

Gray Rebel Foxtrot Six... - Cartographer Extraordinaire

It was the summer of 1967, and the CH-46 Helicopter was still being tweaked up at the air facility on Okinawa in an attempt to keep the tail pylon from separating from the airframe at extremely inopportune and unexpected times. The “rumor-control” had gone so far as to put out the word that any wounded individual allowing himself to be medivaced in a CH-46 became automatically eligible for the Bronze Star for Valor!

We had lost faith in the “46” much as we had lost faith in the controversial M16 Rifle, but apparently the “zoomie-union” was better connected than the “grunt-union” as immediate steps were taken to put a “fix” on the whirley-birds, but we “grunts” were simply told that keeping the M16 clean was the answer, after all, who ever heard of a rifle that wouldn’t function? ...And of course the M16s were less expensive than a helicopter. The AR-15 was originally designed by Eugene Stoner for Fairchild Aircraft, and was originally slated as an airfield perimeter defense weapon as a replacement for the .30 Carbine, by General Curtis LeMay.

McNamara, that brilliant military strategist who had been the brains behind the Edsel Automobile, had put his “chop” on the M16 as a weapon suitable for all services, and the deal was apparently chiseled in concrete to simplify the supply corridors, and act as an all service weapon, cutting down on the weight load to be carried in combat, in both the weight of the weapon and the weight of a larger basic load of ammunition for all troops. On paper it made a certain amount of left-handed sense, but Murphy was to take a hand. Large hardware was a different kettle of fish however, and every service taking ships to sea or aircraft into flight had their champions, and of course and if pilots won’t fly or admirals can make a case for different seagoing vessels, much political weight is taken into account due to pork barrel politics within various States, and companies who had political clout with influential politicians.

Political shenanigans much as contracts controlled by the Brown and Root Construction folks who were (according to legend) the folks who had gotten LBJ into office in Texas politics. It took several recounts, but legend has it that appropriate fiduciary shenanigans manipulating the legendary “graveyard vote” are credited with putting Johnson “over the top”



Reggie Ponsford relaxing in quarters aboard the USS Tripoli during one of our few days aboard ship during the SLF – Summer 1967

after several recounts. LBJ was not a man who ever forgot a political favor or slight. Assuming that there is any truth in such legends, the lads were repaid in spades.

While McNamara was not into the depths of the National political machinery, he did influence the acquisition of military hardware by doing away the tried and true method of small arms by essentially eliminating the Armory System of small arms weapons development and acquisition. For those not familiar with the old Armory System, many private small arms inventors had forever claimed that they were getting unfairly treated by a system that always bought "in-house", thus screwing the little guys out of a chance to compete in major weapons development.

On surface this argument made a certain amount of sense, but what was left unsaid was that most of the systems that the "private small arms designers" had suddenly "discovered," had already been tried by the National armories and found wanting. Much went unsaid, but the old tried and true weapons acquisition system (if somewhat seemingly slower than molasses) lost its place in the sun. Finally with the death of JFK on a November day in 1963, the protector of Springfield Armory lost their "Political Rabbi" since no National Armories were located in Texas (as opposed to Springfield Armory, who had been hanging their chapeaus in Massachusetts since the founding of our country). This would not bode well for the "gravel cruncher" and would allow gents who were more interested in making money than turning out the finest battle rifles available.

The immediate impact of having a plastic toy as opposed to a well thought out and rugged shoulder weapon seemed to be minimal, as those who stood in line to become soldiers and Marines seemed endless. With the draft in place, volunteers for the Corps didn't noticeably decrease (if you've gotta' go, better to go in the finest service, eh what? After all, who would want to be a "Doggie" if you had a choice of being a "Sea Going Bell Hop")? We had all been brought up watching John Wayne in "The Sands of Iwo Jima" so for the time being, we were getting good folks! After all who would let John Wayne's finest down, right?

During this era, we were using the Mike Boats and Amtracs more or less exclusively with the CH-46 temporarily out of action if (for whatever reason), transfer from Ship to Shore (or vice-versa) became necessary. The biggest thrill of all was when we got to spend a night in close proximity to the shore line awaiting our withdrawal back to Naval Shipping. With the seeming whole of the U.S. Navy awaiting the dawn, it took little or no imagination on the part of the NVA or VC to figure out the approximate location of the evacuees.

In order to give ourselves a better than even break, we attempted to locate our units in such a manner as to take advantage of Naval Gun Fire Support or interlocking fire and tactical support between Rifle Companies, withdrawing Artillery Batteries, and other units that made up the composition of the Special Landing Force Units. While awaiting the dawn and resumption of the amphibious transfer, we often spent occasional sleepless nights awaiting the coming of the sea-going "Cavalry to the Rescue" come the dawn. On just such an occasion hangs the thread of our tale...

As the Battalion was setting in for the night during this occasion, we all were required to call in what we called our "night position reports" to insure any necessary artillery, mortar, or air-support would be correctly placed should we run into any trouble that we couldn't handle locally. The position reports were given in Alphabetic Order and duly taken down by the Operations Folks (the S-3 Section) to be instantly available should the need arise.

I was blessed with a fair comprehension of military map reading, and had done a stretch in the Artillery as a youngster. That combined with an extremely competent Artillery Forward Observer named Mike Madsen who had a grasp of military map reading as good as mine. Between the two of us, we could drop a mortar or artillery round in a flea's hip pocket at virtually any observable distance. The maps of Vietnam were "iffy" at best and initially units arriving "in country" were operating using extremely out of date maps, some rumored to have come from old National Geographic Magazines. Marines are of course, adaptable, and little by little we worked things out. While it may seem incomprehensible to those used to using satellite and GPS electronics now available to all hands, most no doubt assume we always had such things at our disposal – alas, 'twas not always so. As the Corps got more ensconced in country, we established Fire Bases (such as Camp Carroll and others), extremely well located, and triangulated, making our (friendly) supporting fires pretty well on the mark.

On this occasion we were digging in and planning our night supporting fires and possible plans of action should the "unthinkable" occur. While it still wasn't dark, we were making certain that our locations were well documented, thus making certain that we would be able to do unmentionable things to his "hindquarters" should the enemy decide to attack.

Since Hotel was the last Company in line (alphabetically) to call in our night positions, I could hear Foxtrot calling his position in to the Operations Shop. While Reggie Ponsford was one of the most formidable of Company Commanders (and one of my all-time favorite friends and Marines) there were times when I simply couldn't resist "twanging" Reggie's guitar string! This of course, was one of those times.

Reggie was one of the toughest hombres I have ever known, and would trust him with anything and everything I own, including my own life. We had served together prior to this occasion, and would again following it. They just don't make 'em any more trustworthy, rugged or competent than Reg. In a dark alley or in a "testicles to the bulkhead" firefight, Reggie was the best of the best. Mercifully he also had a great sense of humor, but if you approached it right, you could screw with Reggie (within limits) and have a great time doing so. It wasn't that Reggie wasn't a competent map reader, it was just that his main thrust was "sight alignment and trigger squeeze" as opposed to carefully plotting his position prior to starting the festivities.

As Reggie was calling in his night position report, I couldn't help but notice he was calling in OUR (Hotel Company's) location! Huh? The situation was complicated by the fact that the entire beachfront perimeter was located on varying hill masses, often closely located, but at several different elevations (as opposed to horizontal dispersion). We weren't that far apart horizontally, but we (Gray Rebel Hotel) were somewhat above Foxtrot's elevation. From where we were sitting, he had misconstrued his actual location and was calling in our position. An evil thought suddenly went through my brain-housing group. Why not...??? Hummm...

On the Company net (as opposed to the Battalion net) I contacted Reggie and told him that I was keeping our relative positions plotted for mutual fire support, but having just plotted location using his night position report, it appeared that he would be in a perfect location to adjust fire on an NVA unit I was currently observing moving into a position. Since I knew where we were, I could see Reggie moving into position somewhat lower than his transcribed coordinates. This had possibilities (heh, heh, heh...).

“Hey Foxtrot, Hotel here over?” I said.

“Roger Hotel, Foxtrot here, what have you got going?, over!”

“Foxtrot, I see a rather large unit moving into a hill mass that should allow you to observe some artillery dropped on their fannies”, over...

“Roger Hotel, send the Dink Position, “ over...

“Roger Foxtrot, I see the NVA moving into the following pos, coordinates 12345678 (not the actual map coordinates of course)” over...

“Roger Hotel, wait one, over”...

A seemingly interminable delay slowed the actual radio traffic.

A sudden comeback from Foxtrot went roughly as follows; “Hotel Six, Hotel Six, *for Christ Sake, cease fire, cease fire!* Those guys you see are **US!** Over”...

“Roger Foxtrot, understand, NVA actually Foxtrot, is that affirmative? Over”...

The return radio traffic was not for tender ears. Needless to say, I never let Reggie totally off the hook on that little exchange, and left no opportunity to mess with him when the occasion occurred, but we both knew it was all in fun. To this day we exchange e-mails, and keep in touch. I served again with Reggie, this time back up on Okie, and again down in Phenom Phen including a short stint at NKP Thailand.

I could write a book on the legendary Reggie Ponsford including several other long time friends and Marine accomplices in a number of “High Jinx” adventures. For instance, there was the time when he threatened to “mash” a Sumo Wrestler in a Hotel Restaurant in the town of Kadena just outside the main Air Base, or the time he was a bit “upset” at the Air Force Security Police having great fun at the expense of four Marine Corps Majors getting caught out past curfew (who in hell ever though of a curfew in a combat zone?). Reggie was intent on “punching out the blighters” who would screw with the Corps. And of course there was the time when he left his dog tags hanging on a hook in a steam house in the town of NKP (as opposed to the Base of NKP), and trying to figure out how to get some replacements.

The trip to Phenom Phen was ostensibly to talk the Cambodian Ambassador to preparing to come with the Marines on what was to be known as “Operation Eagle Pull” – the Ambassador informed us that if the U.S. Military would keep out of the equation, the State Departments of the World could handle things quite nicely. We informed him that when the time came, he’d damned well better be prepared to come with us, as I had a Staff Sergeant named Galkowski (about 6’ 5’ and 120-lbs of muscle) who was prepared to throw him over his shoulder and carry him out. We did NOT depart friends! Mercifully, “Operation Eagle Pull” didn’t come off during our watch and was delayed until 1975, but Galkowski was ready!

Then following the assignment to the Phibron intent of executing the “snatch the Ambassador” caper, Reggie was assigned to a recruiting tour in Ohio. “Rumor Control” claimed that Reggie had “inside information” that some of his recruiters were goofing off and frequenting the bars instead of out actively recruiting. Reggie was is said to have acquired a wig to frequent the same bars attempting to catch his recruiting personnel downing a quick brew instead of filling out the recruiting rolls! If true, I would have given a month’s pay to have a picture of that one!

One of his assignments (after my time) had Reggie assigned to Marines in Guantánamo Bay. I would have bet a full month's pay that Reggie was the "Role-Model" for the Marine Colonel in "A Few Good Men"...

Those were some fine men and some fine days. Along with such individuals as Reggie, Ray Findlay, Skip Hartnett, and other stalwart Marines in my relative youth, in a day and time now long gone, I would cast my lot with the entire crew and do it all over again. A number of these characters and I served together again, later even in a civilian status (some unfeeling oafs might call mercenary activities), we still hadn't had our adrenaline fix under control. If the Muslims had their feces in one bag, it might still be fun to have one more go...

Semper Fi,

ROC