

The Education of a Company Commander

By Dick Culver

The experiences below are true and are extracted from a rather eventful tour in Vietnam during the spring, summer and fall of 1967. I hadn't thought of many of the occurrences for a number of years, until I was recently rereading *Murphy's Laws of Combat*. Those simple truisms are always amusing and often worth considering in a real life scenario. It occurred to me that similar truisms told with the story behind them might be informative and amusing for a budding combat leader. Some of the stories below are told tongue in cheek, some are deadly serious, but all of them are true. They are not necessarily in order, but each is told in a manner that tries to lead into the next one. Read them and chuckle, but never forget: there's a grain of truth in all of them.

LIVES FOR REAL ESTATE:

It was the spring of 1967 and I used a camouflaged sweat rag to wipe my face. We were standing in the middle of a village, now in wreckage from the constant carnage of war. It was the second time in as many weeks that we had been through the same village. The constant fighting for the same terrain on a weekly basis was beginning to wear thin. I called for the company XO, Lieutenant Mike Chervenak, to come up, and he was soon standing beside me.

"Hey Mike, do you get the feeling we've been here before?"

"Yeah, Skipper, and before you came we'd been here several times before that!"

"Is it just my imagination, or does this strike you as a bit stupid? Using 'high-diddle-diddle' tactics to take a piece of terrain we're gonna' give back tomorrow strikes me as idiotic!"

"You've got that right, Skipper - we take the same piece of terrain almost on a weekly basis only to walk off and leave it to the gooks!"

I think that moment in time changed my tactical appreciation of the war to win the hearts and minds of the people. I vowed never again to deliberately trade lives for real estate. This wasn't Belleau Wood, nor was it Saipan or Iwo Jima. We had become a "beat cop," essentially making the streets safe from the Commies. While the VC and NVA were getting a bit edgy about showing themselves, they seemed to know exactly when and where we were going to be. I became a believer in leveling the objective with artillery and air before walking in to sweep up the results.

Mercifully, I wasn't the only one to arrive at this conclusion. We had simply watched too many movies and been through the WWI, WWII and Korean school of combat! No one had given us the postgraduate course on guerilla warfare.

Lesson - Use supporting arms to avoid needless loss of life. Getting bled to death by Ho Chi Minh's followers using obsolescent tactics bordered on insanity.

HIGH ANGLE FIRE:

My initial introduction to the horrors of high angle fire was one that probably saved a number of lives by making me one cautious muvva! It was during Operation Hickory during the May/June time-frame in the DMZ. The idea was to land next to the Ben Hai River (the dividing line between North and South Vietnam) and drive the NVA south into the waiting arms of the "White Mice"¹.

At the time, I was the Commanding Officer of Headquarter and Service Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment, a job I cordially hated. I was constantly working my bolt to be assigned as a rifle company commander. As it turns out, I wouldn't have long to wait!

I had supervised the initial sending of supplies ashore from the USS Princeton, and was chafing under my ignominious job. Once I had satisfied myself that all was well aboard ship, I bummed a ride on the next CH-46 heading for the beach. Instead of a fire swept landscape, I found a barren hilltop with the Battalion antenna erected and a frustrated Battalion Staff that had just watched most of the NVA swimming the river back to North Vietnam. The Battalion was busy digging in. The terrain was sparsely vegetated, and the turf was as hard as a rock. Entrenching tools barely made a dent in the soil, even after an hour or so of digging. What we needed here was a platoon of backhoes, or some cratering charges!

I reported to the Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. "Pappy DeLong". Now, Pappy understood my desire for a rifle company, and he chuckled when he saw that I had wangled my way to the field. "Moose" Beard, the XO, was not as amused. The Moose had told me to stay aboard ship and make sure everything was being sent ashore in an expeditious manner. Moose wasn't really as upset that I wasn't aboard ship as he was that I was taking advantage of Pappy's good nature! Pappy, understanding soul that he was, gave me a half hour to look around while Moose fumed. When Pappy was occupied with other matters, the Moose told me to get my skuzzy fanny back aboard ship. Ah well, this was boring anyway, and I *wasn't* looking forward to having to dig a hole in turf that had a greater semblance to concrete than to dirt. Since the Battalion was due to move out momentarily, no one was taking the "burrowing" project seriously - as it turns out this was a major mistake!

As Moose and I talked, a flight of CH-46s set down in the Landing Zone, disgorging the expected White Mice. They had, of course, timed their arrival until the LZ had been reported as cold². The sudden arrival of the White Mice was to change all that, as our O1-E Artillery spotter aircraft was running low on fuel and had to return to Dong Ha for a refill. Choppers in the LZ were an absolutely irresistible target for the NVA gunners, who had been chafing under the threat of counter-battery fire directed by our spotter plane. A CH-34 landed in the zone a moment or two following the CH-46s. I went over to talk to the CH-34 crew chief to see if he would drop me off on the Princeton. The noise of the chopper effectively blocked out any meaningful conversation, but the crew chief's eyes were suddenly the size of saucers! He pointed aft to the area behind the CH-34, waved and said "by-by"... The chopper disappeared in a cloud of dust. I looked rearward to see what was upsetting the crew chief. It didn't take but a second to see

what the problem was - a large cloud of dirty black smoke indicated incoming fire! Oopsss... Things were fixin' to get exciting!

The major complication was that the NVA had some large bore artillery positions (85mm and 122s) just across the river, and were simply waiting for the spotter plane to leave, to avoid bringing down the wrath of hell on their heads if they fired at the choppers. We were now sitting on the hill like ducks in a shooting gallery. The only saving grace was that several platoons were conducting patrols out of the area. This mercifully left a number of empty holes open to the fastest man.

My horror was compounded by the realization that I had not bothered to dig a fighting hole, knowing that I was to return to the ship momentarily! Uh oh! Oh well, any old port in a storm, I suppose. I headed for the nearest seemingly empty hole identified by a poncho erected with several branches to act as a sunshade. Executing a slide that would have done justice to Ty Cobb, I went in "spikes up"... Seems that another gent and myself arrived in the somewhat inadequate shelter simultaneously. The original owner of the hole had gotten down about 4" in the rock-hard dirt and the thing was about 4 feet long. My fellow occupant had arrived in such a manner that we were feet to feet with our heads pulled in just far enough to give a minimal amount of protection. Our legs and knees were intertwined. I introduced myself to my fellow refugee.

"Afternoon, my name is Culver."

"And a good afternoon to you Captain, my name is Doc Jones (not his real name)."

Miracle of miracles - I had landed in our excavation with a Navy Hospital Corpsman. This might have possibilities, assuming we both survived. A good 20 minutes and almost 200 rounds of gook artillery later, I had discovered a number of interesting truths...

Lesson - People with very little to do often kill time by counting such things as the total number of enemy artillery shells fired into your position.

Lesson - If you stop for five minutes, make like a mole!

Lesson - If the terrain is too damned hard to burrow in with an entrenching tool, don't let your spotter plane go home until another is on station.

Or -

Lesson - If you don't have spotter planes to keep hostile high angle fire off of your fanny, and digging is almost impossible without engineer equipment, don't deliberately "urate-off" off the enemy.

Lesson - Never erect your Battalion Radio Antennae in plain sight! Giving the enemy pre-staged aiming stakes is insane!

Lesson - All high angle fire is evil, both enemy and friendly. I have found many uses for friendly high angle fire, but all of the darned stuff has "to whom it may

concern" written on it. Friendly artillery is only slightly less evil than the enemy stuff, and both will kill you with very little regret!

I climbed out of the shallow revetment with my eyeballs rotating like the wheels in a slot machine. After careful examination I found that I was bleeding in a number of unimportant places, but the Doc obliged with a couple of stitches, iodine and bandages. I counted my lucky stars and headed back to the CP. Moose, quite probably the largest single target on the hill, greeted me with the following:

"Well, Culver, how do you like combat now?" he said in his usual high and extremely irritating nasal twang.

"Sir, there's nothing like a little hostile artillery to get your adrenaline flowing, I always say!" I replied, lying in my teeth!

The Moose's attention was now directed elsewhere, and I started looking around the carnage left by our recent bombardment. The corpsmen were rapidly getting our wounded and dead taken care of, and the wounded were forming a line to board the first medivac chopper bound seaward to the Princeton. What gave me the cold chills was a hole that had been located about 10 feet from mine. It seemed to have vanished leaving only churned up dirt. I went over and looked. With a small amount of searching, I discovered that the only thing left in the hole was a pair of bones sticking out of a pair of Jungle Boots with lots of rather red-stained churned up dirt... Yech...

Now the casualties awaiting the medivac birds were beginning to bunch up, apparently figuring that lightning never strikes twice in the same place. This began to worry me greatly, because since I could see across the river, common sense told me that they could see us as well - bunched troops attract fire! I went to the head of the line and gave them the standard lecture that one round will get you all - get 7 yards interval between men and assume a prone position. They looked at me with a dazed look like I must have lost my mind! These guys were acting crazy, apparently somewhat shell shocked from the bombardment! I began taking them individually by the arm and stepping off 7 extremely long paces between men, using language that I had first learned at my Drill Instructor's knee! The men seemed lethargic, but did as they were told. One Headquarters Staff-Section Gunnery Sergeant came over and grabbed me by the sleeve:

"Captain, you can't talk to them like that, you don't know what they've been through!"

"Gunny, where the hell do you think I've been for the past hour or so? Of *course* I know what they've been through, I just don't wanna' do this thing all over again! If YOU ain't gonna' do your job, get the hell out of my way!"

Lesson - Don't always depend on senior NCOs to have their stuff wired together after taking 200 rounds of incoming 122s. Not everyone is John Wayne.

The Gunny left shaking his head with a pair of glazed eyes. The Moose motioned me over.

"Well, Culver, looks like you are gonna' get your wish - the Foxtrot Company Commander got blown off the hill and has been medivaced. You go in for Foxtrot!"

"Fine, Major, just where the hell is Foxtrot located?"

"Just go with the Gunny here, he's from Foxtrot and he'll take you up to check out the company positions! Call me if you get into trouble!"

"Right, Major, will do."

Lesson - Be careful what you wish for...

ASSUMPTION OF COMMAND:

It was getting dark when I finally arrived at the Foxtrot position. The Foxtrot Company Gunny gave me a tour of the lines, but it was darker than the inside of a meat locker. In the daylight it might have been informative, but this was sorta' like inspecting a darkened closet. Finally the Gunny deposited me at the former Company Commander's hole and told me it was all mine. Great, and the dirt *was* a lot softer here! My pre-dug hole was just about the right height and depth. I began to breath a bit easier.

Spreading out my poncho in my inherited fighting hole, I took off my gear in expectation of getting a couple hours of sleep. It proved to be hotter than the hinges of hell in the hole, so I stuck my head up and took a look around. The brush bordering the perimeter seemed a bit too close to my hole for my tastes, but everything appeared quiet. I decided to take a chance. I repositioned my poncho on the ground just to the side of my pre-dug fighting hole and stretched out. I hadn't been laying there for more than 10 minutes when I heard a "swoosh", "swoosh", "BAM", "BAM"... A couple of large explosions rocked the night, and worse yet, the concussion came from the hole I had just climbed out of. Holy Catfish, *NOW* what!?!? This was not shaping up into my best all time day! Memorable? Yep! Thrilling? You can say that again! *Enjoyable* would be stretching it a bit!

I carefully investigated what was left of my hole and found that some dink had thrown two Chi-Com stick grenades in to welcome me to the area! Luck was with me that night however, as both grenades blew apart on the seams of the cast metal bodies and simply made a loud noise... This had not been a day for the faint of heart! Dawn revealed that my predecessor had dug his hole within 15 feet of the jungle underbrush. Worse yet, the jungle underbrush was the forward edge of the Foxtrot Company lines. No one had seemed to consider the consequences! It was obvious that I had a large job ahead of me. All I had to do was survive long enough to get things straightened out..!

Lesson - Never assume that your predecessor knew what he was doing when he laid in the company positions!

Lesson - Always pick the location of your own fighting hole!

Lesson - Take command of a rifle company during daylight if possible!

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT:

The "rules of engagement" had been explained to us upon arrival in country: "Thou shalt not fire upon any hostile forces until they fire on you - FIRST"! This seemed a bit asinine when first mentioned, but upon being introduced into the intricacies of the reality of the conduct of war in SEA, it became apparent that this was some sort of game played by our State Department and the Communists of North Vietnam. Specific instances of restraint could then be paraded before the United Nations. However it was played, it amounted to gambling with the lives of the Marines (and soldiers, of course) attempting to free the citizens of South Vietnam from the rule of the Communists. Little did we know that the war was actually (or at least in part) a game designed to enrich certain friends of the Chief Executive of the United States (The Brown Construction Company and several chopper manufacturing outfits) and to advance the careers of high ranking military officers who were able to bite their tongues and follow the direction of their masters. Only those willing to lick the boots of McNamara and Johnson were allowed to play! Ambassadors were changed like socks in order to obtain one that would bend to the will of the President. All of these machinations, of course, were to act to the detriment of the troops in the field.

I had early on decided that I wasn't about to let some ridiculous "don't fire unless fired upon" rule lessen my or my troops' chances of making it home in one piece. As it turned out, others before me had made the same decision. One particularly onerous order prevented the calling in of artillery or air support on a village complex that was not delivering heavy automatic weapons fire on your position. Well, OK, but the definition of heavy automatic weapons fire was certainly open to interpretation!

The standard modus operandi for a thinking company commander depended upon his ingenuity. My personal method can be deduced from the following (somewhat simplified) radio transmission following a burst of fire from a village we were assigned to take. Several rounds had been fired into our position to get our attention, but I rather imagine that it would not have come under the definition of "heavy automatic weapons fire". I understood that those in command positions were likely to cover their fannies... It comes under the heading of human nature.

"Arty, this is Hotel Six, over."

"Hotel Six, send your traffic, over."

"Fire Mission, one round HE, coordinates 12345678 (bogus coordinates of course) over."

"Hotel Six, our map shows a village at those coordinates, are you taking heavy automatic weapons fire? Over."

Pointing at one of my M60 gunners who was standing by and a rifleman who had a functioning M16 (unusual), I snapped my fingers. Substantial bursts emanated from both weapons.

"Arty, did you hear that? If you want more, I'll put the gooks on the hook, over!"

"Roger Hotel, I heard the fire, on the way, wait!"

Unscrupulous and cruel? Certainly not in my estimation. Those Dinks had fired at us. The fact that they didn't have their AKs on full automatic wasn't gonna' get my kids killed! I'd do it again in a heartbeat! The Artillery and Air folks knew what was going on and were simply looking for an excuse to support the infantry with air strikes and artillery fire.

I had one situation where one of my troopers told me that he saw a bunch of Dinks in the tree line in NVA Uniforms, carrying AKs and asked if he could shoot at his potential and almost certainly hostile antagonists. Holy Catfish, what a stupid question! I didn't CARE if they were shooting at us yet! OF COURSE it was OK to shoot! If it wasn't, how in the hell could you ever conduct an ambush? After the firefight, I told the young lad who was attempting to play by the rules that he would play by MY rules! If he's a Dink, he's armed, and he appears to be hostile, it ain't necessary for the other guy to go for his gun first! We were playing to win, and you sure as hell weren't gonna' win if you had to ask permission to shoot at the enemy. I told the assembled company that the next individual to ask such a question was gonna' be horsewhipped! Of COURSE it's OK to shoot at the enemy - that's what war is all about!

If I'd been in charge of the Marine Security Guards in Tehran in 1979, I'd have personally shot the guards who didn't blast the Camel Jockeys attempting to storm the Embassy. Allowing the State Department to call the shots once the ball has opened is crazy! My Marines and U.S. Citizens come before political decisions. I would also have had Tehran leveled to about ankle-high rubble. The Marines and State Department employees know the risks, and should be willing to abide by them when threatened. The Ayatollah was intent on taking Iran back to 10th Century Islam! I'd have bombed 'em back to the Stone Age and would have obliged the followers of the Ayatollah by leaving the city in rubble! Other cultures understand power but do not respond to diplomacy, which they consider weakness. I would never leave any doubt in the minds of those who would screw with the United States. Needless to say, I have never been contacted for duty with the Department of State!

Lesson - Fight your own battles according to the scenario dealt to you by the situation. The lives of your own folks are more important than the lives of the enemy. You are the individual on the ground and you were charged with keeping your Marines alive. You owe nothing to the State Department, only to your men, your Country, and the Constitution of the United States! Let the diplomats of the world pound sand!

SEX IN COMBAT:

On two separate occasions I witnessed the ramifications of sexual liaisons in combat; both were enough to give a man pause to think. These took place in the 1st Marine Division Area just below Da Nang. It was during June of 1967, and the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment was conducting a sweep of a known Communist stronghold. Prior knowledge of our assignment assured that we would not run into any major VC attacks, since the ARVIN folks admitted to at least 10% of their troops being Viet Cong. Since we were required to coordinate with the "friendlies" in the area, the

chances of running into a major unit were pretty slim. Unlike our usual operations in the DMZ area, the VC usually set booby traps and faded into the landscape until the Marines had left.

One of the other companies roaming the area caught the resident VC Pay Officer and his female helpmate with a large briefcase full of cash. They would probably have escaped had their hormones not gotten the upper hand. This stalwart pair were caught "en-flagranté," literally with their black pajamas down! A quick grab for their AKs was too late to prevent their joining each other in eternal embrace - too bad the Piasters³ left in the briefcase were essentially worthless. Ah well...

Lesson - All troops are horny, even the enemy. Don't expect your opponents to behave differently than any other fighting person in their prime. Consider the ramifications of the politically correct and totally integrated infantry fighting units currently being demanded by the ladies!

My second encounter with raging hormones occurred during the same operation. We had spent almost three weeks running patrols and sweeps in the area next to the coast just east of Hoi An. On our last day, we finally checked out a village that was strangely devoid of any males of military age. This did not bode well, as such a lack of males indicated that the VC had taken their weapons and faded into the woodwork awaiting our departure. Since we had been told to remain in the village until the following morning, when we were to be picked up and taken back to the U.S.S. Tripoli,⁴ I had planned on withdrawing to the beach just before dark and forming a 180° perimeter.

To kill time in the interim, we decided to conduct what was usually called a Med-Cap⁵ to help the local villagers. Now Marines love kids, dogs and little old ladies, and they went at it with a will. "Boo-boos" were bandaged, medicine was dispensed and the Marines assisted the villagers in repairing some of the fallen down structures. As the light began to fade, we withdrew to a 180-degree perimeter close down by the beach. By evening we seemed to have established a very friendly rapport with the locals. All seemed well, and the Marines relaxed a bit. Soon after dark, some of the young girls from the village came out to the edge of our lines with baskets of the local fruit. One of my young Native-American Marines with the unlikely name of "Yellow Thunder" seemed to be singled out by one of the fairer young maidens.

"Hey Marine, you wanna' go Boom-Boom," she asked shyly?

Now Yellow Thunder was more than up to the task at hand (no pun intended)! He climbed out of his hole with an accommodating look on his face!

"Sure, if you wanna' go "Boom-Boom", I'm your man," said the lad who could only be described as ready!

Yellow Thunder got "Boom-Boom" alright, but it wasn't quite what he expected! The twin booms were from the muzzle of a hidden AK that took him in the shoulder. Mercifully, the wounds weren't life threatening, but Yellow Thunder was a much wiser Marine.

Lesson - All Marines are horny but some are more willing than others. And sometimes something is lost in the translation of the native tongue! "Boom-boom", it would seem, has two different meanings, depending on who's translating.

RIVER CROSSING UNDER FIRE:

When I think back to this operation, the discussion of Capt. Nathan Brittles and the Major in *"She Wore a Yellow Ribbon"* always comes to mind.

"Nathan," says the Major, "young Pennell has to learn to cross a river under fire just like we did!"

I never truly appreciated young Pennell's problem until one June afternoon in bandit country.

We were operating independently, doing a sweep of an area known to be rife with constantly marauding VC, not totally unlike the Indians in the American West. Now, river crossings are always a challenge when you are forced to execute the maneuver without the benefit of boats. A prudent commander always had a 120-foot rappelling line with each platoon along with a fair length of parachute cord. We were so equipped, AND we had our marauding Indians. Unfortunately, unlike the river in *"She Wore a Yellow Ribbon"*, we were not blessed with a shallow ford. Our stream was about 15 feet deep and about 60 yards across, but we had it handled. The only challenge was a way to get our crew-served weapons to the other side of the river without taking them out of action or getting them soaked. Obviously some "poncho rafts" were called for. We set up half of our mortars to cover the other bank and covered our crossing point with M60 Machine Guns. After appointing a "volunteer" to swim the river with the lightweight length of parachute cord, he handily swam to the other side. We had attached one end of the parachute cord to a length of rappelling line. Once our stalwart volunteer was on the other side, he pulled the rappelling line to his side of the river and secured it to a tree. Tying the other end to a tree on our side completed the rope bridge. Brush rafts were constructed with native underbrush and ponchos and tested for their ability to support a load.

Half of our mortars and machine guns were loaded aboard the rafts and pulled to the other side while the guns and mortars on our side of the river supplied cover for our crossing troops. There was only one fly in the ointment, a VC rifleman who had positioned himself on a high bluff across the river and well above our landing spot. Mercifully, he couldn't shoot worth a damn. It was just a bit worrisome to have small waterspouts next to you as you prepared to make your way to the far bank! We, of course, returned fire with mortars, machine gun and rifle fire, but he was essentially in defilade behind the crest of the bluff. It was frustrating but not terribly dangerous.

Once our mortars and machine guns were safely across, we set up a similar covering fire on the opposite bank for the tail-end folks from the company bringing up the rear on our crossing. In best John Wayne fashion, I volunteered to be the last man across. With all hands safely on the other side, I ceremoniously untied the rappelling line on my side of the river and started to wade into the stream. I had my helmet in my

right hand, and the incompetent sniper got his first and only hit of the afternoon! He ricocheted a round off the helmet in my right hand!

"Uh Oh... was that a lucky shot?," I thought, "or is this guy finally getting the range?"

Well, no time to cipher this one out! I figured my best course of action was to get across before his mentor gave him a couple of more lessons in sight alignment and trigger squeeze!! I was wondering how young Pennell would have handled this! Safe on the far side of the river, I breathed a sigh of relief and admired the helmet that had taken the only hit of the afternoon. I was wondering if our sniper was shooting at me and hit the helmet by mistake, or if he was giving me a lesson in personal humility? Either way, it was a sobering experience for sure.

Lesson - Never volunteer to be the last guy across the river if the guy taking pot shots is learning as he goes. And never underestimate young Pennell's problems the next time you watch *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*.

GINGERLY WIPING EGG OFF YOUR FACE:

Once we were safely across the river and making our way down a road on top of a rice paddy dike, we had begun to breath a sigh of relief. Apparently our tormentor had given up and stopped firing at us. But just then a blast of machine gun fire from the bluff told me our sniper had brought in reinforcements. The entire company hit the deck behind the protection of the paddy dike. Now the SOB was playing MY game. I yelled for my radio operator to give me the handset so I could bring in a gunship on this pesky clown. Fire continued to sweep across my position and I was cursing the gent who had designed the Jungle Utility Jacket for making the buttons too thick... I called for the radio again. Suddenly a voice from above said:

"Here ya' go Skipper, who do you wanna' call?"

Above me? Now wait a minute! What the heck is my radio operator doing above me, with me trying to eat dirt? A glance upward revealed that the entire company was in the process of climbing out from behind the dike and dusting themselves off! Looking around I saw the situation a bit more clearly! While the first burst came from the bad guys from the bluff, the subsequent bursts had been from my own M60s returning fire causing the enemy gunner to flee. Oopsss... Ahem! I crawled out of my position behind the dike and got to my feet with a bright red face. I covered my embarrassment with a statement to the effect that I was gonna' compliment our gunners for getting the M60s in action so fast. The troops all kept straight faces, and there wasn't even one snicker! I could have kissed 'em.

Lesson - Get your head up far enough to evaluate the situation and have a good cover story. The alternative is to have an excellent Rifle Company that doesn't laugh at the CO when he does dumb things!

A SURE WAY TO MAKE CONTACT WITH THE VC:

We were heading ashore in our CH-46s to handle a situation in the in the 5th Regiment's Area. We were used to operating in the DMZ area where we were in daily contact with the NVA, a full time professional fighting force. Molesting the VC was a different kettle of fish. These guys had a way of disappearing into the mists when the Marines moved into their area. As we came across the coast, we weren't really expecting trouble, as it was supposed to be well coordinated with the ARVINs who routinely kept the VC apprised of our movements. We expected a cold LZ. Imagine our surprise when we started taking rounds through the skin of the choppers! At least two casualties never left the birds and returned instantly as medivacs.

The rest of the day was a constant shoot-out with the bad guys. We had landed with Dave Burrington with NBC News, and some puke from ABC who proved to be a left-wing gent who became a constant pain in the fanny. Now, Dave was a decent guy, and he had more chutzpah than sense. He and his cameraman stuck with us throughout the fight. Pretty soon it was apparent that we were in contact with a heavy force of VC. After fighting with the NVA, these guys were amateurs, but a poorly aimed round can kill you as easily as a well aimed round. These guys weren't shooting very straight, but there was a lot of fire to keep us honest. After we had taken care of the task at hand, we began to wonder why the VC had chosen to fight us mano-a-mano... This just wasn't like them. The after action report gave us the answer. It seems that the helicopter pilots had inadvertently set us down in the wrong landing zone - one that just happened to be astride of the VC Battalion's escape route! No wonder these guys were upset!

Lesson - If you want to make contact with the Viet Cong, *don't* give the ARVINs your correct coordinates! And if you don't wanna' fight, don't cut off the enemy's escape route! Even a mouse will bare his fangs when cornered!

GUNFIGHTS WITH HOODED COBRAS:

During the above shoot out, my radio operator was about 10 yards in front of me as we moved across the field. When we took our first burst of heavy automatic fire, everyone took cover behind the dry rice paddy dikes. I was just getting situated in order to swing my rifle towards the enemy when a large object came hurdling through space and landed right on top of me... Ooph... It was my radio operator! What the hell??

"What the heck is wrong," I asked?

He was speechless, but his eyes were the size of saucers! He was wildly gesturing forward and his mouth was working but nothing was coming out! I knew SOMETHING was wrong, but he was incoherent! I bellied forward to his former position. My GAWD! There, raising up on his tail, was an extremely pissed off King Cobra! Now this Cobra wasn't giving an inch and was indicating that *"I"* was the object of his hate and discontent! I fired my first rounds out of my belt gun in Vietnam at that outraged serpent, filling the air with lead. I didn't hit a dad gummed thing as I was crawling at top speed backward feet first! To say that he got my attention would be an extreme understatement! Apparently he had found a hole after our inadvertent encounter, because, after the battle, I couldn't find hide nor scale of the slinky varmint!

Lesson - Cobras are apparently apolitical, favoring neither the communists nor the defenders of freedom. Never, ever, piss off a Cobra when you are otherwise engaged in a major shoot out with the enemy.

And as Murphy says in his rules of combat:

Lesson - Never occupy a foxhole with someone braver than you are!

~ **Gray Rebel Hotel Six⁶ out** ~

End Notes:

¹ "White Mice" was a derogatory term applied to the Vietnamese National Police not noted for their propensity to expose themselves to hostile fire.

² A "cold" LZ was simply a zone that was not receiving hostile fire.

³ Piasters were a unit of Vietnamese Currency. Much harder to get rid of than U.S. Greenbacks.

⁴ SLF Bravo, the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines had changed shipping from the USS Princeton to the USS Tripoli following Operation Hickory in June of 1967

⁵ A "Med-Cap" was the name given to an exercise conducted by a unit to provide medical and subsistence to a local village to assist its citizens and create good will among the natives.

⁶ "Gray Rebel Hotel Six" was my call sign as the Commanding Officer of Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment while on the Special Landing Force. "Gray Rebel" (which today would no doubt be banned as politically incorrect) was my Battalion's call sign.