

HOLE HUNTIN'



2nd BN 35th INF

HOLE HUNTIN by MAJ BEN G. CROSBY

The 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry, "The Cacti Blue" is proud to submit this combat experience for the benefit of Infantrymen throughout Vietnam. These successful techniques were applied by this battalion during July and August of 1967 in an area of operations just north of Duc Pho, Vietnam.

The history of our "Hole Huntin" really began back in May 67 when the 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry, as part of the 3d Brigade Task Force, 25th Infantry Division operating in the Duc Pho area of the coastal plain, soundly defeated the 60th V.C. Battalion in open combat. Unfortunately for the U.S. Forces in this area, this battle ended the organized resistance of enemy units and since then only isolated small contacts have developed. Soon after that somewhere in the enemy's higher level a decision was made to concentrate their efforts on "anti-sweep" operations. Anti-sweep operations consist of inflicting a few casualties at relatively long range and disappearing without making close contact. This tactic was implemented by the V.C. about the middle of June and employed very successfully against this battalion for several weeks. We countered this enemy move with ambushes in which one rifle company would divide into ten ambushes that operated without resupply or any assistance for three days. The ambush was partially successful and we killed some V.C. and captured some weapons. During the three day ambush program it became apparent that the enemy was not moving as we swept through these areas. Obviously, we were walking right over him.

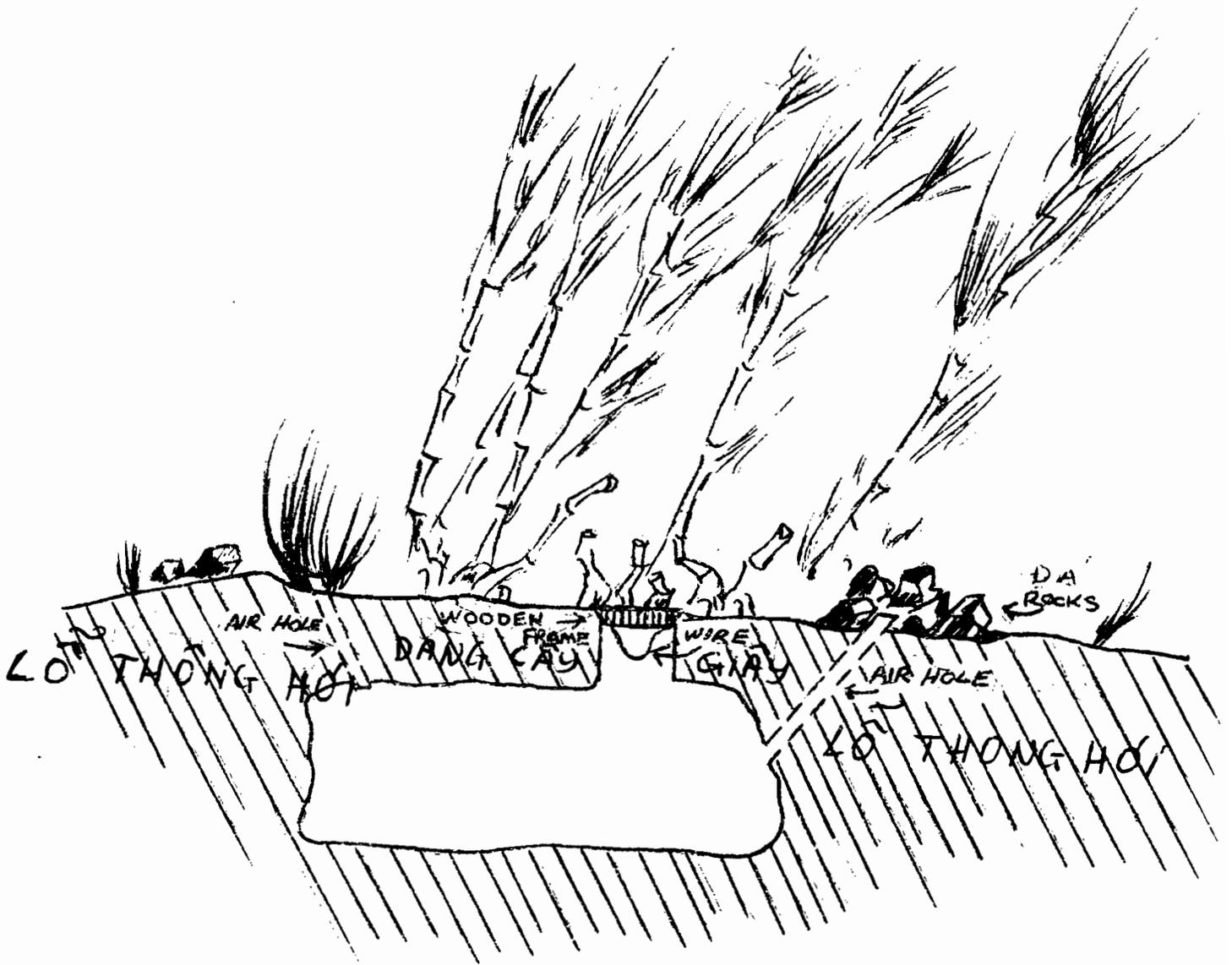
Our break came on 10 July 67, when Captain Larry Hicks, A Company CO, captured an NVA soldier in one of our most troublesome spots. The NVA was slightly wounded by an M-79 fragment and scared stiff. Unfortunately for his comrades he led us to our first hole. When he pointed the tunnel out to me, I couldn't believe my eyes. I could see only a small pile of leaves next to a bamboo clump. I thought surely this "Charlie" was only stalling for time, but then I studied the pile. Slowly I began to see the slight outlines of a small square about eighteen inches on a side. I noticed a small depression around the edges of this square looking as windblown as nature herself could make it. Larry looked at it and exclaimed, "I'll be damned". There it was. Now plain as day, we could see the outlines of the square in the pile of leaves. One of Larry's soldiers raked back the leaves exposing a wooden door of the same dimensions and the first "hole reduction team" went to work with their M-16's. We killed two from that hole and soon found another that also contained two enemy. Before the day was out "A" Company killed eight, captured one and had five weapons to its credit, all within an area measuring 250 meters by 250 meters. The next day was equally successful in an area adjacent to that of the previous day's contact. LTC Tiller, the Battalion Commander, took the other company commanders and platoon leaders over to the area where Larry Hicks was having a field day. They carefully studied the holes and the area, admiring "A" company's rising body and weapons count. The battalion went to work. The race was on. Ever since then, the battalion has been digging out "Charlies" at a fantastic rate, and it soon became obvious that a need existed for a detailed study of the types of holes and techniques used in their reduction.

We have found that there are three main types of holes and these are classified more by their location, than by their construction. By far the most common is the "under bamboo" hole shown in sketch #1. This hole is easily and quickly camouflaged, characteristic of all the holes found in the Duc Pho-Mo Duc area of Vietnam. The entrances to the hole differ widely as do the techniques of camouflage. Most of the entrances are located within the edge of a bamboo clump or just outside the edge. The hole cover or trap door contains the camouflage material. Some have pieces of cut bamboo affixed to the door itself. The edges of the door fit snugly into the entrance. One type is illustrated in the accompanying photographs. Many other entrances are covered only by the door which is camouflaged by spreading leaves, rocks, and other materials over the top. Another characteristic common to all these small tunnels is the air hole which is normally made from a hollow piece of bamboo three to four inches in diameter inserted into the tunnel and camouflaged on the surface.

The air hole is the only telltale indicator of the second type hole, the "beach hole". The beach hole differs from the bamboo hole in that it is made in the sand and normally constructed from cut timbers. It does not depend upon the bamboo roots to add rigidity to the roof. Naturally, the entrance to a beach hole is impossible to locate as it is often buried under a foot of loose sand; however, it can be detected by finding the breathing tubes. Some air holes are a continuation of the bamboo frames that make up the local fisherman's "lean to". Other air holes can be exposed by pulling up the cacti plants that grow along the sand dunes on the beach. The enemy has been clever in hiding these breathing tubes and we must be just as clever in locating them. See sketch #2.

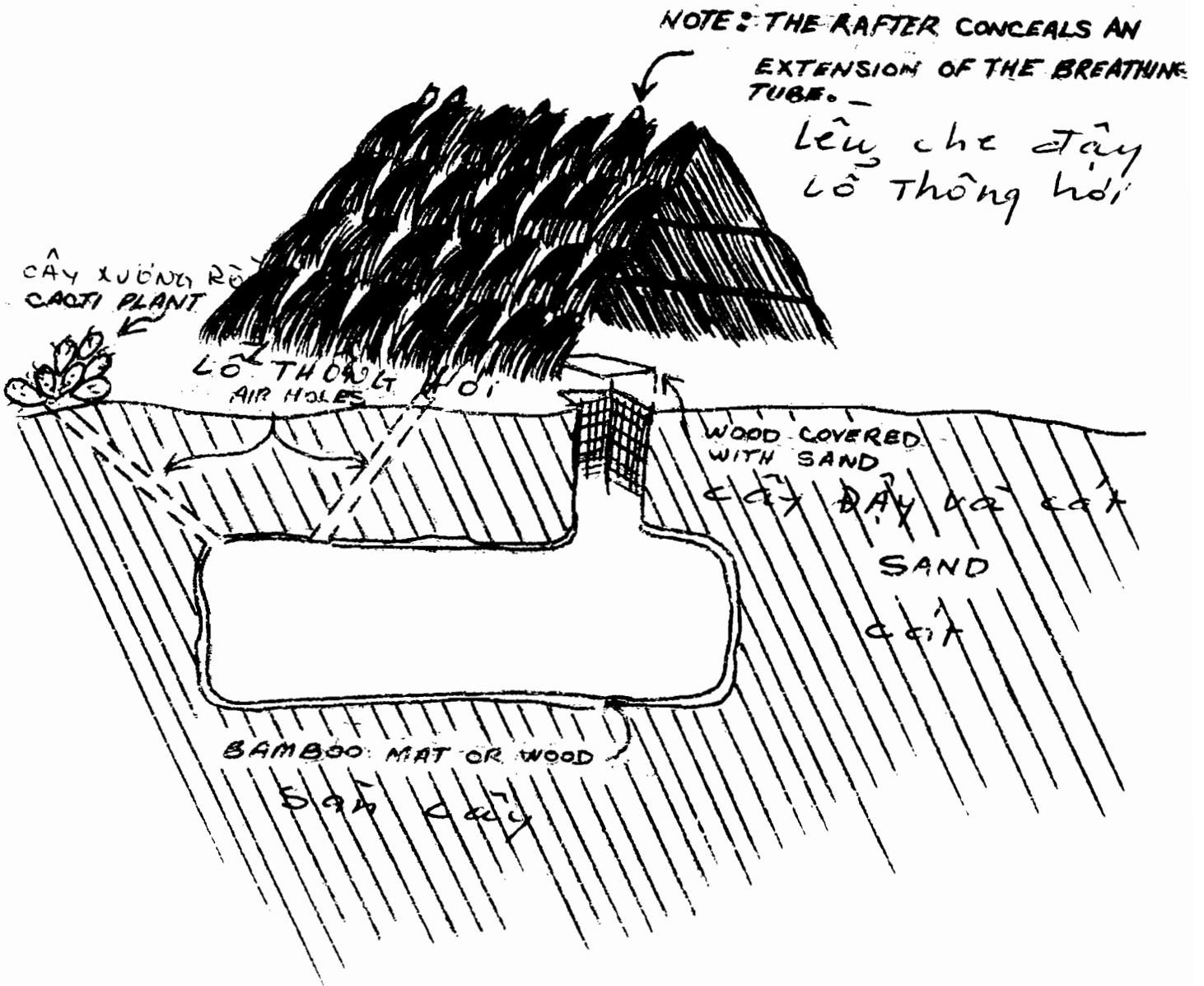
The third type of tunnel, the least common, is the "water entrance" type. This tunnel may be located near a small stream or beside an old bomb crater that has filled with water. Normally these holes have no lid and depend on the natural growth along the stream bank to hide the entrance. Sometimes the entrance is completely submerged, but not always. A typical such tunnel is depicted in sketch #3.

No matter what type of hole you face, the slogan "find 'em - fix 'em fight 'em and finish 'em" is as true as the day it was first promulgated; however, many units fail to put the sequence in proper order. During several of our own operations we fixed and fought only to learn that we had nothing to finish. The unmatched success of this battalion lies primarily with finding the enemy through the deliberate search technique before we attempt to fix or fight. The one true indicator of success is the actual number of enemy killed or captured and the number of weapons seized. During the period of 10 July - 10 August, this battalion killed 386 enemy, captured 77 POWs and seized 158 weapons while suffering only 12 U.S. soldiers killed in action. The high kill ratio and large number of weapons captured have been a result of locating the enemy within his hiding place. Once the enemy is located, the job is relatively simple as the enemy has fixed himself by choosing a small tunnel in which to

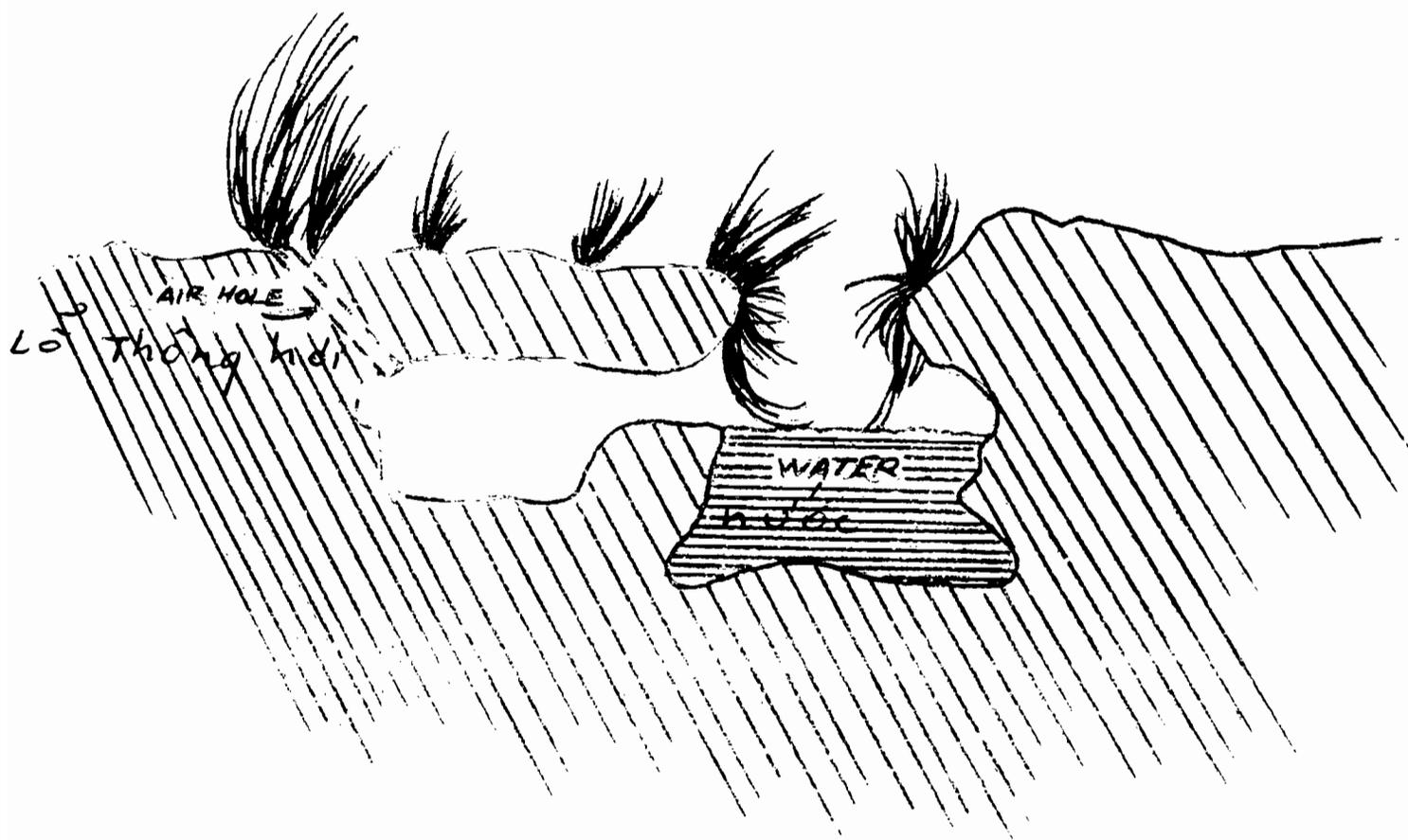


SKETCH #1

HINH SE I



SKETCH #2
HÌNH SỐ II



SKETCH #3
HÌNH SỐ 3

hide. The enemy, dependent only on his expertise at passive camouflage has no choice but to be killed or captured as defense of a small hole against an American rifle squad is a difficult if not impossible task. The key to a successful search is the application of common sense to the situation here in Vietnam. We assign a rifle company a small search area, never larger than a 1000 meter grid square. These small areas are picked based on intelligence reports or past actions. The company then painstakingly searches every square meter of the area. There is no time limit to complete the task. We have been able to capitalize on the natural curiosity of the American soldier in developing our techniques of deliberate search. Naturally, the first and foremost technique is the art of locating the hole. There are several indications that should prove to be helpful in locating these holes. Visual indicators often disclose the general area of the hole but not its precise locations. Worn places on the bamboo that the enemy has used as hand holds are good visual indicators. Another indicator is a small trail, much like a game trail, through the brush into a bamboo clump. Easily seen, although not a sure sign, is cut bamboo as shown in several of the photographs. Frequently, the V.C. dig their holes under these partially harvested bamboo clumps. A good visual indicator, but difficult to detect is a slight depression in or around the bamboo clump. This depression is often the location of a trap door. The depression collects leaves and trash and aids in the camouflage of the hole entrance. The surest of all visual indicators is the ever present air hole. Once located these bamboo breathing-tubes will always reveal the tunnel below. Visual indicators are by far the best indicators but they are not the only ones. A lone individual, especially a female, signals that the V.C. are not far away. She places the finishing touches of camouflage around the hole. Fresh cooked food with no one attending the pot is a sure sign the V.C. departed in haste or are hidden nearby. The V.C., being lazy and not very good soldiers, often dispose of human waste near their hole. Fresh human feces can point out an unwary enemy.

All of these indicators are good; however, in each different area of Vietnam they may vary. Experience will tell you what the indicators are within your area. Once the individual soldier achieves success at locating the enemy he will almost be able to "smell them". There is a certain sixth sense about locating the enemy, but more often than not it is knowing where to look and what to look for. The indicators are what to look for. The places to look are in the corners of hedgerows, in the corners of villages and in the corners of trails or trenches. The enemy often hides in these corners as he can see from them while not being seen. Additionally, hiding in a corner allows the party who puts the finishing touches on the camouflage to escape undetected. The enemy is aware of the danger in establishing a pattern; however, he must have a location that provides him with observation as well as concealment so look for an O.P. that allows him to move into or out of the area undetected.

The technique of deliberate search that we have successfully employed centers around the rifle squad. The squad divides into a security team and a search team. Naturally the curious go to the search team while the less curious provide the security. Needless to say, these positions must be rotated after a period of time as the thorns in the bamboo clumps wreak havoc on hands, arms and uniforms. Each platoon assigns the squad a search area and they in turn start a systematic search along the hedgerows and bamboo clumps. Meanwhile the security element moves toward the limits of each search area. Once a hole is discovered, the security element surrounds the area while the searchers clear away enough brush to allow the comparatively large American soldier to operate within this confined space. Then hole reduction begins.

Reduction of the hole is a simple four step process beginning with a soldier firing one or two magazines from his M-16 into the trap door. This has a tendency to discourage enemy grenadiers from getting too close to the door. After getting their attention with a magazine or two, various American and Vietnamese expressions are shouted into the hole exhorting the enemy to come out or be killed. Some times he will give up without a fight, saving us not only the effort of killing him, but of excavating the tunnel for weapons and documents. When all else fails and the "Hard Corps Charlie" remains within his self-created tomb a few strategically placed grenades normally reduce both the tunnel and "Charlie" to rubble leaving only the messy task of digging out the remains. Frequently the M-16 fire will open a hole large enough to allow insertion of a grenade. If not a grenade is placed on top of the trap door or the door removed from a distance with a rope. This minimizes the effects of any attached booby trap. Sometimes an air hole is enlarged and a grenade pushed through it. This is particularly effective against stubborn V.C. who hide behind a grenade baffle. The last step is the insertion of a tunnel rat to insure that all weapons and documents have been recovered as well as all enemy killed or captured. The hole must be thoroughly searched as the enemy has small compartments built into his holes to hide weapons and ammo. Obviously, it is far better to capture the V.C. as he can frequently lead you to another hole containing items of interest but in any event, capture will save you the time wasted digging out the hole for weapons and documents. After the hole has been searched we destroy it with explosives if it was not already destroyed in the four step process. A caution to remember is that the enemy's defense is to toss out a grenade when everyone is standing around the hole and attempt to escape from another exit of the tunnel. Many of these holes have two entrances so naturally the best defense against the grenade tosser is dispersion of our forces and alert security men who fire into the hole before the grenade or "Charlie" comes out.

It is apparent that the success of the operation depends entirely on the success of the searchers. Accordingly, your best men should be used first. As soon as your unit finds success in "Hole Huntin" everyone will desire to be a searcher. But as success usually is, it is short lived and frequently the unit's enthusiasm dwindles to a low ebb. Many a bleeding hand of a Lieutenant has finally located a hole that rekindled the desires of his searchers and the race was on to locate the next hole. The operation will only be successful if the officers and noncommissioned officers lead the way in the search for holes and maintain in the searchers an enthusiastic approach to the mission.

The results of a successful search operation can be amazing. During our search of an area near Duc Pho, Vietnam, we uncovered two company commanders, the S3, the XO and a first sergeant from the 97th V.C. Battalion. Further to the north, we killed the XO of 1st Co, CO of 3d Co and the battalion CO of the 38th V.C. Battalion. In still a different area, the village chief, the district finance chief, and several other members of the infrastructure were literally unearthed from their hiding places. Of more than 350 enemy we have killed in the last month, a substantial number have been either members of the infrastructure or cadre of these V.C. units. These losses hurt the enemy doubly. Many of the weapons seized have been crew served, including machine guns, recoilless rifles and rocket launchers. As a result of our operations the enemy in our A.O. has two serious staff problems: First, determining what course of action is open to him to counter the deliberate search, and second, obtaining and keeping a staff to study the problem.

Deliberate search techniques are easily taught and quickly learned. The emphasis is of course placed on where to look for the enemy, a location that provides him with observation, cover and concealment and a route of escape. Then the soldier learns what to look for, the indicators, - a game trail, worn and cut bamboo, and airhole, human feces, a depression, fresh food, a lone individual. All trigger a mental alert in the curious American soldier that the enemy is not far away. The four step reduction process provides a simple means of effectively combating the enemy with minimum friendly casualties. This type of "on the scene" training was presented to selected members of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, a part of Task Force Oregon, by the 2d Battalion 35th Infantry. In a matter of only two weeks, the 196th had located over 300 of these holes. The success of their operation was a result of good leadership and a knowledge of these "Hole Huntin" techniques.

A LIKELY ENEMY SPOT, NOTICE THE BAMBOO

THE AUTHOR POINTS OUT THE HOLE

A CLOSER LOOK, CAN YOU DETECT THE HOLE?

COUPLAGE REMOVED, THE TRAPCOR FRAME IS EXPOSED

THE TRAPDOOR IS OPENED

THE "VICTOR CHARLIE" COMES OUT

THE ENEMY SURRENDERS

THE HOLE AS SEEN FROM ABOVE