

THE VILLAGE CHIEF AND THE ASSASSINS

Monsoon rains poured across the northern I Corps Zone and certainly all of South East Asia. It was the season that made life miserable for the tens of thousands of U. S. military fighting in the paddies and mountains of South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the monsoon season was the life-blood of rice farmers in this agrarian country who produced the staple of their people.

The deluge was nearly deafening under the tin roofs of the Company A huts. At least, there was shelter for part of the company. Those on patrol north of the Cua Viet River and the platoon positioned in the “ Rocket Box “ were being drenched. They would be soaked and shivering through the night and into the early morning hours before drying out. This would call for early rotation of these men for the rains would surely continue. Hot meals and hot showers would be the order of the day before allowing anyone to bed down to recover from many hours of lost sleep.

My thoughts of ordering the relief of the fielded troops had hardly cleared my mind when a knock on the door of the hut came to me through the din of the pounding rain. I invited the caller to enter. Expecting the burly company First Sergeant, Hayden Metz, USMC. I discovered it was not he but a Staff Sergeant from the Interrogation Translation Team, attached to the battalion Intelligence

Office (S-2). He too was drenched and appeared to be alone. He hesitated to enter but did so as I encouraged him. After formalities and apologies for a late night interruption, I offered him a cup of hot coffee and a seat next to the wood burning tent stove, now stoked with a diesel fuel soaked roll of toilet paper that put off a nice drying heat.

The ITT leader explained his visit very carefully and in a good deal of detail. It was obvious he had measured the gravity of the news he had gleaned from interrogating a Vietnamese. To paraphrase, his report went something like this:

The village chief of My Loc, just a couple of thousand meters up the Cua Viet, had arrived in a small boat at the Naval Support Activity (NSA) port facility an hour earlier. The u. s. sailor on sentry duty had taken the chief under custody, bound his hands and blindfolded him. After being directed to deliver the chief to the nearest Marine unit, another sailor took the man to the ITT leader. The ITT leader and Marine linguist discovered the reason for the chief's trip down river in the driving rain. Unfolding the gravity of the situation confronting the chief prompted the ITT leader to contact the nearest company commander.

Having heard the crux of the chief's dilemma, I insisted the ITT leader to bring the chief to my hut. The staff sergeant had left the chief out in the rain with the Marine linguist. Both entered my hut. The chief was seated in the usual oriental squatting position near the pot-bellied stove. He remained quiet and

shivered slightly from time to time. I could not tell if these tremors were a result of having been so scantily clad in the rainstorm or if a touch of fear may have been involved.

While the ITT leader and linguist exchanged some refresher questions about information gained from the chief, I tamped my pipe and lit it. The chief came to life.

“Dai We Jong-su tobac.” (Captain Johnson tobacco.), the chief said with a smile.

The chief had detected my brand of tobacco. He knew it well from the many bowls I had given him on visits to his village on patrols, sweeps and County Fairs. He was always too proud to ask for a bowl, and I always offered one as a gesture of friendship between two pipe smokers. Once again he did not ask. He tilted his head and enjoyed the aroma. I knew the old man could use a calming pipe so I directed the linguist to remove his bindings and to tell him to join me in a smoke. Plumes of smoke soon filled the damp surroundings of the hut as the chief talked and I asked questions through the linguist.

The chief related that about nine Viet Cong had infiltrated the village just after sunset during the rain as it blew in from the South China Sea. He knew most of these people. Most were members of his village but had been working

for the North Vietnamese Army for the past four months as porters, setting booby traps and implanting anti-tank mines.

When asked why they had returned to their village, his mood changed to one of being very somber. In a distressed voice he explained that the VC were part of an assassination team, and he knew what their intentions were all about. He gave an example of the assassination team's work in a village farther up river near Dong Ha. He told of how they had entered the village late at night and the following morning had taken the village chief and his family to the hamlet center and proclaimed their crimes against the population. Further, as these crimes were against the laws of the regional Viet Cong leadership of the free Vietnamese, they must pay the price of being shot in a public gathering. The family of six had been shot as they knelt, bound and gagged.

While we well knew the actions and motives of such brutality, the chief nevertheless explained. All such acts served the VC in their moves to instill shock and control over the villagers. With the chief dead, control and power passed to the communist. After all, they were armed and proved they would kill anyone that resisted their smallest whim. The VC collected currency and food for the "cause." Villagers were then formed into labor groups and forced to build punji traps, fortified fighting positions, trenches and bunkers accessible through hidden entries to tunnels. These, he explained were for the NVA to sleep in as they passed through to the south.

“Now they come to kill me and my family for the same reasons,” the old chief said in a hushed voice.

The linguist translated the chief’s words in the same tone. The impact of his words effected each of us deeply. Fear and anguish was obvious as he began to tremble, then shake. He lost all his pride and began lowly sobbing as he begged for the Marines to come to his village to take the VC away, even if they had to be killed.

To break the depressing mood, I moved to the EE-8 telephone on my field desk and gave it a short crank for the company operator in the command bunker. Momentarily, I had the operations officer (S-3) and intelligence officer on the line. With a short description of the situation, the S-3 insisted on moving the chief to the battalion combat operations center (COC) for a meeting that would include the battalion commanding officer. He agreed this might be a great opportunity to eliminate this murderous team.

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Once again the chief had explained all the details he had related to me. It was now 0100 hours in the morning and the chief had been returned from seclusion until the command group could come up with a plan of action. The

plan was quite simple. The battalion commander assigned the task to A Company. It would be a raid. An absolute minimum of “fireworks” would be used to protect the innocent, the commander insisted. I assured him that we would use stealth but needed some guide support from the chief. The chief agreed that he could trust the under cover National Policeman in his village to point out the huts in which the VC hid. It was agreed the raid would have to take place the following night between 0200 and 0300 hours, hopefully under the cover of the heavy rains. In addition he agreed to the point where the National Policeman would meet the raiding party.

Since the essentials had been arrived at critical to the chief’s “ need to know”, and I had my marching orders, the chief was returned to the port facility ramp. His second set of bindings was cut and his blindfold was removed. I shared another bowl of tobacco with him, which he lit shielded by my poncho from the rain and prying eyes to the north. He dumped the water from his little boat and pushed off up river waving his crude paddle. He puffed a couple of wispy clouds of smoke from his pipe now upside down before melding into the dark night.

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During the day, each platoon in the base camp was briefed on their role in the raid. Sufficient detail was imparted that little was left to chance. The only

platoon not briefed directly was the one on patrol and ambush to the north along the DMZ. Fortunately, activity with the NVA had been nil. No enemy movement had been reported. This platoon was given a set of coordinates to occupy by 0200 hours the following morning. Simply stated the two coordinates were the lines along the north side of a box surrounding the village. This platoon would be joined by elements of the other two platoons, one on the east flank and the other on the west side. Only two fire teams would accompany the snatch group that included the company headquarters group of only six men including myself.

The battalion command had arranged with the Junk Fleet advisor, a US Navy lieutenant, to provide four junk boats to ferry the raiding group up river and to drop the western blocking platoon and headquarters group beyond the outskirts of My Loc village. The other two carried the eastern blocking force.

When the junks arrived, the lieutenant and I reviewed the plan for insertion, withdrawal and emergency actions in case the raid became ambushed on landing. While it was not felt probable, reaction plans were always in order. As soon as the junks were loaded, radios crackled to shove off. Each turned west and moved as a group until the point where the first drop off point was reached. The two junks hauling the eastern blocking platoon flanked and moved to the north side of the river. They were lost in the driving rain and darkness. The platoon commander soon signaled by three clicks on his radio handset they had landed. Following suit, the Navy lieutenant signaled our junks to turn to starboard and approach the north bank to land. Soon the throb of the small

diesel engines slowed and the near flat-bottomed junks eased onto the sandy riverbanks of the outskirts of My Loc. Just as silently, the Marines eased over the bows and stepped ashore onto dry land. The platoon commander lined his platoon out into a single file and quietly led them to a point of contact with the platoon blocking the northern side of the village. The command group remained on the beach until all platoons reported in as connected and in positions.

As the command group rose up to move into the trees above the beach line, the old chief and a man wearing light colored clothes, khakis in fact, moved to join our group.

The Marine linguist interpreted the exchange between myself and the National Policeman as to how the search for the assassins would be conducted. The policeman knew there were nine VC in the team, but he only knew of where six were sleeping. He contended that the other three might have returned north to act as guides for directing NVA down to occupy or pass through the village. This was most likely and was confirmed by the village chief. He had seen the three depart earlier the evening before. They had their weapons and rice socks slung bandoleer style across their bodies. This was a clear indicator that they were going overnight from the village.

With the plan of action understood and issues resolved, the command group moved out in trace behind the policeman. The chief had departed for his dwelling. He had wanted to be at home if shooting started for surely villagers would seek his presence. He did not want to be absent if they came calling. The

implications were too serious if it appeared he was directly colluding with the Marines.

The little policeman led the group to a small hut in the northwest corner of the village. Using hand motions he indicated that the VC in the hut was sleeping just inside the thatched structure to the right of the door. Two Marines eased into the hut. The first placed the muzzle of his rifle to the throat of the VC. The second Marine applied a large strip of adhesive tape over the VC's mouth. He then made the VC to stand and tied his hands behind his back. The prisoner was moved out of the hut along with his AK-47 and his ankles were tied to allow him to take only six-inch steps. The Marines detailed to handle the prisoners escorted the captive to the rear of the group for control.

Silently and so very carefully the Marine snatch team and the national policeman repeated the capture of four more assassins. Four captives and their weapons were quietly moved to the rear of the command group. The neck tied each captive to the man behind him to insure they did not hobble off in different directions in the dark.

Hut number six was approached as quietly as all the others were. The policeman moved into the doorway of the hut behind the two Marines. At that moment, a villager ran past the hut along an old dike. No one spoke or yelled to halt. The runner's feet slapped the muddy dike as if an audience offered

applause. Suddenly, the hut erupted with gunfire. It was neither an M-14 nor the policeman's .38. It was an automatic weapon, a burp gun in fact. The policeman recoiled from inside the hut and fell on his back alongside the raised pathway leading to the hut. One of the Marines opened fire and another crashed through the side wall of the hut and landed in the pond. He was cursing and searching for his rifle. The second Marine was still in the hut. A figure appeared in the doorway of the hut. The person wore a white top and black trousers. A weapon was brandished and soon bursts of fire swept the darkness. My "shotgun" stepped forward and knelt down on the raised dike. Instantly he fired off three rounds as I fired two with my .45. The VC went down, rolled onto one knee, raised up groggily and raised the burp gun to fire again. The shotgun and the Vietnamese Chu Hoi fired simultaneously and the VC went down again. The VC was not dead and attempted to rise again. The Chu Hoi moved forward, pushing the shotgun's rifle aside. Just as the VC was raising the burp gun again, the Chu Hoi stepped on the barrel of the weapon. He then placed his M-16 on the VC's temple and sawed off the top of his head.

The occupants of the hut were screaming and yelling. A baby's cries could be heard over the other voices. Soon lamps and candles began lighting throughout the village. Shouts erupted throughout My Loc. Tension was at its peak as the headquarters group instantly formed into a protective-fighting circle.

Our Chu Hoi barked a single word after rolling the VC over on the dike path. The Marine linguist touched me on the arm and said the dead VC was a woman. He

told me that a woman inside was screaming that we were killing her daughter. I moved forward a few paces and saw the Chu Hoi rip the shirt of the corpse open and proclaimed the VC to be a woman as he poked at each of her breasts.

Screaming and wailing of the two old people emerging from the hut left no doubt the dead woman belonged to this family. The linguist confirmed that she was the daughter of the inhabitants. The Chu Hoi passed along that the woman had a baby in the hut.

The two Marines of the snatch team reappeared from the side and back of the hut. The one had found his rifle. He was trying to reason as to how he missed the VC at such close range.

Moaning and a rasping voice rose from the body of the national policeman we had thought dead. The policeman was curled up on the side of the dike path to the hut. Our Corpsman had moved up and immediately administered aid to the wounded man. The Corpsman reported that the man had a serious head wound, a neck wound and both forearms were shattered. He tied off the arms to stem the blood. He complained that a compress would not be able to stop the flow from the neck wound. He suggested an immediate medivac to save the man's life. My spirits sunk, as I knew that it would be nearly impossible to guide a helicopter into a landing zone in the driving rain, under low clouds, with winds gusting to thirty –five miles per hour. Nevertheless, I called for a

helo and the request went through. I knew it would be at least twenty minutes before a chopper could reach our position. I took advantage of the time differential and proceeded to move the command group and all platoons to the east.

The command group moved to the riverbank and stepped out smartly to reach the point of land where a chopper could set down. The easternmost platoon was assigned to replace the northern platoon along the DMZ. They began moving tactically to the DMZ. The northern platoon and the western one were directed to move along the northern edge of the village and that of the resettlement village until reaching the point at the mouth of the river.

Four Marines and the Corpsman moved quickly to the clearing to await the helicopter. In the open area of the LZ, the force of the wind appeared to be increasing. The rain did not seem to be decreasing. The blasts of wind and pelting of the rain on one's helmet made it near impossible to hear radio transmissions.

A radio call from the S-3 shop advised me the helicopter was on the way. They had to use instruments and were warned by the S-3 not to have high hopes of their being able to see the LZ. The chopper's rotors and engine sounds were growing closer. The four Marines carrying the wounded policeman stood ready with flares and two flashlights. The flares would have been of little use as they were smoke and not illumination. Soon the choppers were overhead and requesting light on the LZ. The strong beams of the lights went on but the pilots

could not see them. When the lead helo passed over the LZ I sounded, "You're directly overhead." Still they could not see the lights through the heavy rain. I suggested they do a 180-degree turn and approach slowly and we would talk them in just like a Ground Control Approach. I was told they did not do GCAs in the middle of a roaring monsoon. I complained how they would be able to land again at Dong Ha. I was sharply reminded that Dong Ha had radar capability.

In my frustration the Corpsman approached me from his patient's side and said, "The policeman is dead." With that news, I again raised the pilots and gave them a wave off and thanked them for their courage on giving it a try. They responded with a, "Roger, roger," and departed.

The company returned across the Cua Viet with the dead policeman and five prisoners. Later that afternoon the policeman's body was returned to his village and his family. It was a truly sad situation. His wife and two children were devastated. The South Vietnamese provincial chief later paid the family death compensation, but it was a small gesture for the service the man had provided to his country under such dangerous conditions.

During debriefing at the battalion COC with the commanding officer, operations officer and intelligence officer, it was determined that the VC and quite possibly the NVA would not likely back off with their tails between their legs. Instead, they would probably return with the lead elements of the NVA to prepare

the village for combat. It was reasoned that the chief himself would have to be called upon to identify the VC in the huts in order for the Marines to take them out. A hasty conference was called for with the Junk Fleet advisor. His mission was to replay the transfer of the raid force again and to set up the chief as the guide to conduct the snatches.

Around 1800 hours, the S-3 called to tell me the raid was on again. This time, hopefully, we could round up the last three VC. I was thoughtful that the three VC may have led at least a platoon of NVA into the village and the raiding force would end up in a scattered firefight.

The second raid went without incident. Only two VC were collected up and delivered to the ITT team for questioning. For the moment, the chief and his family were spared, but not for long. Two days later, the NVA sneaked into the village and had to be extracted by force. That enemy contact is the subject of a separate paper, Tet 1968.

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