



AMBUSH

Lewis Dale

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In the first seven months of 1966, the USMC had undertaken 14 battalion-size or larger search and destroy operations in Quang Nam and Quang Ngai provinces, the two southern-most of the five northern provinces (I Corps) of South Vietnam. Although several of these operations resulted in violent confrontations, others were little more than hot walks in the sun, as the Viet Cong had learned to avoid meeting Marines, with their superior supporting arms, head-on.

Thus, by mid-1966, the lion's share of combat action stemmed from much smaller unit patrols and ambushes. At first, these smaller unit affairs reminded me of the cowboy and Indian games I played so often as a child – albeit this time quite deadly.

In early August 1966, just a couple of weeks after my arrival in-country, my platoon, along with two other platoons from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, became part of a provisional company assigned the temporary mission of security for South Korean engineers as they built a base camp for the ROK Blue Dragon Brigade.

The site of this budding camp was just several clicks north of the village that almost two years later became notorious as the site of the massacre of civilians, including women and children, by U.S. Army troops of the Americal Division at My Lai 4 hamlet in Son My village, an inexcusable and unforgivable incident in my opinion. (A click, as a map term, is 1,000 meters or a kilometer or about .62 miles.) This particular area, in Quang Ngai province, included some ARVN units (troops of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam), but American troops in mid-1966 did not have a significant presence there.

Our provisional company was led by Captain Robert C. Prewitt, who had earned a Silver Star four months earlier on Operation Utah, where Marines first encountered North Vietnamese troops. Captain Prewitt seemed to me to be what Marines called an "old salt", and one of that exceptional breed of men who would charge a hill in the face of withering fire and expected no less from his troops. However, this security assignment did not seem to engage his attention to any great extent. He left the tactical activities of his temporary command largely to his three green lieutenants, which was a good way for us to gain experience and confidence and was likely Captain Prewitt's and the battalion's intent.

The company sector was fairly extensive. It consisted of a combination of dry rice fields, demarcated both by dikes and by rows of high, thorned hedges; a few tree and shrub-covered hills that jutted up sharply a hundred or more feet out of the generally flat terrain; and several small hamlets and larger villages. Because of its significance to their survival, most infantrymen learn quickly to recognize and respect topography. Moreover, Marine infantry officers had better be good at map reading and matching map features

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to actual terrain and landmarks, a talent needed especially for calling in supporting arms.

Captain Prewitt divided his assigned sector into three patrol areas and ordered that we lieutenants were to rotate patrol responsibility for each area on a daily basis. This arrangement enabled each platoon to become familiar with each patrol area. However, after just a couple of days, I became aware that each platoon tended to follow in the traces of the previous day's patrols.

Naturally enough, the locals, some of whom were farmers by day and guerrillas by night, observed that we were setting a definite pattern during our daylight patrols. Not long after our arrival, the local snipers began firing at us, feeling safe enough considering their superior knowledge of the area and our rather ponderous progress along predictable paths.

In fact, a sniper incident on August 6 (1966) was my baptism of fire. In my effort to become more familiar with the terrain and with my men, I accompanied a squad-size, daylight patrol. About halfway into our walk in the hot sun, a sniper at the edge of a village let loose several poorly aimed shots. I went down to one knee behind a dry paddy dike. My Basic School training began to kick in. Have to send a sitrep -- a situation report -- back to Captain Prewitt, about two clicks away, using the PRC 10, an unreliable radio known as the "prick ten" that barely worked under the best conditions.

So, while I'm fumbling with my sitrep card and trying to report the action, my veteran squad leader and his squad had responded with a blast from their M-14s, and I heard him say, "Ready, one, two, three, GO!" and the 13 men of the squad jumped up and charged toward a paddy dike much nearer the village. I, along with our artillery forward observer, trotted along behind feeling pretty superfluous. The FO had asked to come along, and I welcomed his presence, considering I didn't really know what we might run into. That FO was 1st Lt. Al Doody who was killed five weeks later on Operation Fresno when a small sliver of metal from a booby trap sliced his jugular.

That first blast of our return fire also introduced me to a recurring problem in Vietnam – the difficulty of avoiding civilian casualties. An old farmer was the only Vietnamese visible in the direction of the initial sniper fire. He should have hit the ground immediately. Instead, he threw his hands in the air and started to run. The hoe in one hand, at 150 yards or so, could have been mistaken for a rifle. The Marines blew him away in the initial volley before he had gone 20 feet.

The next couple of days, the other platoons had similar run-ins with a sniper or two in this area. This bothered me, because I believed we were setting ourselves up for a bigger firefight, with us at a disadvantage. The Viet Cong were adept at capitalizing on our habits and patterns, and I had read enough about them to know they were likely soon to take advantage of our unimaginative tactics.

My next patrolling day in this area was August 13. I decided to try something unconventional, aimed mainly at retiring an individual sniper who, though a bad shot, was beginning to hit closer to his targets. I really had little inkling that the VC were planning their own welcoming party for the same day.

My plan was unconventional, because it violated both the USMC's table of organization (T/O) and its rules of engagement, at least as I understood them. Unit integrity is a cardinal principle in the Corps, although in many engagements, especially in the Pacific in World War II, Marines have demonstrated great adaptability amid the chaos of opposed amphibious landings and in other combat operations. Nevertheless, you're not supposed to start out violating the T/O.

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I had decided to establish an ambush just prior to first light covering where I thought the sniper would choose to position himself for a clean shot at the expected patrol. To increase the probability that he would be where I wanted him to be, I assigned Corporal Williams, a fireteam leader, the responsibility for leading a squad of Marines along the usual trail, emphasizing the importance of arriving as close to 8:00 AM as possible. This arrangement ran counter to the rules of engagement which stated that Marine units were not to be used as decoys. I had been in-country only four weeks, but it was already clear to me that following those rules to the letter was not a winning hand for a counter-guerrilla war.

I had a fireteam leader leading a squad, because I had selected two squad leaders for my five-man ambush team – Sgt. Nicholas Navarro of Denver, CO, and Cpl (later Sgt) Wallace G. Estes of Greensboro, NC. Rounding out the team were Cpl Biskey, my radioman, who, like Captain Prewitt, had earned a Silver Star on Operation Utah, and Private First Class Tom Chasteen, another North Carolinian, the only Marine I ever saw busted from PFC to Private, but a man who preferred to walk point and was very good at it. It's not hard to understand why the Marine Corps, generally speaking, would not have approved of such an arrangement, but I was green and wanted men I already was convinced I could rely on.

To get to the ambush site, we would have to cover about two miles in the dark including passing unavoidably through a village. Not being seen or heard was utterly essential. Most Vietnamese villages had very effective security systems, consisting of geese and small, excitable dogs. Geese especially seemed always to be on alert, and any suspicious movement or even a slight sound easily provoked the whole flock to a raucous honking.

Just as I had been instructed in Basic School, I insisted that the team deaden whatever could potentially make a sound and blacken whatever might reflect light. We pulled black socks over our canteens and made sure our 782 gear didn't rattle. I allowed the men to ditch their helmets and heavy flak jackets – better to travel light. We may have used charcoal on our hands and faces, but I don't recall doing that. I do recall that the four men were enthusiastic, and the careful preparations seemed to heighten their excitement.

At 0200 hours, we set out for the ambush site, with me in the lead to insure we set the right pace. We moved very slowly, sometimes even taking baby steps, with no one saying anything – nothing that is until early on, I stepped into a punji pit. Fortunately, it was small and shallow and not near anyone else's hearing. One foot only went straight down, and my boot landed squarely on the evenly spaced punji stakes. There was no penetration, and soon we were back on course.

The most amazing experience of this night movement was walking through the village. We moved very deliberately. It took us a long time. We saw no one outside their hooches; no one saw us. We made no audible sounds, and no goose honked, and no dog barked. This was a feat I had not been sure we could accomplish. As the time neared 0530, I knew we would have to get set very soon in our ambush site to avoid detection by early rising farmers. Prior to arriving in the general location, I had not really had an exact idea of where I would place everyone, but as sunrise was only a few minutes away, I knew we had to decide quickly and quietly.

What ensued was a combination of some initiative and pure chance. We had made our way to one end of a fairly large village, about 50 yards from the nearest hut. Some shrubbery there close to a trench network fortuitously offered cover adequate to hide at least one man. I noticed also that the position would overlook trenchlines which ran perpendicular, forming an upside-down L, with the base of the L running parallel to the decoy patrol's assigned route, which would be about 150 yards to the north, across level ground.
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At this spot, I posted Cpl. Estes.

The longer portion of the L was a trenchline at least seven feet deep, measured to the top of its parapet. At the south end of the L, Private Chasteen was posted. He managed somehow to stay out of sight. The remaining three of us stepped into a stand of bamboo, thick enough to hide us, but not so abundant as to prevent our sitting down. This line of bamboo also ran perpendicular to the long stem of the L at its southern end. Thus, four of the team were facing south, which was the direction I expected the sniper or snipers to come from, while Cpl. Estes, facing east and northeast about 35 yards behind us, protected our rear and overlooked the critical trench junction.

We were just in time. Within no more than six or seven minutes, a little girl walked a cow across our front, no more than 20 yards away from where we sat very still in the bamboo. There we sat for the next two hours, watching and waiting for the decoy squad which would be appearing almost 200 yards to our rear. As ants crawled over me, my mind involuntarily began thinking about bamboo vipers. I hoped like hell none made their homes in this little stand.

As my watch approached 0800, I was getting very restless and beginning to wonder where Cpl. Williams was. Suddenly, the very distinctive sound of a 30-caliber rifle shot cracked the morning air. We were all familiar with that sound which almost always indicated Viet Cong. I immediately assumed it was a signal. The sound reverberated from the low, long ridge on the far side of which our squad had likely been sighted. So Cpl. Williams was right on time.

Since there was no sign of any combatant(s) coming from the south, I whispered to Sgt. Navarro, who was the nearest to me in the bamboo, "I'm turning around." Slowly, I made my shift toward the base of the L. Several minutes later, a little girl driving a cow out of the village came down the path past Cpl. Estes. She drove the cow along the trench parapet and out into a field.

Not far behind her, hunched over and trotting hurriedly in response to the rifle signal were three excited figures – two Main Force Viet Cong in uniform and what looked like a 16 or 17 year old kid in black pajamas carrying a big rifle with a big scope – my sniper. These figures darted across my line of sight about 40 yards away. Had they looked to their right, they would likely have seen me, because I was no longer well hidden. They quickly got into position in the trenchline that formed the base of the L, in preparation to fire at our decoys. I said somewhat urgently to Navarro, probably loud enough for Biskey to hear, "They're behind us. Turn around!"

In an intensely adrenaline-charged, chaotic moment, time is compressed, and the sequence of events can be very confusing. But from here on, this is what I remember about the next fifteen minutes, supplemented by what other participants later told me. First of all, I should point out that these three VC were not alone. About 200 yards east of us, another group of VC, as yet unseen and positioned to catch the 13-man Marine decoy squad in a crossfire, was soon to make its presence known. We later estimated there were at least five VC in that group.

The three VC at our front had disappeared into the trench line. I took my M14 off safe and began to get up. Later in my tour, the USMC ordered officers to carry only the Table of Equipment (T/E) weapon, the 45-caliber pistol. This day I was glad I had an M-14.

At about the same instant, Cpl. Estes, from his hiding place, fired into the three VC from their left flank,
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wounding one of the uniformed VC. As Estes later described their actions, the wounded man quickly jumped onto the back of the other uniformed VC, and the kid scooped up all their weapons. Not knowing where the rounds fired at them had come from, they headed for the long, deeper trench, directly back toward Cpl. Estes. At that junction, Estes leaped onto the parapet with his M-14 on automatic in one hand and a 45-caliber pistol in the other. At point blank range, he blew away both of the uniformed VC. The black clad kid, who had preceded his compatriots into the trench line, seeing Chasteen at the far end and hearing the action behind him, dropped the three rifles and leaped out of the trench, an Olympics qualifying feat, and disappeared into the bush behind the village.

Almost simultaneously, the other group of VC had taken the decoy squad under intense fire, dinging the helmet of one Marine and knocking an M-79 grenade launcher out of the hands of another. Hearing the action to their left, these VC also turned their attention to my team. As Sgt. Navarro and I advanced toward Estes' position, a fusillade of bullets kicked up dirt no more than four feet in front of us. This startled me considerably, because, in the confusion, I had no idea where these rounds were coming from – startled me so much in fact that I inadvertently squeezed the trigger of my M-14 as I began backing up. The recoil knocked me on my ass. I can honestly say that having the shit scared out of you was in this case more than a mere expression.

By this time the decoy squad had established fire superiority and driven the other VC away. All of us then converged on Cpl. Estes, who was standing over the two dead VC. It was a grim sight, with the top of the skull of one cleaved off as if by a surgeon, and his brain had rolled out into the dust at the bottom of the trench. For intelligence purposes, we proceeded to remove their uniforms and other paraphernalia.



August 13, 1966, L to R: Corporal (soon to be Sgt.) Wallace G. Estes, 2nd Lt. Lewis I. Dale, PFC Thomas Chasteen, Sergeant Nicholas L. Navarro, Corporal Biskey, shortly after their return from an ambush patrol. Cpl. Estes holds a Russian sniper rifle with scope; 2nd Lt. Dale and Sgt. Navarro hold Chinese made Model 53, bolt-action rifles. One of the latter and the scope are now in possession of Lt. Dale. Sgt. Navarro was killed in action at Duc Pho on January 27, 1967, just three weeks before he was to have rotated home. He was a great Marine.
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If this had been a Hollywood movie, now would have been the time to bemoan the cost and tragedy of war with a solemn, philosophizing scene. The truth of the matter at that place and time was that as I stared down at these two dead enemies, I felt exhilaration, as did those men I was with. I had planned an ambush, told my men it would work, and it had worked, with special credit to Cpl. Estes. I would defy anyone in combat to have a less competitive attitude and still have much chance of success and/or survival.

Yet even as I was feeling a bit triumphant, I began to worry about how many VC might be around. We had just beaten them at their own game, which was likely to stir up a hornet's nest. Our adversaries were unlikely to spend much time philosophizing about the situation, and there was no predicting what they might do next. There were 18 of us Marines together now, but I still didn't really know the territory and thought we better get back to the company base ASAP.

Back in the company area, I reflected on what I had just experienced. My first reaction was how incredibly lucky we had been. An enemy rifle aimed a bit more left or right could have killed or seriously wounded several Marines in the decoy squad. Our timing was right on. We had arrived and positioned ourselves first at the ambush site. Our positioning was on the spur of the moment but happened to work out just right this time. Our adversary was thinking basically the same thing we were thinking and saw an opportunity similar to what I had seen. We were just quicker on the draw this time. What about next time? I had now been in country a little over four weeks. The prospect and probability of similarly tense and deadly encounters made the next 12 months seem a fearfully long time.

I had never wanted to be in a really bad war. No Iwo Jimas or Guadacanal for me, but I did want to dabble. Winston Churchill once compared champagne and war, but warned "... the quality of both is best discovered by sipping." I was beginning to re-think Sir Winston's comparison. Unfortunately, few wars afford opportunity for moderation, and few of those bearing the brunt of the fighting are able to hang up their shields after what they might consider suitable imbibing.

The qualities of war discerned while bogged down under fire in the fetid rice paddies of South Vietnam confirmed that war is still generally more terrifying than exhilarating, no matter how much one indulges. One of the first impressions produced by combat was that qualities other than a modest fear, a judicious sense of caution and a competitive attitude would be required to survive. Because pure chance was such a factor, essential qualities to maintain mental stability included a well-developed sense of humor welded to a contradictory hybrid frame of mind that combined fatalistic detachment with a strong dose of self-determination.

The average human mind is unusually resilient. Scenes which would stir deep anguish in "normal" environments drew no more than a detached glance in Vietnam. The sight of a man blown in half was quickly stored somewhere in the fathomless recesses of the mind to emerge for consideration only when the relative sanity and safety of the civilized world was regained.

In May 1967 Saga Magazine, a pulp rag for men, which may no longer be in existence, published an article by a writer named Edward Hymoff which purported to tell the story of "Suicide Charlie" Company, and how it got its name. It was entitled "The Jolly Roger Gyrenes." The article is crammed full of errors but clearly reflects that branch of journalism that never lets facts get in the way of a good story. At the tail end of the article, Hymoff relates a garbled version of this ambush which at least gets the names right. I found a copy of the 50-year old article by googling it. Amazing!

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