and assumed a blocking position while the 2-502d and a battalion task force from the 3d Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division conducted a sweep toward the blocking position. In the second phase, the 2-502d assumed responsibility for the landing zone and the 1-327th initiated a search and destroy mission northward and then westward. In the final phase, the 1-327th and the 2-502d established a joint defensive perimeter from which platoon and company sized patrols were dispatched.

The 1-327th encountered enemy fire at the landing zone, but no sustained resistance. The search and destroy mission (phase 2) uncovered a cache of an estimated 15,000 pounds of rice, a large logistical complex containing food, clothing, and ammunition, and a small cache of gasoline. Booby traps encountered in the jungle and the time required to destroy the VC caches required the "Above the Rest" troopers to spend the night of 13 December in a hasty defensive perimeter. Ambush patrols outside the perimeter reported an estimated two VC companies moving toward the battalion, and time-on-target artillery was called in. Screams were heard and bloodstained trails were discovered the next morning, but no other enemy presence was detected. During the third phase, patrols uncovered a hospital complex and several VC villages in various stages of construction. In one mess hall, troopers found freshly pre-

pared food. Several encounters with small groups of VC took place, but there were no significant engagements. The VC 9th Division, although evidently present, exhibited no desire for engagement. On 16 December, Operation CHECKERBOARD was terminated and the 1-327th and 2-502d began their return to Phan Rang.

Operation CHECKERBOARD was a tactical success. The 1-327th and 2-502d achieved their objectives and returned to Phan Rang. The VC 9th Division was not engaged and the 1-327th and 2-502d were not destroyed. The operation was a tactical success and the 1-327th and 2-502d were not destroyed.

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²²Westmoreland, "Report," p. 111.