



2nd Lt  
Charles Sooter

## LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

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One day, in March or April of 1965, I was walking through the quad on the University of Arizona campus, I stopped at a USMC recruitment table. A young Lieutenant and Gunnery Sergeant, in their snappy uniform, were present at the table, surrounded by a few interested students. They were seeking men to enlist in the Officer Candidate Program. The Lieutenant turned to me as I snuck a peek at the literature on the table to engage me in small talk. He asked if I'd ever considered serving my country as an officer to fulfill my military obligation. I attempted to back out of the conversation by stating that I wasn't officer material; I was too lean, too mild mannered, and too nerdy. The young Lieutenant must have heard this disclaimer before, because he was not deterred; he had a ready response. Speaking to the Gunny, "*Gunny, have we filled our nerd quota yet?*" To which the Gunny replied with a straight face, "*No Sir, we are behind in our quota for nerds.*" I enjoyed the humor of the situation and played along asking how many nerds the Marines needed. Then the Lieutenant went serious and explained how most young men didn't believe they were qualified to be a leader of men, and of course, when they enter the program, they aren't qualified. "*The job of the Corps is to train you to become a leader of men. When the Corps is done with its training, only then will you be qualified to be a leader of men.*" I bought his argument, went through qualification testing, and then forgot about it, as I went about finishing my MS degree in Aerospace Engineering.

One evening after dark, there was a knock at my door. I was taken by surprise to see the same Lieutenant I had met weeks early standing there informing me that I had been accepted to attend Officer Candidate School upon my graduation from the University of Arizona. To say that I was in shock would be an understatement. I was absolutely stunned that the Marine Corps would be seriously interested in me becoming an Officer. He offered me a few days to think it over.

I wrestled fitfully with the decision. Joining the Marine Corps would completely wreck my plans to work on the Apollo/Saturn space project, among other things. My decision, when it came, was a flash of insight. Why should I peremptorily rule out my qualifications to become a Marine Officer? An opportunity had just opened itself up for me to test myself against the high standards of the Marine Corps. I decided to let the Marine Corps determine if I was or was not qualified to be a Marine Officer.

Like everyone else in my 38th OCS class, I reported to Quantico on October 11, 1965 determined to make an all-out effort to succeed, ready to sacrifice everything for the honor of becoming a Marine Officer. After I enlisted and was sworn in, I made an effort to take my physical fitness to a higher level. I had been warned by my sponsors of the demanding physical requirements, so I prepared. The recruiter also suggested I work on my command voice, whatever that was. I was physically up to the challenge by the time I arrived at Quantico. I was fully prepared to give 110% effort over the next 10-weeks. All my free time during OCS was devoted to preparing myself for the forthcoming challenges. On Saturday afternoon, I would run the

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obstacle course over and over trying to cut my time, ultimately reducing my finish time to 73 seconds.

### **Tailor-Made Utilities**

Upon arrival, each Candidate was issued utilities and other military gear. Since I was long and lean, the supply Sergeant decided to issue me standard issue clothing sizes that were long enough, but unfortunately, were too big for my waist and torso. I had to wrap my utilities around me to achieve a tight fit. With any strenuous exercise, the utilities would unravel, and I would look unkempt. Since I wanted to look the part of a future officer, I made every effort to keep my utilities tucked in, but it was a constant struggle. On October 13, 1965, I wrote home the following, *"My uniform is the worst fitting piece of clothing I have ever worn. They found a size to fit me in the sleeve, but it was the size of a tent in the chest."*

A turning point for me came about midway through the 10 week OCS program. We'd been doing something very physical on the grinder (drill field), and my utilities weren't completely tucked as a result. My platoon was called to formation for an impromptu inspection. The inspecting Marine was a full 'Bird' Colonel, the first one I'd seen. For some reason, he was being given the honor of inspecting the latest batch of Officer Candidates. I had no time to prepare myself, to ensure that my utilities were properly tucked and wrapped around me. My uniform was disheveled, and I knew it.

As I stood at attention, with my eyes focused frontward, I felt the eyes of the Colonel were especially focused on me when he slowly passed in front of me, and then, from behind. I felt a sense of foreboding the entire time the Colonel was walking up and down the line.

Finally, the inspection was over. We were ordered to 'parade rest', which is a military position a little less formal than stiff attention. I could plainly see the Colonel speaking with Captain Williams. When the two officers finished speaking the Captain smartly saluted the Colonel, and the Colonel went where Colonels go. The Captain conferred with the senior DI who in turn dismissed the platoon...everyone except me. *"Candidate Sooter, report to the Captain."* As soon as the words were spoken, I felt an awful sense of dread; the game was over, and I had lost.

I reported as smartly as I could to the Captain, *"Candidate Sooter, reporting as ordered."* I swallowed hard as I awaited my fate. I vowed to take it like a man. I'd done my best, and now, I feared I was about to be cut from the program. I consoled myself as I waited for the Captain to make his pronouncement, I had done my best and had nothing to be ashamed of. The words he spoke were a blow to my self-confidence *"The Colonel has just completed his inspection of the platoon. Of all the Marines in my platoon, he has singled you out. In his opinion, you look like Ichabod Crane in your uniform."* Then, he paused, and I waited for the sword to fall on my neck. I was starting to feel light-headed, crestfallen at being drummed out of OCS because of my odd-shaped body with a uniform that didn't fit.

The Captain continued, *"The Colonel had ordered me to get you a uniform that fits you properly."* I wasn't sure I heard right. *'What did the Captain just say?'*, as my ears perked up. *"You will be measured by a tailor this afternoon for a new uniform. That is all, return to your platoon."* I responded with a boisterous *"Aye, Aye, Sir!"*, running to catch up with my fellow candidates. For the first time, I had an ear-to-ear grin on my face as I raced to catch up. I felt like I had just been sentenced to death, and then just as quickly, given a reprieve. I felt electrified. As it turned out, a civilian tailor showed up at the barracks that afternoon to measure me, and three days later, I had two sets of form-fitting utilities, the only candidate in my platoon who had been given this special treatment. In my new utility uniforms, snugly fitting, I felt like General  
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Patton. I may even have developed a slight swagger in my walk. My confidence of graduating from this testing ground soared.

## **Leadership Development**

My mild mannerism was still a problem and my peer-leadership scores reflected it. I had not found my 'command voice' yet. After dark, I would slip out of the barracks after lights-out and walk to the parade field where I would attempt to practice close-order drill with my so-called, command voice. These practice sessions didn't last long as one night the 'officer of the day' came out with the flash light calling out "*who goes there*". When I explained what I was doing, he ordered back to the barracks, telling me that God and everyone else in the camp could hear me.

Everyone in the platoon was assigned leadership billets for the day for special event as a means to train and test us. On one occasion, I was assigned as the Candidate PT Sergeant, backing-up the Candidate 1st Sergeant who would lead PT that day. During PT, the Candidate 1st Sergeant failed, unable to count cadence to each repetition. I was ordered to replace him and fortunately, I was successfully able to use my budding 'command voice' to lead the physical training.

Another crisis developed midway through OCS, when I was assigned the billet of Candidate Right Guide on weekly afternoon 'Hill Trail' conditioning hike. I was positioned right behind Captain Williams who personally led the hike. Halfway through the hike, there was a call from the rear, "*Right Guide to the rear!*", the command being echoed and repeated up the column by the other candidates. As soon as I heard it, I high-tailed it back to the rear to find out what was going on. Upon reporting to the DIs, "*Candidate Right Guide reporting as ordered!*", I was instructed to take over as Platoon Sergeant. I glanced over to Vic Cordell who had been assigned that role. He looked beat, staggering on his feet. "*Run to the head of the column and report to the Platoon Commander (Captain Williams) that you are assuming the duties of Platoon Sergeant and pick someone to take over your role as Right Guide!*" I wasn't expecting this turn of events. I knew Vic to be one of the weaker and less physically fit in the platoon, so I was not too surprised he'd 'fallen out'. Still I was reluctant to give up the billet I had. I was perfectly content at the head of the column, trailing right behind the Captain. But I wasn't being asked for my opinions or my preference.

Without another word, I accepted the assignment, "*Aye, Aye, Sergeant Instructor!*" Knowing what I had to do, run the full length of a fast-moving column of 40 Candidates, strung out in line, along a narrow hill trail to the front. I'd have to double-time to get there so I moved out at a quick pace. As I neared each candidate, trudging along, I run uphill around him. This was quite fatiguing, but I was making good progress.

About half-way to my objective, an order came from the rear, relayed from candidate to candidate, "*Platoon Sergeant to the rear!*" This was unexpected, surely the DI's hadn't expected me to have made it to the head of the column yet. I stopped and ran back the way I'd come to find out what they wanted now.

As I arrived, the SSgt Vincent asked me if I had gotten to the front of the column and reported to the Platoon Commander. "*No, Sergeant Instructor, I was just about there when I got called to the rear.*" SSgt Vincent was not pleased with my answer. Again, he gave me the same instructions and sent me back. I knew immediately that they were messing with me, testing my resolve, my forbearance, my mettle. By now, I was at the end of my energy reserves. But as I took off again, the adrenalin kicked in. I was pissed. I didn't like the game they were playing with me, trying to break me. I resolved that I would not turn back for any reason until I got to the front of the column, no matter what order came up from the rear.  
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I ran faster now, completely focused on getting to the head of the column before the DIs called me back as I knew they would. Now, rather than running up hill around each candidate, I shouted as I ran, "*Gangway, candidate Platoon Sergeant coming through!*" As I shouted the warning, each candidate obliged by stepping aside, giving me a clear path to run on. I was about two-thirds of the way to the front of the column, when I heard the order coming from the rear, echoed and relayed by the candidates behind me. "*Candidate Platoon Sergeant to the rear!*"

This time, I was not surprised by the antics of the DIs. I had already resolved to ignore any such request and keep running. I would not be deterred from reaching the front of the column this time. I continued running. Fortunately, the visibility in the forest on a hill side was obscured, so the DIs in the rear could not have known that I was ignoring the order and still running. Fortunately, the candidates behind me were doing me a favor. They slowed down the relay, repeating the command only when I had passed them in the column. I redoubled my effort, and faster than I expected, finally reached the head of the column, where upon, I gave my report to Captain Williams. "*Sir, I have been ordered by the Sergeant Instructor to take over the duties of the candidate Platoon Sergeant.*" The Captain acknowledged the situation, without bothering to look around. It was evident he was struggling to keep going himself. These condition hikes were hard on everyone, even the regular Marines. I picked the candidate immediately behind him to replace me and become the candidate Right Guide. In a loud voice, with as much command authority as I could muster, so Captain Williams could hear me, I passed on the instructions to my replacement that had been given to me. "*You are to stay two paces behind the Captain and carry out whatever duties he assigns to you.*"

With that done, I ran quickly back to the rear. I reported smartly and crisply to the SSgt Vincent, "*Candidate Platoon Sergeant reporting as ordered!*" Behind my tight lips was a slight smile of victory, because I knew what was coming next, and I was about to be disappointed both the Sergeant Instructors with my report of success. "*Did you report to the Platoon Commander as directed?*", I was asked. I paused for effect, and with a smile I couldn't conceal any longer, "*Aye, Aye, Sergeant Instructor, I have reported the situation to the Platoon Commander and selected a replacement to serve as candidate Right Guide.*"

There were flashes of both surprise and disappointment in the faces of our two Sergeant Instructors, as if this trick was usually sufficient to wipeout and washout a candidate. After they recovered from their shock, I was directed to remain with them and to assume the duties of candidate Platoon Sergeant.

The hike continued on a short distance when a rest break was called. When the tail end of the column finally arrived, I took the opportunity to sit down to rest and take a drink from my canteen. But that didn't last. "*Candidate Platoon Sergeant, report!*", bellowed SSgt Vincent. 'What now?', I wondered. I jumped to my feet and hustled over to report to SSgt Vincent. "*What the !@#\$% are you doing!*" he demanded. I knew immediately that something was wrong, and even alerted, I still gave the wrong answer. "*If you don't start acting like a Platoon Sergeant, and looking after you men, I'm going to do everything I can to see that you get booted out of OCS!*" This is the first time I'd been threatened with the possibility of dishonorable dismissal from the program. This statement shocked me to my foundation. Fortunately, on the spur of the moment, I asked an intelligent question, since I truly didn't know what a Platoon Sergeant was supposed to do on a rest break. "*Sergeant Instructor, what do you suggest I be doing?*" Fortunately, he responded with a half-way decent suggestion, "*If you don't know anything else better to do, then check for blisters.*" I replied smartly and turned to execute the task he had directed, "*Aye, Aye, Sergeant Instructor.*"

I abruptly moved away from him, without even asking for permission, turned and faced the members of my  
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platoon, whom I knew were going to hate me for doing this, and shouted in a very stern and commanding voice, which surprised even me. *"Blister inspection, boots off!"* This was something that had never been done during a conditioning hike, but only after the hike was completed. Everyone looked at me incredulously as if I'd lost my mind, so I repeated my order just as boldly, *"You heard me, boots off, blister inspection!"*

There were groans everywhere as the candidates reluctantly began complying, untying their boots and taking off their socks. No sooner than I had given the order and the boots starting coming off, when a new order was given by the Sergeant Instructors, *"Saddle up, we're moving out!"*

I thought to myself, 'Well there goes my peer leadership rating.' Now, I had no choice but to countermand my own order. *"Boots and socks back on, we're moving out."* I had given my order for a blister inspection under duress. I gave my second order to move out with an attitude of 'what did you expect'. There was a flurry of activity to lace up the boots and preparations to resume the conditioning hike. And I was encouraging everyone to *"Move it!"* I was playing an unfamiliar role now, and I intended to play it as if my 2nd Lieutenant's bars depended upon it. I could no longer remain as the mild-mannered person I was. I had been forced to assume a new persona. *"Quickly, let's get ready to move out!"* Somehow, I'd found my 'command voice'. When the Captain gave the order to move out, I repeated it, directing the lead squad to move out. If I was going down, I wanted to do it with a flourish, even if it meant making an ass out of myself.

Acting on pure adrenalin and continuing to act as if I was a loudmouthed, salty, don't- give-a-damn platoon sergeant, I jogged up and down the line of march, shouting encouragement to the rest of the platoon. As we approached the next high rise or hill, I'd shout something stupid, *"Up the hill; everyone up the hill; don't slow down; keep moving!"* If I was tired, I don't remember it. I was charged up, running on pure adrenalin as I was playing my role to the hilt, in hopes of saving myself from the SSgt Vincent's threats to have me shit-canned if I didn't shape up.

Based on my 'out-of-character' behavior, bordering on the bizarre, I expected my peer-leadership scores would plummet at the next posting on Friday. To my surprise, they had actually risen to about the middle of the platoon. My spirits soared. Unless the Marine evaluators decide to fail half the platoon, I actually had a good chance of making it. I felt of surge of optimism. But I was not one to let down. I was still committed to giving 110% effort until the day my gold bars were pinned on.

## **Graduation**

In the final days of OCS, I became progressively nervous and apprehensive about graduation. Gone were the opportunities to display my potential as a candidate officer. Now it was time for the staff to make their final selection. The staff was not revealing their choices until the last day. They forced us to purchase expensive uniforms and officer gear just as if we were all going to graduate. We began to hear rumors that the selection list would be forthcoming, but when and how, no one knew.

The fateful 'moment of truth' finally arrived, a day or so before our scheduled graduation, and after we'd received our officer uniforms and paraphernalia, SSgt Valent appeared in our barracks in a somber mood. "The following candidates are to report to the Platoon Commander immediately." As soon as he started reading off the list of names, I knew instinctively that these were the candidates that were being cut, because their names were perpetually ranked at the bottom of the evaluation lists. The only issue for me was how far up the list would names be called. Holding my breath, I prayed that my name was not on that  
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list. As quickly as it started, the list had been read, and I hadn't heard my name. My name had not been called! My name had not been called...I was going to graduate with a commission as an officer in the United States Marine Corps. But it was too soon to celebrate, perhaps there was more to come. I stood there waiting for further announcements, but I couldn't help but permit some optimism. SSgt Vincent left the platoon bay, without any further announcements. Some of the other candidates began to congratulate each other as if it was final. Presumably, those of us who remained would graduate. I could hardly believe the possibility...me a 2nd Lieutenant?

### **Finding a Niche for the Ontos**

We all graduated on December 17, 1965, and I flew home to San Diego for Christmas, prideful, wearing my 2nd Lieutenant's uniform. For the next 23 weeks, those of us who graduated and weren't assigned to the air wing, went the Basic School. I have to admit that I allowed myself some slack, pleased to be a student again, learning the military arts and principles of leadership.

After graduation and a few weeks leave, all the officers assigned an infantry MOS (Military Occupation Specialty) were flown to Okinawa where we received our orders. My heart had been set on becoming an infantry Platoon Commander as that is what I had trained for. So, I was crestfallen and horrified when I read my orders; report to the 1st Anti-Tank Battalion in Chu Lai. I had seen an Ontos anti-tank vehicle during training, but I knew absolutely nothing more about them. Having no choice in the matter, I decided to make the best of a bad situation, as I had always done with my life.

My Ontos platoon was A-2, attached to 1/1 South of Da Nang. My first priority was to figure out how to best employ my five Ontos (meaning 'the Thing' in Greek). For the first month, I played a passive role in supporting the battalion as I observed and learned about these Ontos vehicles. The Ontos vehicles were held either in Battalion reserve or attached with one of the company base camps. The most notable missions we participated in were night rescue missions for infantry out in the field who were receiving VC sniper fire or cordon security on County Fairs (Marines encircle a village at night and the ARVN enter during the day in search of Vietcong Cadre). I decided to change the scope of my Ontos platoon's roles, by developing tactics unique and suitable to our guerrilla warfare environment.

The more I was out in the field observing what the infantry companies were doing to secure the peace, the more serious I became about inventing innovative applications for my five Ontos vehicles to get them into useful action as well as to relieve our collective boredom from static guard duty. I eventually developed what I called a 'block and sweep' tactic. I would take four Ontos into the field, link up with a platoon patrol base, load up a squad of infantry to ride on top of two Ontos, and head out to a nearby village. The section of Ontos without infantry would drive around to the back side of the village to set up a blocking position, while the Ontos section with the infantry aboard would arrive at the front end. The infantry would sweep through the village to the other side. Any Vietcong suspects attempting to flee would be trapped between the two forces. The first couple of attempts yielded nothing, but the exercises helped me to polish the tactic.

There were about 20 men in my platoon and five Ontos vehicles. The platoon is divided into a three-vehicle section and a two-vehicle section. Each vehicle had a three-man crew. We also had a radioman, two maintenance men, and one platoon sergeant. The pictures below show me with our platoon battle flag (left) and a double exposure of an Ontos and how fearsome the vehicle might have been regarded by the enemy (right).

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Second Lieutenant Charles Hendricks, whose platoon was now along the coast of the South China Sea, was a classmate of mine from the same B-1 Platoon at Officer Candidate School. Lt Hendricks was open to experimentation. Duty along the coast during this time period was quite boring with little enemy contact. The only regular contact the Marines had with the enemy was mines and booby-traps. Most of our casualties were from this source. The enemy sappers would infiltrate into our area, bring with them explosives and basic arming devices and dig them into trails and paths frequently used by the Marine patrols and vehicle conveyances. Often, they would get lucky, causing Marine casualties.

My luck ran out one fine day. I was leading two light sections, two Ontos each, plus a squad of infantry Marines on a series of block and sweep operations at a series of hamlets lining the coast line. Our mission was to conduct 'Block and Sweep' maneuvers around several of the villages in the area. Up to this point, I had employed this tactic many times without ever flushing any Vietcong from the villages, but I hadn't given up. The sweep of the first village went smoothly, but once again with negative results. However, during the second sweep, I was with the blocking force when I received word from my Ontos section leader, with the sweeping force, that one of his vehicles had broken its alternator drive belt. After the infantry swept the village, I terminated further action as I needed to get the Ontos with the problem back to a safe place before the battery was drained.

As we headed back, along the coast, I was riding on the lead Ontos, sitting in the only place available, on top of one of the 106mm recoilless rifles. We were hugging the beach shoreline, heading south along the South China Sea, far enough off the water line to avoid the risk of getting salt water on the vehicle treads, which is a potentially damaging corrosive.

It was late in the afternoon. We had just passed a fishing village, just off the beach. Many fishermen, with wives and children, lined the beach, repairing and preparing their nets and boats for the next day. As we passed, I waved in greeting to the Vietnamese, and they waved back, probably more out of fear and awe than friendship. 'Even the natives are friendly,' I remember thinking to myself. It was warm, but not too hot, a cloudless day, and I was feeling hopeful about the future of this conflict as we passed this village.

About 200 meters further south, with my mind still aflutter, thinking pleasant thoughts, everything was interrupted by a cataclysmic event. Without warning, I remember a loud boom, the Ontos and myself rising up in the air uncontrollably. As I was up in the air, rising higher than the Ontos, I thought to myself, 'What the hell is happening? Why am I flying up in the air?' It wasn't until I saw the black smoke and debris flying past me that I realized we had hit a mine. When I landed, I bounded once on top of the recoilless rifles and

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and then bounded a second time off the vehicle onto the sand.

I was initially dazed for a few seconds. The crew from the second Ontos rushed over to aid the crew of the stricken Ontos. Fortunately, there were no serious injuries, only minor abrasions, contusions, and sand/debris in one of the crewmen's eye, but everyone was able to walk and talk, some more than others. I was able to stand, but I could tell I was injured. Fortunately, I had no broken bones, no lacerations, and no bleeding. I would limp on my right leg for three-weeks, and it would remain black and blue from hip to knee. Despite the lack of severity of the crewmen's wounds, each would ultimately be awarded a Purple Heart. I declined an offer for mine, justifying my refusal on the fact that I had shed no blood nor suffered any broken bones. In my mind, a limp did not meet the standard for awarding a Purple Heart. Quite frankly, I was quite pleased that my injuries were so minor relative to what I'd just been through.



Immediately after the explosion, one of the crewmen displayed personal initiative when he detached the 30-caliber machine gun, and with its tripod, he set up a defensive position off the beach for security. What we all knew immediately was that we'd hit a mine, buried in the sand in the craziest place, on the beach close to the shoreline where the tide would surely have ruined, not only the explosives but the firing mechanism over time. Fortunately, the full explosive charge didn't ignite, otherwise the extent of the vehicle damage and injuries would have been much greater. So, it turns out that I was luckily unlucky.

Examining the damaged Ontos, it was evident the repairs probably couldn't be done in country. The vehicle would have to be shipped back to the states for depot-level repairs. There was nothing that I could do at this point except to call back to my AT Company to report the incident and to get a recovery vehicle out here to haul it away. This would take some time, and it might not even be doable today. I turned this job of planning for the vehicle's recover to my senior Ontos section leader.

I was still somewhat dazed and confused. My mind was spinning with useless thoughts: 'there shouldn't be mines this close to the shoreline, villagers shouldn't be waiving to me as I approached a minefield, and my vehicles were not supposed to get damaged by warfare.' After my bewilderment subsided, after checking over my damaged vehicle, my mood changed from one of gloom to one of anger. I looked back in the direction of the village from which we'd just passed, and the villagers were going about their business like nothing had ever happened. I created my own vision of accountability, 'They knew the Vietcong Sappers had been through here lately and they stood by watching us drive to our fate.' I decided to extract revenge. Leaving one Ontos in place to guard the damaged Ontos and to await the arrival of the recovery vehicle, I decided to head back to the village to find out how much they knew about the planting of this mine.

I climbed aboard one of the Ontos of my other light section, the one with the squad of Marines on board, and directed the Ontos Commander, to head back to the village we'd just passed. In seconds, my two Ontos came to a stop in front all the villagers still working feverishly on the beach, trying hard to ignore us. They weren't taking this matter seriously, nary giving our presence any attention, trying their best to ignore us in hopes we'd go away. I yelled for the infantry squad to dismount.  
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I had my 45-caliber pistol in hand and fired one shot into the air and one into the sand, no more than 10 feet in front of one villager who suddenly decided he wanted to head back to the village. *“Round up every male over the age of 13!”* I yelled to the Marine squad leader. During the next 15 minutes, the Marines rounded up over 110 men and mature boys.



I was fully intending on holding every one of them as Vietcong Suspects so the South Vietnamese authorities could question them all in regards to the mine incident. *“Move all the VCS (Vietcong Suspects) to a holding center on the edge of the beach.”* I was yelling out orders as if I had authority to do so. Usually, officers from the supporting arms don’t give orders to the infantry. However, it would have been hard for a young Corporal to

turn down an order during a military operation from an officer of higher authority, especially when he was acting as if he was in charge. So, the Marines did as I ordered.

I radioed a status report back to the Charlie company commander who was responsible for this sector via his squad’s radio. I reported that one of the Ontos had hit a mine just outside a village, and in response, we had rounded up 110 Vietcong suspects. He was surprised at the large number since the average haul of young men on a sweep is none, and on a country fair, we might get a dozen if we were lucky. So, you can imagine his surprise when I told him we had rounded up 110 suspects. I was convinced that many or all had some degree of complicity in the placement of that mine. An enemy action this significant doesn’t just happen without anyone knowing about it. It happened just too close to the village without it being common knowledge.

The Charlie company commander ordered us to hold on to the suspects until he got there with his LVT (Landing Vehicle Tracked) to pick them up. At that moment, I had five infantrymen and five Ontos crew members plus myself. About that time, I received a report from my other Ontos section leader that the driver of the disabled Ontos had burns around his eyes, and they were going to have him med-evacuated by helicopter. I had nearly forgotten about the other half of my Ontos platoon (two disabled vehicles), because I was so consumed with my fury at losing a vehicle to a mine so close to a so-called friendly village.

The Charlie company commander radioed that he was one his way and was only several kilometers away. Shortly thereafter, I received another report that the LVT had also hit a mine. I found out later, two Marines had been killed and many wounded including the Charlie Company commander. This event made the suspects I had rounded up even more valuable since they might reveal who had placed all the mines and where. Most likely, a Vietcong sapper unit had infiltrated the area, placing vehicle mines along our well-traveled routes. My Ontos was the first to fall prey to these simple but deadly devises.

By now, it was close to sundown, so I had to do something fast. I decided to move all 110 Vietcong suspects down the beach to the disabled Ontos, and thus, consolidate my forces. It looked like an exodus with 110 Vietnamese men, flanked by my two Ontos as shotgun wading down the beach. The five infantry Marines walked to the rear to herd the suspects forward. Behind us, many women and child from the village followed us, concerned about the fate of their men folk. After we reached the disabled Ontos vehicles, I set up defensive positions.

<sup>1</sup> One vehicle was lost to a mine and a second had developed engine troubles.  
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Before dark, many of the women and children were still waiting outside our defensive perimeter. They gestured about wanting to give our captives water, rice, and tobacco. I relented and let a few through to distribute what they had brought. Even now, my VC suspects weren't even tied up, so casual was the roundup. I had too few Marines to spare for that duty. By night fall, we all settled in for the night and the villagers returned home.

Just before dark, I received a radio call from the Major Stokes, the battalion S-3 (operations) officer, who was upset and spoke angrily. With the company commander in this sector out of action, he was personally taking command of the situation. He had not been properly briefed by the company commander and was surprised by our predicament. For some reason, I would tell from his tone that he assumed that the whole situation was my fault.

I was the only officer out here, and I was not a member of his direct command. I was part of a supporting unit (the Ontos platoon was attached to his battalion). He reminded me that I was not in command there. It was the squad leader, a Corporal, who was in charge. As he talked, the squad leader and I smiled at each other. After the conversation, the infantry squad leader asked what he should do now that he was in charge, and I replied, *"Just keeping doing what you've been doing."*

I suggested he set up a two man watch over the prisoners during the evening. I reminded him to keep a close watch on the Vietnamese males we had in custody but, *"If any of the detainees try to escape, you are not to fire at them. Instead, fire warning shots in the air."* I explained, *"I suspect that most of the villages are just hardworking locals that were in the wrong place at the wrong time."* I gave orders that they were to be treated humanely. After all, they did wave to us.

None of us had brought our backpack or food, so it would be a meal-less evening. I stayed with the Marine squad guarding our position. I placed my two operational Ontos on opposite sides of the detection area. It was a difficult sleep as I kept wondering if I'd done the right thing in rounding up all the males in an entire village.

As dawn broke, I observed all the males with their hands free, smoking or eating the food brought to them the day before. They didn't seem concerned that they were VC suspects. After sunup, ARVN troops arrived at our position, tied up all the suspects with communication wire, looped them all together, and led them off towards the major urban area in Hoi An, a large ARVN city for interrogation. The rest of the detainees were released by the ARVN authorities. I wondered if they would ever wave to us again.

Later, my AT company commander arrived with a tank retriever, and took the blown Ontos away. My own AT



Company Commander expressed his own disappointed that I left my damaged vehicle and went off on a tangent, rounding up Vietcong Suspects. He thought my priorities should have been focused on my own Ontos platoon instead of acting like an infantryman. Seems that I had not pleased anyone with my actions, but it was too late to do anything about it now. The whole incident seemed like just another leadership stress-test back at OCS only now, what I did or didn't do really counted and lives depended on making judicious choices. I'd worn my 2nd Lieutenant's bars for eight

months now, and I was just beginning to understand the challenges of leadership in a combat environment.  
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