

Sight Alignment and Trigger Squeeze

Dick Culver

I was listening to a discussion of the necessity of carrying belt guns in combat. The general consensus of opinion seemed to be that a handgun was an anachronism in modern combat, and more suited to the days of cavalry charges. No one seemed to care that our military had sold out to the NATO agreement to go to 9mm as a SOP to our European Allies... After all, who cares? Nobody ever uses the damn things anyway!

I smiled to myself and thought back to a few years prior when I was mighty glad to be carrying a belt gun, in fact without it, I wouldn't have been listening to the conversation between the young pups sitting at the bar...

The month of July 1967 was damnably hot in the area southwest of Quang Tri, and Hotel Company had just been landed to conduct a sweep of a minor village that had supposedly already been swept the afternoon before. Sounded like a cakewalk compared to our usual assignments, until one of the young troopers detected movement in a tree line 300 yards distant. Since we were short of dry ground, we were putting in defensive positions in a graveyard adjacent to the small ville to act as a patrol base. The only thing that set my hair on end was the presence of the inhabitants of the settlement in the graveyard, and they weren't talking. Something was definitely amiss. The ville was long and narrow, with hardly enough room to maneuver a platoon, let alone a company sized unit. The 3rd Platoon was dispatched to enter the village along the long axis to drive any NVA into our fields of fire. In combat, however, I had long since learned that nothing is ever as it seems. With our 3rd platoon approaching their objective, we began to take fire from the tree line. The fight was on.

After a few minutes, communication was lost in the ensuing mêlée in the woods. No communications, platoon within the tree line! I was frustrated - I do not do vicarious firefights well. I decided to investigate.

Taking my radio operator, I left my Executive Officer in charge of the perimeter and headed for the battle. There was a hedgerow on the left of our perimeter that might at least offer some concealment from direct observation by the NVA, now heavily engaged in the wood. My plan was to get down there and extract the 3rd Platoon so I could call artillery in on the tree line. Obviously, I didn't want to call for artillery while my folks were in there, and they weren't answering the radio.



"Big Red", DCM veteran of the hedgerow fight, in "Evening Dress"... A \$20 engraving job on Okinawa and a Swenson hard chrome 'suit' were a reward for services well rendered.

Now, I have been a pistol aficionado all my life, and I had hauled my own pistol to Wes Pac in direct violation of Marine Corps orders. It was an M1911, a veteran of WWI that I had obtained for the munificent sum of \$20.00 through the Director of Civilian Marksmanship. Most of those obtained from the DCM had been essentially new, but alas mine was a real old timer... It was devoid of any meaningful finish and rattled like a box of bolts, but I set about making a personal sidearm out of my "worse for wear" veteran. I had a High Standard .22 Pistol front sight milled into the front of the slide, and attached a Bo-Mar sight to the back end. While I was no gunsmith, I was fairly clever with a stippling tool and had done what I considered to be a very workmanlike stippling job on the front strap to limit my grip from slipping when my hands were sweaty.

While shooting for the Marine Corps Pistol Team in the summer of 1965, one of the armorers added a match barrel, an aluminum trigger, did a trigger job and tightened the slide. The damned thing would finally shoot and shoot well. Keeping 'em in the 10 ring of a Standard American Pistol Target was no sweat at 25 yards, and head shots at 50 were a breeze. An E-Silhouette set out at 100 became easy to hit consistently. Some home brewed handloads and I would be ready to go to war. Heavy Keith flat nosed cast bullets over a healthy dollup of Unique Powder, sealed primers with fingernail polish, and bullets waterproofed with a mixture of road tar and kerosene painted inside the case with a match stick completed my preparations.

Yes, I know all the legends about the illegality of lead bullets, and cautions from supposed firearms experts about handloaded ammunition in combat, but since it was my fanny, I essentially ignored the arm-chair warriors and took 'em anyway. This was the pistol and ammunition I had in hand that miserably hot afternoon just south of the DMZ... As it turns out, I was well armed.

Running down across the field in the shadow of the hedgerow, I had my hand cannon cocked and locked, firmly grasped in my right hand pointed out and away from my leg to prevent acquiring a self inflicted gun-shot wound. Encountering the bad guys before I reached the tree line hadn't crossed my mind - I was much more concerned with getting my platoon out of the ville so I could call in some heavy artillery and get this thing over with a minimum loss of life on our part.

Suddenly, and without warning, a distinctly Oriental face appeared from behind the hedgerow, hardy 10 feet away. He had an evil look on his face and was holding onto his AK-47 while looking at me in total disbelief. I don't think he had expected any hostile company. My AK wielder had obviously been preparing to lay some flanking fire onto our CP in an effort to distract our efforts aimed at greasing his comrades. Surprise, surprise! And trust me, NO ONE was any more surprised than I.

In pure panic, I half turned and snapped off a shot at my unwelcome visitor underhanded almost like pitching a softball! Mercifully my first and wildly thrown shot hit the gent right between the eyes. By now the situation had my total attention. As I stood there in total disbelief, the first guy's buddy stood up next to where his friend had met his maker. He too was clutching an AK, but he was intent on looking down at his friend's ruined face. This was a tremendous mistake, because by now I was ready! I swung the .45 around and center punched number two with a 237 grain Keith in the breast bone. Number two went one way and his AK went the other.

My mind was racing. I figured that I was probably facing a squad sized unit behind the hedgerow. If I ran, I was sure to get hosed in the back with automatic weapons fire. If I had to go down, I always promised myself that I'd be looking at the guy who did for me. I couldn't see over the damned row, so I took the only other alternative, I dove over it. My radio operator was yelling "No Skipper, no!" but was right behind me, attempting to get his rifle unlimbered.

The hedgerow was only about four feet high, and when I landed I found myself totally alone except for my faithful radio operator who had followed me in my personal assault. Looking around to assess the situation, something suddenly occurred to me... "I wonder how those Keith Handloads performed?" Pulling out my K-Bar, I prepared for field surgery. My disbelieving companion looked on in total horror.

"Skipper, what in the hell are you DOING?"

"Quiet kid, I'm checking something out!"

"You can't do that, it's barbaric!"

"Nope, the scientific curiosity of an old time handloader!"

"SKIPPER! **NO!**"

"Shut up kid and help me get his jacket off!"

"*SKIPPER!...*"

A burst of automatic weapons fire brought me back to reality... What the hell WAS I doing, hell, I've got a platoon to extract. And now the @\$holes know where we are! I re-sheathed my K-Bar, threw a fresh magazine in the belt gun, and headed for the ville, with a still disbelieving, but obviously relieved radio operator hot on my heels.

As a personal "after incident report", we were successful in extracting the platoon and returning to the CP. The situation in the ville was getting hot. We had plenty of rifle ammunition as the M16s weren't firing reliably, but we were down to about one belt per M60 and about 5 rounds per mortar tube as we had been firing more or less constantly all afternoon. A fire mission on the tree line would be wasted if we didn't have the company ordnance to take advantage of the artillery. We had to be ready to assault the entrenched NVA as the artillery lifted. The extreme heat meant that water would be as important as the ammo, and our water supply was getting low.

Two CH-46s came in with our requested water and ammo, but two RPGs from the tree line got a couple of solid hits on the birds in our landing zone. The landing zone was uncomfortably close to the trees, but wet rice paddies on three sides limited our options. Resultant shrapnel from our wounded birds resulted in 17 casualties among the troops trying to unload the choppers. The birds departed with most of our supplies. Although they were leaking hydraulic fluid, the injured birds managed to crash land in the Battalion CP. A second try by some aviators with more b+++ than sense got our gear to us by lowering the tail ramp and tilting the choppers nose up and literally

dumping our water and ammo onto the LZ like a dog fertilizing the front lawn. I could have kissed those birdmen. Now that I had the wherewithal to conduct the assault, I HAD to get some artillery on the NVA in the tree line. Unfortunately, there was a large fly in the ointment.

Since we were freshly ashore from our floating base camp, the USS Tripoli, our own artillery battery was not yet ashore. I had expected them to be set up by now. All was not lost, however, as my Artillery FO, Lt. Mike Madsen, reminded me that the ARVINS had a 155mm battery stationed at Quang Tri. Mike also pointed out that the ARVINS had a reputation of being totally incompetent artillerymen, but he would call in a fire mission if I insisted. What the hell, I thought, let's give it a try!

"Mike, call in the registration 1000 meters over and walk it back, that ought to give us a little cushion!"

"OK Skipper, but we're playing with fire here!"

"Ya think 1000 is too close?"

"Naw, that oughta' do it!"

"OK, get with it!"

Mike was soon chattering on the PRC-25, and we sat back to wait. We were not to have to wait long, as the sound of a sizeable artillery round announced that Quang Tri was on the job. As luck would have it, the first round hit dead in the center of the NVA in the tree line.

"Holy catfish Mike! What in the hell is going on? I'm sure as hell glad we didn't call that stuff in with the REAL coordinates!"

"I told ya' Skipper, those guys are hamburgers!"

"Damn! - Oh well, call in a 'fire for effect' before they forget what they just did!"

"Roger Skipper, I'll have 'em on the way in a couple!"

The "fire for effect" landed with satisfying results. We continued to call for additional rounds until Quang Tri claimed they had expended their ready ammo supply... The ville was a shambles, but night was rapidly falling. Damn! A night attack in that mess would be an invitation to disaster! I resolved to dump some more 155s at dawn and follow it into the ville.

We pulled in the perimeter and put out LPs, although we were almost within effective bayonet range. We spent a sleepless night, but we had the advantage of pre-registered 155s... I love accurate pre-registered fire!

First light found us filling in our fighting holes to deny their use to any future NVA who might be intent on using the graveyard as a fighting position. We gathered

ourselves for the assault and Mike called in the same fire mission that had been so effective the evening before. The first round came roaring in - right in the middle of our position!

"Mike, what the hell's going on?"

"Christ Skipper, I don't know! I told ya' these guys were incompetent!"

"Either get these tools to cease fire, or shift it onto the zips!"

"Roger, will do!"

We finally got the fire moved sufficiently to tear up the tree line, and mercifully without any Marine casualties. The entire company moved smartly into the tree line with a will. Anything was preferable to getting shot at by friendly artillery, most especially 155s!

The assault was a total anticlimax... The NVA had gotten their bellies full of 155s the evening before. Aside from numerous blood trails, and a couple of overlooked AK-47s, the village was bare but stomped flat! Our quarry was long gone.

I took a personal trip behind the hedgerow I had followed the afternoon before. I still hadn't satisfied my curiosity about big flat pointed Keith bullets! Alas, the NVA had hauled off their dead. The discovery left me with mixed emotions as I find something of a kinship with warriors who take care of their own. I was beginning to feel the worse for my intellectual curiosity about the effectiveness of my handloads. I was glad they got him back in one piece.

I managed to get my personal sidearm back to the States following my tour and today it hangs in a place of honor on my wall. I find it hard to regret my decision to bend the rules all those years ago.

Now there are times when I sit by the fire sipping a glass of Claret while reading the various gun rags that insist that the belt gun is an anachronism in modern combat. I fondle my sidearm of long ago and smile. I suppose it's all in how you look at it.

ROC