

The Saga of the M16 in Vietnam (part 1)

by Dick Culver

The following story is one that I tell with some trepidation, since my experience(s) with the "Matty Mattel Mouse Guns" were not pleasant ones. In this time and place far separated from the grim reality of kill or be killed, the bitter memories of the "little black rifle that wouldn't shoot" have started blending into the mists of long forgotten firefights. Some of the bitterness of those days of long ago will no doubt color the story somewhat, but in order for the reader to understand the story from the perspective of those of us who experienced the frustration, this is probably unavoidable. There seemed to be a callous disregard for the lives and well being of those individuals who willingly fought and often died using a seriously flawed rifle. This is their story then, for those who went in harm's way with the XM16E1, and most of all, for those who didn't come back. May their sacrifices never be forgotten.



Like most things, the reality of being armed with an ineffective weapon was of little import to those who were not risking their lives on a daily basis. By the time the problem was finally fixed, many friends and comrades had been awarded "*the white cross*", or in the verbiage of the time, had "*bought the farm*". Many lives could have been saved if a few individuals in "decision making billets" had possessed the intestinal fortitude to correct the problem. ...And the problem was "correctable" – all that was necessary was the application of a bit of guts and common sense. Aircraft that are suspected of being flawed are immediately grounded until a problem has been corrected, or a fix has been found. And so it was with the Marines' CH-46 Helicopter during the same time frame. The tail pylons started rather abruptly separating themselves from the bird with catastrophic results. The CH-46 was quite rightly grounded and sent back to Okinawa until the problem was isolated and fixed. For some unexplained reason the same rationale was not applied to a rifle that was costing lives on a daily basis. Perhaps the "*Wingies Union*" was stronger than the "*Grunt's Union*" – whatever the reason, dead is dead, and the Grunts were not amused! Unfortunately, doing the "right thing" would have cost individuals in positions of authority considerable embarrassment – something that no one was willing to risk. The "air types" could blame Boeing, but many of the decisions concerning the M16 were made within the "military industrial complex", making it more difficult to pin Colt to the wall. Individuals within the Military who had given their "yea verily" to the project would have found themselves looking for another job.

Rather than bore you with cold statistics and hard facts to start, I will tell the story as it happened and as I remember it. Making allowances for the dimming of the memory after 32 years, the entire saga still stands in my consciousness as if it happened only yesterday – things like that are hard to forget.

Our outfit, the Second Battalion, Third Marine Regiment, was selected to assume the duty as one of the two Battalions filling the job as the "Special Landing Force". This evolution consisted of a quick trip out of Vietnam to the peacetime home of the 3rd Marine Division

(Okinawa), for a refurbishment of web gear, worn out equipment, and the fleshing out of a casualty riddled Battalion with fresh replacements. This slight respite from the "free fire zone" afforded new replacements an opportunity to gain experience and training with their new organization. The SLF was in fact a BLT (Battalion Landing Team) with enough attachments to make it into a sort of "bobtailed Regiment". In addition to the standard four line (infantry) companies, and an H&S Company (Headquarters & Service), we also had attached: a Helicopter Squadron, an Artillery Battery, a Recon Platoon, an Engineer Platoon, Amtracs (Amphibious Tractors/Landing Vehicles) and various other supporting elements. At that time, an (unreinforced) Infantry Battalion (before being festooned with the above attachments) consisted of approximately 1100 men. 1/3 (1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment) was to be designated as SLF Alpha, and 2/3 was to make up SLF Bravo.

The SLF's job was to act as a sort of "Super Sparrow-hawk" (cavalry to the rescue stuff) to reinforce any organization actively engaged with the enemy who wound up in a "feces sandwich"... when the brass sent in the SLF, someone was already in big trouble! Knowing that you were headed into a "hot LZ" (landing zone) on a rather repeated basis made for a very exciting tour. The normal SLF tour of duty was usually scheduled for a duration of 6 weeks. The outgoing SLF Battalion was then returned to its parent Division (1st or 3rd), and a new Battalion took over the rather thrilling duty as "The I Corps' Fire Brigade". It was an ingenious scheme, as it allowed the Marines to refurbish their battalions occasionally, and allowed time (albeit relatively short), to train new replacements out of the line of fire. Normally, the SLF tour was anticipated by the selected Battalions with some enthusiasm, as it was *supposed* to include one short R&R for the Battalion in Subic Bay, prior to the SLF's reassignment to the RVN. Needless to say, no one in 2/3 ever saw Subic, except as a casualty. *Murphy*, always taking a hand in things, stirred the pot in such a way that the refurbishment and replacement of battalions on the SLF was curtailed after the vicious "Hill Fights" around Khe Sanh in April of '67. 2/3 (and their sister battalion, 1/3) had taken on the best that the NVA could throw at them and whipped them hands down, but it was not without cost. Many a dead or dying Marine was found with a cleaning rod shoved down the bore of the little black rifle...

The constant pressure on I Corps starting that Spring left 2/3 manning the ramparts as one of the two SLFs for a period of nine months (versus the normal 6 weeks)! When the smoke finally settled, 2/3 had taken over 800 casualties and those who survived walked away with a sigh of relief. By August of '67, my company (Hotel, 2/3) had only 5 Marines without at least one Purple Heart, and I was not one of them.

Technically, the SLFs were supposed to return to the LPH (and other supporting shipping) after a battle, lick their wounds, get cleaned up, draw more ammunition and standby for the next mission.

By way of explanation to those who have not been in the Corps or associated with the Navy, "LPH" stands for "Landing Platform - Helicopter". The LPH is in fact nothing more than a small aircraft carrier, primarily designed to launch helicopters for a Marine (or perhaps Army) landing force. The supporting shipping usually consisted of an LSD, ("Landing Ship - Dock" designed to launch Amphibian Tractors for a seaborne surface assault), an LST ("Landing Ship - Tank", self explanatory) and an APA (assault transport to house additional troops). All together, they made up the seaborne vehicles for a rather formidable assault force.

Murphy again took a hand, and out of those fateful 9 months, we spent approximately 12 days aboard our assigned shipping. The rest of the time we got "chopped op-con"¹ to one of the Infantry Regiments ashore (transferred to, and under their operational control) - after all, we were those "pogues" who lived aboard ship and had it easy, were they not? Everyone figured that we were well rested and ready to go. The Regiments ashore, of course, took full advantage of such obviously fresh troops, and threw us into the very "choicest" assignments, to allow their units a breather – we were eventually referred to as the "*day on - stay on battalion*", and brother, they weren't kidding!

It was in the arena outlined above that I got my first introduction to the XM16E1. When 2/3 arrived on Okinawa to refit and train for their duties as SLF Bravo, they were already licking their wounds. The Battalion had been ambushed on a march between two hill masses, losing their Commanding Officer and Sergeant Major, along with numerous other individuals. While they were hardly demoralized, they possessed a particular affection for their CO and Sgt.Maj. and were chomping at the bit to return to the RVN to avenge the Battalion's losses. Shortly after 2/3's arrival on Okinawa, the Battalion learned that it was scheduled to draw a new "experimental rifle"... the XM16E1. 2/3 dutifully turned in their M14s to draw a curious little plastic thing that drew lots of snickers and comments from the old timers (we still had a few WWII vets in those days). The Battalion was given an orientation lecture in the Camp Schwab Base Theater by some ordnance folks, sent to the range to fire some sighting in rounds, and pronounced properly prepared for combat... little did they know!

The Battalion was told that they would now be able to carry 400 rounds ashore on each operation, and were now armed with an accurate, hard hitting rifle that would tear a man's arm off if you hit him. The lecture was impressive. The interesting thing is that the Marines WANTED to like the little rifle – it was light, cute, and supposedly extremely effective! Marines are always in favor of a weapon that will dismember their enemy more efficiently and more effectively. The Marines of 2/3 left Okinawa READY to go try this "jack the giant killer" on the NVA or Cong (they didn't care which, as long as it made a good fight!). However, there were several flies in the ointment. First, they only had one cleaning rod per rifle and no replacements – sounds reasonable, but events were to prove this assumption wrong. The second problem was that ordnance had only enough magazines to issue three (3) per rifle, and they were "twenty rounders". The thirty rounders in those days were only being used by the Special Forces – Robert "Strange" McNamara, (The Secretary of Defense), had decreed that the 20 round magazines were more cost effective than the 30 round magazines (this from the guy who was responsible for marketing the Edsel!); We were now armed with the latest in weaponry, and able to carry 400 rounds ashore. Our confidence level would probably have been considerably higher if we had been issued more than three 20 round Magazines per gun. We were promised more of course, and as it turned out, it became true, but only because we were able to pick up those left behind by the casualties. The long and the short of this lesson, however, was that they were trying to get the M16 into action well before adequate supplies were available to support the weapon, even if it had been functioning properly. Politics is indeed a strange game!

Ammunition was issued in "white" or "brown" twenty (20) round boxes. Bandoleers with "clipped ammunition" in ten round "strippers" had not yet made their way to South East Asia. While this would have been a handicap under normal circumstances, it turned out to be a "non-problem"... A full 50% of the rifles wouldn't shoot semi-automatically! The unfortunate individuals armed with the malfunctioning rifles couldn't shoot enough rounds to need more

than the initial three magazines at any rate! Three hundred and forty rounds in 20 round cardboard boxes were stowed in our packs, with the idea that during a firefight, a man who had run dry, could roll over to his buddy and take ammunition out of his pack and his buddy could do the same. As it turned out, this rarely figured into the equation.

The first clue (for 2/3) that something was wrong came during the battle of Hill 881 North... but *all* the Hill Fights at Khe Sanh in April '67 came up the same – dead Marines with cleaning rods stuck down the barrel of their M16s to punch out cartridge cases that refused to extract. At first, we considered that the experiences encountered during the Hill Fights might have constituted an isolated incident, but as experience was to prove, alas, 'twas not so! The regulations of the time required that all such malfunctions were to be documented, and reported to Ordnance Maintenance/Division Ordnance. The 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment of Marines must have filled a 6X6 truck with malfunction reports attempting to stay within the administrative guidelines. We submitted the required reports and waited – we wanted the problem *FIXED* – *NOW*, and we were willing to play the ordnance paperwork game if that was what it took to correct the situation!

Spring stretched into summer, and summer gave way to fall, with reams of paperwork having been sent out to the Ordnance Maintenance Folks on the "Rock" (Okinawa) and to the ordnance folks in Vietnam. We outlined, in great detail, the failure of the much vaunted M16 to perform as advertised... It simply *wasn't* working! It seemed that if your rifle *would* shoot, it would shoot under almost all conditions (if clean), but if it *wouldn't*, no amount of coaxing would help. *All* of the M16s seemed to be extraordinarily sensitive to carbon build-up, even if the rifle was one that would shoot when freshly cleaned. This meant that in a long and heated firefight, it was possible to have a much larger percentage of rifles "out of action" than the 50% that didn't want to shoot at all. Something was seriously amiss! A rifle that refuses to shoot during a firefight, is unsuitable as a combat implement. The NVA was obviously not gonna' allow us a "time out" while we held a cleaning session! My first clue to the solution to the problem came from talking to the Battalion Armorer. He had an M16 that worked under almost all conditions. I asked him what he had done to it, and he replied that he had taken a ¼" drill, attached a couple of sections of cleaning rod to it, and put some "crocus cloth" through the slotted tip (like a patch) and run it into the chamber and turned the drill motor on. He "horsed" the drill a bit and apparently relieved the chamber dimensions just enough to ensure positive functioning. This was a sort of precursor to the "chrome plated chamber fix" that would be applied in days to come.

FSR (Force Service Regiment – which also acts as a home for the small arms repair folks), sent a trouble shooting team to visit us aboard the LPH shortly after the "Hill Fights" to try and pin down the problem. As soon as the ordnance team arrived, they made it clear that *THEY* were already well informed (meaning they'd already made up their minds) concerning our problem and had decided (without so much as a question to us) that *WE* as a Battalion were responsible for a bad rap being given to a marvelous little rifle! The lads in the rear had decided that *WE* were simply not keeping our rifles clean, and if we weren't such inattentive and unmotivated "oafs" being led by incompetents, we wouldn't *have* such a problem. Needless to say, the hackles stood up on the back of our necks. "Them wuz *fightin'* words!" ...And we wuz peaceable folks (well sorta' anyway)! To say that they had misread the problem is an understatement!

Certainly from a personal standpoint, they were full of "un-reprocessed prunes". My background in small arms went back as far as my conscious memory, and when I "screwed

up" with a firearm of any kind as a kid, my Daddy left knots on my head and welts on my "stern-sheets"! During this time frame, I had just finished firing on the USMC Rifle Team (in 1965 – this was now 1967) and to say that I had high standards of weapons cleanliness for my rifle company is an extreme understatement. If the rifles had been clean enough to eat off of before the visit from the FSR clowns, rifle cleanliness moved up a notch to "autoclaved" as a result of the insults they were bandying about! We literally fired thousands of test rounds over the fantail (the stern) of the LPH. Each of the issued rifles was fired, cleaned and then fired again! ...Same story, about 50% of the rifles were reliable and 50% were "non-shooters". We cleaned the rifles between strings of fire (and *this* test was conducted in the more or less "sterile" conditions encountered in a shipboard environment), with the same results! NOW we were getting worried.

The malfunction reports continued to pour into the rear echelon papermills without any tangible results. On one notable occasion, a stalwart Marine crept around in a flanking movement on an enemy machine gun position. He assumed a quick kneeling position to get a clear shot over the sawgrass, and "did for" the hapless NVA gunner! His second shot aimed for the assistant gunner never came, as his rifle jammed and the assistant gunner avenged his dead comrade by splattering the Marine's gray matter all over the stock of the Matty Mattel Special. After the fight, we sent his little black rifle to Division Intelligence with a complete report on the events (without removing the brain matter from the stock). We waited with baited breath for the response to this one, but alas to no avail! Still no action! Normally aggressive Marines were understandably getting a bit edgy about being assigned to listening posts or outposts. Ambushes were, more likely than not, to result in Marine casualties. We started stealing and or trading the cute little black rifle for M14s. Many rear echelon troops (usually known as *REMFs*) were more than willing to trade their old fashioned M14s for a little lightweight rifle that was easy to carry, (the M16s in those days were reserved for the frontline troops). Supply and demand prevailed, and what we couldn't trade, we appropriated (a polite military term for outright theft!). The Engineer troops assigned to us for support (mine clearing, demolition, and setting up helicopter landing zones) were still armed with the M14 (not being infantry). The Engineers became some of the most popular troops in the Battalion and made up a substantial part of our base of fire. I was always partial to Engineers anyway, and these guys cemented our relations in a big time way – good people those Engineers – and *THEY* were armed with a *REAL* rifle!

It finally became apparent that no one was gonna' come to our rescue! Our reports were falling on deaf ears, and our Battalion Commander was more than a little annoyed. The bayonet had become more popular than before and indeed enjoyed a resurgence of usefulness, until in the throes of hand to hand combat one of the lads gave the enemy a vertical butt stroke that resulted in his holding a "two part" Matty Mattel... Captured AK 47s began to show up in increasing numbers, but they were a double edged sword. The AK 47 had a rather distinctive sound when fired, and would occasionally result in the Marine "wielding" the foreign piece, receiving a bit of "friendly incoming"! This was in addition to the fact that ammo re-supply for the AK was a problem. After a fire fight, the battalion S-4 (supply & logistics) frowned on requests for a couple of thousand rounds of 7.62 X 39...

Things were getting desperate... Our Commandant at the time, General Wallace M. Green, when queried about the rumors filtering back from the front-line troops, contacted the Marine Corps ordnance people and asked them what the problem was. The Ordnance Brass "bleated" the school solution and told the "*Commandanche*" that the problem stemmed from poor weapons maintenance and a lack of leadership! The Commandant then appeared on TV

and announced to all the world that the only thing wrong with the M16 was there weren't enough of them! How RIGHT he was! It took 20 rifles to get off 20 rounds! We were enraged! – and we began to plot! Never let it be said that the average Marine isn't cunning, if not terribly intelligent.

This is probably a good place to describe the actual malfunction that was prevalent with the "mouse gun" – although there were variations the problem was essentially as follows:

- 1.) The rifle would be loaded normally, i.e., a loaded magazine would be inserted and the bolt would be allowed to go forward, causing a round to be chambered.
- 2.) The trigger would allow the hammer to fall, with the rifle firing the first round in the expected fashion. Then the problem began...
- 3.) The bolt would start to the rear, but the cartridge case would remain in the chamber. There were two variations to this one, one in which the extractor would "jump" the rim, and one where the extractor would "tear through" the rim. Either version left the case in the chamber.
- 4.) The bolt would start forward stripping the next round from the top of the magazine.
- 5.) Since the chamber was already occupied by the cartridge that had just been fired, the newly fed round would shove the bullet tip firmly into the stuck case effectively jamming the rifle.

This "jam" could be cleared by:

- a.) Removing the magazine from the rifle, pulling the bolt to the rear, and locking it in this position by depressing the bolt catch.
- b.) If the newly fed live round did not automatically fall free (it often did), you had to shake the rifle to allow the round to fall free of the magazine well.
- c.) A cleaning rod was then inserted in the muzzle and the "stuck case" was driven out of the chamber.
- d.) The magazine was then reinserted and locked into the magazine well, and the bolt allowed to go forward by depressing the bolt catch. The bolt would again strip a round from the magazine and reload the chamber.
- e.) This round could then be fired and the entire cycle started all over again.

Essentially we had been reduced to a *"magazine fed, air cooled, single shot, muzzle ejecting shoulder weapon"* shooting an inferior cartridge. How lucky can you get?

Mike Chervenak, my XO (executive officer) was a man of rare moral fiber. Not only was Mike one hell of a good Marine, but he cared for and about our Marines... and the M16 was continuing to get them killed. On one of the very few days we spent aboard the LPH preparing for our next thrilling adventure, Mike came to see me in my quarters.

"Skipper" said Mike, "what the heck are we gonna' do about this miserable little rifle?"

"Well Mike," I replied, "I guess we're doing about all that can be done – I'm about out of options! All we can hope for is that ordnance'll find a fix!"

Mike being smarter than the average bear, drug his toe in the dirt and asked, "Skipper, do I have your permission to write a letter to my congressman?"

"Well Mike," I said, "I can't tell you *NOT* to write such a letter, it's a free country!"

"Well Skipper," said Mike, "what would YOU do?"

Uh oh – now I'm trapped! "Well," I told him, "I'd probably write a letter to the Commandant!"

"But Skipper," Mike says, "you *KNOW* he won't ever get to see it!"

"Wrong," sez I, "all you have to do is put 'copy to: Senator Zlotz' (or whoever) at the bottom of the letter, and military paranoia will kick in! The staff will be afraid *NOT* to show it to him, lest he get a call from an outraged Congressman!"

"Yeah," said Mike, "but I'll bet that nothing will be done about it even if he *DOES* see it!"

"Well, you're probably right," I tell him, "but it might be worth a try!?"

Mike, somewhat discouraged at this point, allows as how it'll probably be more effective to send one to his Representative. I agree without overtly suggesting that he do so. He turns to go, but just as he reaches the Water Tight Door (WTD), he turns around with a slight grin and says "Skipper, would YOU help me write it?"

Hummm... the rest is history. Mercifully we did a workmanlike job on the letter, and simply explained the problem (much as above) and made note that it took precious seconds to clear a jammed rifle that an Infantryman doesn't have in a firefight. We were also careful not to call names or point fingers, and that's all that saved us in the light of things to come! I'm not too sure who Mike sent the letter to, but a copy of it WAS published in that "Communist Rag", *The Washington Post*!

Mike was on R&R when the thunder came rolling in. He received a "person to person" phone call from "Wally" (Wallace M. Green, the Commandant, who hangs his hat in Washington, D.C.) in Vietnam! Alas, Mike was not there to take the call! The brass came to me of course, asking where Mike had gone when he left on R&R. Since Mike had earned his R&R in spades, and I didn't want to screw it up for him (knowing the problem would still be there when he returned). I did the only honorable thing I could and lied! Hee, hee, hee... Mike finished his R&R in good order and without harassment.

When they discovered that I had aided and abetted Mike in his endeavors, the feces struck the ventilation! That letter kicked off FIVE simultaneous investigations; one from the Third Marine Division, one from the 9th Amphibious Brigade, one from the 3rd Marine Regiment, one from the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment (us) and last but not least a Congressional Investigation led by a Congressman from Louisiana named "Speedy O. Long" (yes, that was really his name!). During the investigations, the Battalion hid me so far back in

the "*ding toolies*" that it was necessary to pipe in air and sunlight. Mike and I had become the "pariahs" in the Marine Corps in general, and the 3rd Marine Division in particular. However...

At long last people started doing something overt for a change. We were pulling an operation down in the 1st Marine Division AO, south of Da Nang (AO stands for "area of operations") – the SLF was essentially a "hired gun" and went wherever there was hate and discontent). The Corps "*flew-in*" a C-130 with 400 brand new XM16E1 rifles along with a Marine Warrant Officer considered to be an expert in the small arms ordnance field. The ordnance Warrant was an old friend of mine who had been the Marine Representative to Cadillac Gauge when they were building the "Stoner 63" System. He had been a Staff Sergeant at the time and we used to sit on my living room floor and disassemble the Stoner System over an occasional beer (well, maybe *several* beers) when the Marine Corps was running its Stoner tests in at Camp Lejeune. Now, I tell myself, we'll get some results, Bob is a pretty savvy guy! ...Wrong again "*gopher breath*"! – Bob Baker (the Marine Warrant Officer), had suddenly and inexplicably switched to (what we thought of as) the enemy camp!

In a private and rather heated conversation with Bob, he allowed as how the problem was that we weren't keeping them clean enough!

"BS." I said, "Bob, you know me better than that!"

"Nope," he said, "the M16s will work if they're clean!"

Seeing that I had reached a dead end, it was time to try a different approach. Another Captain/Company Commander and I (he having just as much a case of the "\$%#^" over the "16" as the rest of us) watched as WO Baker utilized his \$800 ultra powerful chamber scope to examine the M16 rifle chambers of a line of troops brought in out of the lines for evaluation of the condition of their rifles.

This marvelous chamber scope was supposedly powerful enough to make any imperfections in the chamber look like the surface of the moon. The first man stepped up to the front of the line and handed over his rifle. Bob sticks the chamber scope in the chamber, shakes his head and throws the old rifle in a pile that was to grow materially in the next couple of hours. The Marine was then issued one of the new rifles brought in on the C-130. Watching the lad with his "brandie, brand new" rifle stride off. Bob Bogard (the other Company Commander) and I chased him down (out of sight of course). We talked him out of his rifle, threw it into the dirt, kicked a little over it, picked it up and dusted it carefully off (to make it look like a "used" rifle). We then waited awhile until a number of folks had gone through the line and "number 1's" face had faded from WO Baker's recent memory. We put the trooper back in line and hid and waited. When (Warrant Officer) Bob stuck his chamber scope into the new rifle, he again shook his head and threw the new rifle on the pile of discards! Gotcha! When we pointed out to Bob what we'd done, he went orbital (not a word to come into general use until '69 of course)! He accused us of not taking his efforts seriously, and trying to make him look bad – not hard to do at this point! While we had outraged the brass, a seed of doubt had been planted, and it grew!

Back at the Command Post, a rather short civilian gentleman of Asian extraction wearing a Colt Detective Special on his belt, strode over to see me. I recognized him as a Mr. Ito, the Colt Representative that had flown in with the 400 rifles.

"Howdy," he sez, "my name is Ito!"

"I know," I said, "and my name is Culver."

"Yes, I know," sez Ito, and at that point, I figured that my fanny was truly gonna' be grass.

My instincts in this case were wrong.

Mr. Ito turned out to be a heck of a nice gentleman and told me all sorts of revealing stories. Among other things, he told me that Colt had offered to chrome plate the bores and chambers of the M16s for the sum of \$1.25 each, but that Robert "S" McNamara had vetoed it as being non cost effective. Mr. Ito sent me a "care package" when I got home, guess what it contained? A double handful of Colt M16 tie tacks². Grrrrr...

Ultimately, Colt wound up chrome plating the chambers (and later the bores) of the M16s, thus reducing the coefficient of friction between the cartridge case (not necessarily a good thing, incidentally) and the chamber. The bolt then began battering the frame from the excessive velocity in its rearward movement, and they again gave the "*patient*" with a brain tumor an aspirin tablet as a "*fix*" – they simply made the buffer group heavier! But the real story had yet to be told. The story eventually leaked in bits and pieces but was never made public in the headlines it deserved. The rifle was eventually fixed, but at what a price... Much like the guy unjustly accused in print - when the real culprit is found, the headlines don't shout out his innocence, a retraction is usually printed in extra small type on the last page. The guys who died for this folly can never be brought back, and the people responsible who fought the problem by placing the blame where it wouldn't get *their* fingers dirty came away clean.

Somewhat later, a new Battalion Commander, who hadn't fought with us in the old days when the rifle was at its worst, inherited 2/3 in time to preside over the ensuing hate and discontent. He called me in during the ongoing investigations, and chided me about my stance on the rifle.

When I stood firm, he asked me, "Culver, just what would be *YOUR* solution?"

"Easy." I said, "it's only been 9 months since we turned in our M14s, all that's necessary is for us to draw the 14s again until ordnance can work the bugs out of this little piece of #\$\$@&!"

"Unfortunately," said the Colonel, "it's not as simple as that!"

"Unfortunately," sez I, "it's *EXACTLY* that simple! What you mean is that it's not '*politically*' that simple!"

I was dismissed without another word.

The aftermath? The rifle was eventually fixed of course, but at great cost in life and suffering. Unfortunately, "fixing" the M16 left us saddled with a service rifle that shoots a cartridge not powerful enough to be used on anything larger than groundhogs according to most state hunting laws. The latest version is almost as heavy as the M14 without any of the

14's redeeming features. In retrospect, the cost of saving reputations and enhancing corporate well being was high... *too* high. Mike and I both spent an extra year in grade and Mike decided not to stay on in the Marine Corps even though he was a regular officer, and a damned fine one at that! That was one of the larger tragedies, as Mike was one of the truly good guys. Men of principle are more rare than the Hope Diamond in real life, and he was one of those. After the decorations had settled on the scene in SE Asia, they decided to keep me around and I was too stubborn to quit. The Corps, with what can only be described as a rather macabre sense of humor, sent me to Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, California and made an Ordnance Engineer out of my somewhat "frayed" fanny. Life is often rife with seemingly contradictory incidents. Most of these give truth to the statement of George Burns in the movie, "*Oh God*" where he describes God as a comedian playing to an audience that's afraid to laugh! Amen...

In "Part 2" I'll tell you what the problems *REALLY* were and why so many were fighting to keep the lid on the situation. The real story is not one to give you great confidence in our leadership or human nature. War and politics truly make strange bedfellows!

ROC

End Notes:

¹ "Chopped Op-Con" literally meant detached from the operational control of the parent unit, in this case, the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, to another operational unit (usually a regiment in the Area of Operations [AO] of whatever Divisional [1st Marine Division or 3rd Marine Division] area you were operating in).

² In all fairness to Mr. Ito, he also sent me a match barrel for my .45 Government Model, and some great .45 Auto and Single Action Army tie tacks. He also sent me a whole XM177E2 (a sort of predecessor to the current M4 Carbine), which was appropriated by the Battalion Commander as his personal weapon (I had asked Mr. Ito if it was possible to buy the short barrel group and a collapsible stock to put on my M16 – he sent the whole thing!). The last I heard, the rifle had been passed down from Battalion Commander to Battalion Commander as a sort of badge of office. I never felt any rancor in losing my prize, I figure it went for a good cause. Mr. Ito was truly a jewel among men!