

Indian Summer in Indian Territory

By Dick Culver

The summer of 1967 was beginning to creep into the first stages of fall in the Republic of Vietnam, but you couldn't tell it by the weather. The country just above and West of Quang Tri was hotter than the hinges of hell, appropriately coinciding with the expected results of the upcoming elections. The powers that be had decided to ensure that General Ky would become next the President of South Vietnam.

As the Company Commander of a Marine Rifle Company, I had been assigned to join the blocking forces placed to guarantee the fairness of the upcoming election. The fact that the eventual outcome at the polls was a foregone conclusion was of little consequence to those of us performing a minaret for the rest of the World to see and say "yea, verily"...



Major Dick Culver

The 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, along with its support elements including an Artillery Battery, an Engineer Unit, an Amtrac Company, Helicopter Support Troops, a Recon Platoon and a Helicopter Squadron, was one of two Battalions designated to sail in small circles in the South China Sea as a floating reserve for both the 1st and 3rd Marine Divisions. The floating reserves were called the SLF for Special Landing Force (a sort of predecessor to the modern MEUs).

The SLF was divided into two segments, 2/3 (our Battalion) was designated *SLF Bravo* and the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Regiment comprised the second, or *SLF Alpha*. I was the Commanding Officer of Hotel Company of 2/3. Our call sign was what would now be considered to be terribly Politically Incorrect... The Second Battalion of the Third Regiment was known as "Gray Rebel", and I was "Gray Rebel Hotel Six"; most appropriate, I thought, for a gent who had two Great Granddaddies who had served in the 59th Alabama during the Late War of Northern Aggression!

The SLF was designed to come in and assist any organization that inadvertently stepped in deep Kimshee... In other words, we comprised a firefighting battalion to assist any unit in I Corps that bit off more than they could chew. We were, in simple terms, "A Sparrow Hawk Unit with Steroids". To say that the duty was thrilling was something of an understatement (we sustained over 800 casualties in a nine month tour). Normally, when we were ordered ashore, we knew the landing zone was already hot. Thus the assignment to "block" for the election was considered soft duty for a Battalion that had been on the SLF for over six straight months. My rifle company had only five men who had not received at least one Purple Heart; I was not one of them.

While the blocking duty was not as rigorous as what we usually drew for an assignment, it was not without certain hazards. Any Rifle Company Commander worth

his salt knew that sitting in one location for more than one night was semi-suicidal, and we had been ordered to stay in place for *three!* We were *not* amused! The march to reach our assigned ridgeline had been strenuous and we had sustained several heat casualties, which did not contribute to the overall morale.

I was extremely fortunate in that I had inherited one of the finest Rifle Companies in the Corps one night during a pitched battle some months earlier. If I had been allowed to pick my own people from scratch, I could not have done better with a stack of record books many feet high and a month to peruse them. The Lieutenants were the best I had ever worked with and the NCOs were outstanding. Better yet, the officers, NCOs and enlisted worked as one and trusted one another in a manner I have never experienced before or since. I would have trusted any one of them with my life and often did. It was truly a fortunate set of circumstances. To add icing on the cake, they all had a sense of humor that added to the ability to survive in a hostile world.

Needless to say, since we were required to stay in a fixed position, we ensured that our patrolling efforts were heavily beefed up, as were our outposts and night ambushes. We were not going to get caught with our trousers down. Late in the afternoon on the last day of the election frivolities we were sitting on the hillside breaking out our evening C-Rats. Up until now, things had been almost boring. The patrol activities had yielded negative results and the ambushes were batting zero. We had begun to relax – perhaps a bit too prematurely.



**Blocking for the Elections
September 1967
Ammo Dump at Dong Ha burning in
background**

While I sat heating a can of “Ham and Muvas¹”, and wearing a soft cover, the sound of a rifle shot rang out. Reality returned to Hotel Company. At the bottom of the ridge we were occupying, there was a bit of unusual activity in the tree-line. My radio operator claimed to have seen some movement and a puff of smoke from below the ridge. I was carrying a .30 Carbine with several magazines of tracer rounds to mark close-in targets. I gave my radio operator my binoculars and unlimbered the little carbine. I had him pass the word via radio that I wanted everyone on my side of the hill to fire two rounds of 5.56mm into the spot I had fired a tracer. And then the fun began... Every time I would fire, the hillside would reverberate with gunfire and the tree line seemed to be alive. My radio operator began to have fun with the situation and gave me several “corrections” that would indicate the perpetrator of hate and

discontent was on the move.

Suddenly the 60 Mortar NCO asked permission to shoot-in his night defensive fires. Since he had a grin on his face, how could I refuse? The thud of outgoing 60s soon

reverberated in the evening air. No sooner had the 60s left the tubes, then the 81 Section Chief asked my blessing to get clearance from the FSCC² to shoot in his night defensive fires. The 81s were soon challenging the 60s for supremacy. The Company Gunnery Sergeant asked if I had any objections to having the 3.5 Rocket Gunners to join in the fray, and the one-sided firefight escalated. The edge of the wood line began to smoke with White Phosphorus rounds. The "Zips" hadn't given up, however, as when one of the 3.5 Gunners went into a kneeling position, the desperate NVA tried to spoil the aim of the gunner. A quick round between the 3.5 Man's legs did the trick and he yanked his shot ricocheting a 3.5 WP round off the ground about 30 feet in front of him and sending it mercifully unexploded into the tree line to detonate harmlessly.

I began to get a bit suspicious when the Artillery Forward Observer asked to check his night defensive fires, but what the hell, fun is fun! I was gratified that the Artillery was on target, and could be depended on to do evil things to sappers if they decided to molest our position during the night.

The Battalion S-3 (Operations Officer) called in and asked what the hell was going on? I described a fire-fight of sufficient proportions to justify our somewhat heavy expenditure of ordnance. He told me that they had just received notification that there were two F-4s returning to base with unused 250 lb. Snake-Eyes³ and wanted to know if I could use them. The company was now beginning to get with the program and was helping with all the small arms fire we could muster without expending our ready supply of ammo. I answered in the affirmative on the Air Support and told them that I would mark the target with 60 mm WP.

The wood line soon was ablaze and the entire earth shook, since the edge of the tree line was only about 200 yards distant. Needless to say we were not molested that night! A search of the tree-line in the morning revealed the remnants of what appeared to be an NVA Platoon, but it was pretty hard to say, since the 250 lb. Snake-Eyes leave little to the imagination.

The election was over and we were due to withdraw to the beach and be picked up by Mike Boats⁴ for return to the USS Tripoli. The Tripoli served as our home base during our tour as SLF Bravo, although we were only destined to spend a total of 12 days on the ship during our nine-month SLF tour.

The Battalion was to move out in trail with Hotel Company bringing up the rear as "Tail End Charlie" during the Battalion withdrawal. We weren't exactly ecstatic over this maneuver, as the last Company in column usually gets the benefit of any hate and discontent that the enemy wishes to administer as a parting gesture. After our encounter the evening before, I doubted seriously that the NVA would be amused. Little did I know!

The withdrawal from the ridgeline went smoothly and all seemed to be progressing well. Last company or no, we were progressing without incident as we passed below Quang Tri heading for the beach to meet the Mike Boats.

I was located about the middle of the column while my Executive Officer, Mike Chervenak, was bringing up the rear with the Company Gunnery Sergeant, Franklin

Craddock. Mike was about as savvy a Lieutenant as I have ever served with. Much like the twins shown in scientific studies, Mike and I tended to have the same thoughts at the same time – this made tactical deployment in a firefight a piece of cake.

Gunny Craddock was a former Drill Instructor with the fighting heart of a Roman Centurion. My Company First Sergeant was an old time NCO from Korea and a two time Drill Instructor from Parris Island. Jones was better known as “Horrible Jones” or “Locker Box Jones” throughout the Corps... he was a true professional and was respected (or at least feared) by the entire company. My job was as simple as keeping my head and letting the company run itself!

As we got within striking distance of the beach, I suddenly became aware of the sound of mortar rounds leaving the tubes... And they were close! The only possible point of origin had to be the tree-line about 150 yards on our right flank. Without even thinking, I got Mike on the hook and told him to get the 81s on the tree-line. He chuckled a bit and told me that they were already on the way. Soon both the 60 and 81 mortars were on target and the M60s were joining the fray. I was just asking the Artillery FO to contact Quang Tri for a fire mission. The next step would have been to call the Battalion CP for the possibility of bringing in Air when I noticed a long bamboo pole coming out of the tree-line. This wouldn't have been remarkable in of itself, but this one had a small white handkerchief tied to the top of it! Since the white flag was waving frantically, I called a cease-fire! Sudden silence and the spectacle of a line of troops wearing U.S. Style Helmets and what appeared to be ARVIN Uniforms came winding out of the foliage. The most notable thing about our former adversaries is that they all had their hands in the air and their rifles slung muzzle down. It appeared that these guys had done this before! Hummm...

I called Battalion and told them what we were observing, and asked what disposition they wanted of the marauding troops. I was fully in favor of tying their hands and marching them to the Mike Boats. Heck, the brass could sort the thing out! Some of the troops, of course, had more imaginative suggestions. Since no one had been injured on either side, I allowed reason to prevail, and stripped them of all the ammunition I could find and sent them back to Quang Tri on their own recognizance...

Everything in me told me that there was more to this exchange that met the eye, but I have always had a soft spot in my heart for the helpless and inept so I let them go. In retrospect I have always wondered how many deaths these guys were later responsible for?

We continued to the beach when some unnamed Marine started singing the Marine Hymn... I expected some disgruntled trooper to fling a dirt clod at the “gungy” Marine. Instead, the entire column slowly took up the refrain and, much like a John Ford movie, the entire company was singing “From the Halls of Montezuma” at the top of their lungs. It was truly an emotional moment and if it hadn't been for a bit of wind kicking up some dust, I'd have sworn that a bit of moisture had formed in the corners my eyes...

General Ky was victorious in the election of course, and I suppose we *were* successful in our blocking efforts, as there were only twice as many kidnappings and murders in the surrounding villages as usual. I WILL wager one thing though; I suspect

that very few NVA units in the area above Quang Tri in 1967 ever again fired a shot at a dug-in Marine Rifle Company.

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END NOTES:

¹ Slang for C-Ration ham and lima beans – you fill in “Muvvas” for yourself.

² FSCC is an abbreviation for Fire Support Control Center, an organization set up coordinate high angle fire weapons to clear air corridors for the aviation segments of our support elements. The clearance was required if the trajectory of the expended ordnance would possibly be within the flight path of a low flying aircraft. 81 Mortars fell within that parameter, but 60 Mortars did not.

³ “Snake Eyes” were a slang term for a tail fin assembly on a 250 lb. bomb that retarded the forward movement of the bomb allowing it to drop straight down, and thus more accurately on their intended target.

⁴ A Mike Boat is an amphibious landing craft carried aboard an attack transport ship (APA) for the landing of troops during an amphibious assault. You’ve seen them many times in the movies with the drop front landing ramp with the troops splashing ashore in the surf.