

A in Tactics



Jeffrey L Minch

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The Wisdom of the Campfire is located in Austin, Texas and ostensibly owns this little tale. If you feel inspired to contact the author, please email him at jminch2011@gmail.com. He answers all of his emails.



Austin, Texas

Introduction

A in Tactics is a short story written by Jeffrey L Minch of Austin, Texas, published by The Wisdom of the Campfire.

It is based upon a true story but it is complete and utter fiction. Like most war stories there is an element of inadvertent bullshit as things happened so fast and so many folks had such different views of things.

Not only have the names been changed to protect the innocent but the story has been embellished and shorn of all human frailties. It is a completely sanitized and gussied up story that the participants would never even recognize.

If you like it, drop me an email and let me know what you liked --- jminch2011@gmail.com. If not, sorry to have bothered you.

You may enjoy reading the blog **The Musings of the Big Red Car** which can be found at:

www.themusingsofthebigredcar.com.

It is a series of musings as written by a 1966 Impala convertible. It can be wry and odd at times and it is fun to write. Of course, you have to remember you are talking to a car --- even though it is a very unique car. What does that say

about you? Suspend your disbelief just for a second. It will help.

Here is the Big Red Car hanging out with Bevo, the University of Texas mascot. Bevo is a huge Longhorn steer but this particular one is just plastic.



Hey, have a great day. You deserve it.

Jeffrey L Minch
Austin, Texas
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A in Tactics

Republic of Viet Nam
101st Airborne Division
November 1969

Being an infantry company commander was as close to being a Chinese feudal warlord as a Captain in the US Army could hope to be. It was a damn good job. The Old Man in an infantry company --- and even 26 year old Captains were called The Old Man --- could promote, discipline and decorate his soldiers. He could stamp his personality on that unit and it belonged to him. The only downside was the rampant mortality of the position. If you could stomach that little shortcoming, then it was a Hell of a job.

In the infantry, the officers command and the non-commissioned officers lead the unit. The Captain and the Lieutenants give the orders and the First Sergeant, Platoon Sergeants and Squad Leaders see that they are carried out.

An infantry company was arguably the smallest unit of the Army in which the commander could join battle with the enemy and the subunits --- rifle platoons commanded by Lieutenants --- were maneuvered out of the field of vision of the company commander. It was a big step up from being a platoon leader where you could usually see all of your squads.

I was a Captain in the 101st Airborne Division operating close to the Cambodian border in late 1969. This was my second tour with the 101st having been in the same



AO¹ in 1967 as a platoon leader in the same battalion. It was familiar ground and I could not fail to feel a bit of a home field advantage. Not sure that the home field advantage trumped that of the NVA units who had been operating there for almost a decade but nonetheless it was a bit of an advantage. I would take every edge I could get.

The 101st was an airborne unit meaning that all the men were trained as paratroopers though the tactical deployment of the Division in the field did not suggest that there would be any airborne assaults to justify that designation. Most paratroopers are either 101st men or 82nd Airborne Division men. I had been both having come from the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg where I had also commanded an infantry company.



The 82nd had a single brigade in Viet Nam at the time and the 101st had the entire division.

In my heart, I guess I was a 101st Airborne man. I wore that patch on my right shoulder signifying that I had served in combat with that unit. I was proud of it.



AS a platoon leader, I had spent a lot of time conducting patrols in the AO and learned its subtleties and the tendencies of the NVA² units

¹ AO ---area of operations

² NVA --- North Vietnamese Army

we opposed. Not a lot had changed since 1967 and the same enemy units were up to the same tricks. So it seemed.

When I arrived at the battalion, I was slated to be the battalion S-3 in charge of plans and operations but the battalion had lost all of its experienced company commanders either to casualties or DEROS³. The battalion commander pressed me into service and I was only too happy to comply.

Of course, my life expectancy took a nose dive. An S-3 is at the battalion HQ⁴ and was a much safer assignment than humping the boonies with a rifle company. But commanding a rifle company, particularly a bunch of paratroopers, was a plum assignment --- danger be damned. Plus the battalion CO⁵ was not running a democracy. He had really not asked me anything. I only pretended that I had a say in things.

My first tour had been filled with almost continuous action and I had served my apprenticeship diligently. I was comfortable maneuvering under fire, knew how to mix it up and, most importantly, learned how to direct supporting artillery, helicopter and air fires. I met a plane called Snoopy or Puff who could rain fire on any target if you could get them lined up just right.



I got wounded twice --- insignificant wounds that did not get me evacuated but which got me a couple of Purple Hearts --- and was recommended for and received a Silver Star and a Bronze Star with V device as well as all the “been there” badges and the usual Vietnamese

³ DEROS --- Date of Expected Rotation from Overseas

⁴ HQ --- headquarters

⁵ CO --- Commanding Officer

decorations. I guess I did see my fair share of action and I was damn lucky. Pretty good haul for a young officer.

I always remembered what Napoleon is supposed to have said about soldiers being willing to die for a colored piece of ribbon. Not sure I was prepared to go quite that far but I did enjoy showing them off on my greens and at the Officer's Club.

I had a few tales to spin when I went to the Infantry Officer's Advanced Course which was thought of as the company commander's prep course. I was not alone. We had a couple of Captains who had Distinguished Service Crosses. The DSC is usually given posthumously so these guys were really lucky.

One night under the prodding of more than a few whiskies, one of the DSC guys told the story of winning that award. It made the short hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. Thereafter, whenever I saw that son of a bitch in the O Club, I sent him a beer. He had damn sure earned it. He was KIA a year later. I visited his grave in Arlington and left a six pack. Seemed the right thing to do. I always wondered who eventually drank those beers.

At first, I did not contemplate that I would get a second tour in Viet Nam but as the fighting continued to escalate in 1968 and 1969, it became obvious that a second trip was a high likelihood. I didn't have a lot of choice as I still had over two years left on my five year commitment. I had gotten a Regular Army commission at Virginia Military Institute and the grand bargain had been a degree in civil engineering in return for five years of service. A good bargain if things worked out well.

When an opportunity was presented to go back to the 101st, I jumped at the chance thinking I might as well go somewhere familiar

where I might know the terrain and the unit. My luck held and I was re-assigned from the 82nd to the 101st.



The company was pretty salty and had a good combat record but the vacancy had been created by the death of the Old Man and the company had lost a lot of good men in that same engagement. Any time a rifle company loses its commanding officer and takes a lot of casualties in the process, the unit takes an understandable hit to its morale and confidence. The company was a bit edgy and the anxiety was plain to see.

Replacements flowed in quickly as soon as I arrived and we were at full strength within less than two weeks. A lot of replacements meant that the company needed some time to absorb them and get their battle drill down tight. That was my job to do as the new CO. It was a bit spooky to be filling a dead man's shoes but that was the nature of the business, I guess.

The First Sergeant was a good hand and the Old Man had been well liked and competent. They had tangled with a very large unit and had simply been overwhelmed and mauled before the battalion commander could get the cavalry started in their direction. Once the reaction company arrived, things got sorted out quickly but by then the damage had been done.

I had two very experienced platoon leaders and a couple of brand new shavetails for the other two platoons. I had a very experienced Executive Officer --- VMI grad who had been a couple of years behind me at the I and who I knew --- and I immediately put him to work riding herd over the green Second Lieutenants. He was very effective. I had two West Pointers, an Aggie and two VMI grads. I had no complaints as to the quality of the Lieutenants.

The First Sergeant was seasoned and experienced and, like me, had operated in this AO with a different unit as a Platoon Sergeant. We had a crackerjack company clerk who made all the paperwork smooth and simple.

The big question mark seemed to be me. Was I up to the task of retraining the company and could I fight it effectively when the time came.

Most importantly, I had already popped my cherry as a company commander in the 82nd and I knew this AO fairly well and I knew the operating procedures of the 101st. I was ready to go and hit the ground running. I had a lot of confidence in me.

The battalion commander let me shake the company out a bit in the area within several miles of the fire base and the unit began to regain its confidence. We had some contact and acquitted ourselves well in a couple of little firefights against platoon sized formations.

Based on those fights, I began to develop my favorites among the platoon leaders, platoon sergeants and platoons themselves. I had one platoon --- third platoon --- that was head and shoulders above the rest. The platoon leader, a fellow VMI grad, and platoon sergeant had been together for almost a year.

They had that perfect combination of aggressiveness but without any of the dangerous glory hounding. It is a fine line between closing with the enemy and trying to get a medal in the process. The third platoon and its leadership had it just right.

The inexperienced platoon leaders, under the watchful eye of the company exec, took out several recon and ambush patrols each and the new soldiers began to jell into effective fighters. I was very pleased with our progress.

We went on a couple of battalion sized airmobile insertions and while the battalion was decisively engaged a couple of times, our part of these fights was not extensive. But we did get to take the measure of the other companies and I was frankly unimpressed. We all worked well together and the battalion commander clearly knew his stuff.



Right after the New Year, we got orders to take the company out about twenty miles to take a hard look at a village on the edge of a huge complex of rice paddies. Division intelligence had reason to suspect that a large NVA unit was lying low just across those rice paddies from the village and that the village was a critical support element to that unit. In addition, chopper pilots reported receiving ground fire when operating in the vicinity. The nature of the ground fire indicated a fairly large unit because of the caliber of the weapons.

We were ordered to take a stroll that way staying overnight for a few nights enroute and working our way up to and around the village taking our time and getting a good look at what was going on. You could consider it a recon in force. If there was, in fact, an NVA unit we would have call on the rest of the battalion to develop the situation further. Typical mission for us in those days.

If it were a large unit, the company could not handle it by itself and the rest of the battalion would likely enter the fray. Our job was to find them and fix them and let the battalion come up to destroy them. We would do what we could to make that easier by softening them up a bit with concentrated fire power.

I took a helicopter recon flight a week before we were supposed to depart and the overflight was inconclusive. I did notice that the wooded areas adjoining the rice paddies were very dense. They could have been shielding an entire regiment given the size and density of the forest. I did not see a single conclusive sign indicating any enemy presence and we did not draw any groundfire. The chopper pilot indicated he had drawn fire on previous trips through that area. Must have been our lucky day.

The appointed day arrived and we moved out through the wire just after dawn. It was a thrill to watch the platoons exit the firebase. There was some substantial fire power on the hoof.

As each platoon went by, I nodded and spoke to the men I knew. They moved with the easy and practiced precision of a seasoned rifle company which knew what it was doing and was headed out looking for trouble. They were carrying a lot of ammunition and grenades.

I could not help feeling a certain pride. Not everyone got a chance to command a rifle company of paratroopers and I felt pretty damn lucky and blessed.

I had spent a lot of time putting together the fire plan for the mission because we were at the edge of our organic fire support fan. Our direct support artillery could not quite reach that distance from the firebase. We did not bring our own organic mortars. They were just too damn heavy to hump that distance including ammunition. That put a bit more pressure on the fire plan to ensure adequate support.

I had laid on 8” guns, Cobras, jets as available and Puff. All the support would be available for us given other competing demands. They were all firing and flying every day so we could not count on exclusive support but someone should be able to help if we got in a pinch. I was counting on it.

I called the fire direction center to make sure they knew we had moved out.

“Red Leg 6, this is Eagle 6, over.”

“Red Leg 6 here, send your traffic. Over.”

“Eagle 6 is moving out and has just passed checkpoint Kilo enroute to Lima. Wanted to ensure you had our fire plan and were ready to fire in support. Over.”

“Eagle 6, I’ve got it right here and we are ready. Understand Kilo headed to Lima. We’re firing in support of some other units right now. Let me know what you need and when. We’re ready to go.”

“Thanks, Red Leg 6. Eagle 6 out.”

So, the artillery fire support plan was ready to go. Changing to the air support fire direction center which was likely a FAC⁶ circling out ahead of them somewhere.

“”Talon 4, this is Eagle 6, over.”

“Talon 4.”

“Eagle 6 commo check.”

“Got you loud and clear Eagle 6. I monitor Red Leg when I’m not too busy and heard your earlier transmission. We’ve got you covered. I’ve got some fastmovers --- Squids --- ready to rock and roll when you need them. I just sent some snakes home to rearm and refuel. They’ll be back in about 30 mikes. Good hunting to you, Airborne. Over.”

“Thanks, Talon 4. Got you Lima Charlie. Eagle 6 out.”



I ran a commo check with all of the platoons and everything was working fine. We moved in a column of platoons with my position

⁶ FAC --- forward air controller, spotter plane directing air assets in close air support of infantry units engaged in close combat with enemy units

between the first and second platoons. I tried to blend into the men moving and not stand out. Standing out would attract fire if we were engaged. The radio whip always drew fire.

Whenever I spotted a likely or potential enemy location, I would have a platoon position themselves in front of that position in overwatch and let the balance of the company move behind them and have the overwatch platoon drop into line behind the last platoon. We had rehearsed this dance step before and it came off smoothly. Gave the overwatch platoon a chance to get a blow.

We moved smoothly and effortless through sparsely vegetated terrain. We covered about 5 miles as the sun began to warm things. Felt good on my face. Felt good to be moving. We were moving generally northwest from the firebase so the sun was to our backs. We were in that funny time of year at the end of the winter monsoon and before the spring monsoons. We seemed to have continuous monsoons with the winter monsoon only being differentiated by colder and bigger raindrops. It would likely rain like Hell for an hour or so in the afternoon. But just now it was quite pleasant.

We stopped to take a fifteen minute break. I checked my RTO to ensure that we had lots of extra batteries. He was a tall lanky kid from Georgia who had had a couple of years of electrical engineering. So I made him my radio man.

He carried the AN PRC 25 and an M-79 grenade launcher with both HE and smoke. I would use the smoke to mark targets. We had been working together for a few months and he could be counted on to talk to the platoons, the battalion command net and the fire direction nets at my direction. He just needed a nod to be able to get the medevac process

started. He was a valuable addition to my leadership and I was damn lucky to have him.

We effortlessly moved another five miles without fanfare and took a lunch break. It was about 11:45 local time and I was feeling hungry myself --- probably the anxiety. So we broke for lunch. As we stopped we formed a circular defensive position and each platoon sent out a three man patrol to make a 2-300 meter clover leaf in front of their position checking for anything unusual. As the patrols returned each platoon reported a negative sit rep. All was quiet and uneventful. The way I liked it.

We lolled around for about an hour, ate, drank a bit of water, buried our trash and got ready to move out. It was like a rich kid's summer camp but with live ammo. Just then the radio crackled:

“Eagle 6 this is War Eagle 6, over.” I did not like the battalion command net using the identifier “War Eagle” because I thought there was a chance for confusion with our call sign, Eagle. But I was not the battalion commander, so we lived with it.

“War Eagle 6, this is Eagle 6, over.”

“Eagle 6, we just got a report of a helicopter being fired on up in the area of checkpoint Tango.” Tango was where we were headed.

The report continued: “They took ground fire and the chopper indicated they thought they were being fired on by a ZPU type weapon.”



I mulled that over quickly because a ZPU was a very heavy machine gun which often had a couple of barrels --- sometimes as many as six --- but it weighed about 900 lbs as a single barrel variant and about twice that for a double barrel. I remember that it could throw lead up to 5,000 meters or 16,000 feet. That was one Hell of a powerful weapon and would play Hell with low flying choppers.

It also indicated a very large unit as they were typically moved by prime movers or a bunch of soldiers. We were close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail just inside Cambodia across the river, so it could have been towed down the trail and arrived in our AO recently. Companies did not typically drag along ZPUs. I felt like I should know what kind of unit had

them. I was thinking they must be at the Division level. Could that be right?

I did not like the sound of that intel.

“Eagle 6, that seems like a damn heavy weapon to be in that location. How sure are they? Over.”

“War Eagle 6, said it threw up a lot of tracers and chased them all the way home and they took a couple of hits. The holes seemed to match. All of this is second hand. Over.”

“Eagle 6. Got it. Any other intel? Over.”

“Negative. War Eagle 6, out.”

I called the platoon leaders in and briefed them on the news. We discussed the plan for when we got up to the rice paddies around the village. We would spend the night in the field tonight, run some security patrols and make contact in the afternoon tomorrow. We would try to maneuver a bit so the sun was to our back making it harder to be seen. We would likely get there right after noon and lie in wait observing for a couple of hours.



Three hours later, the rains came and they were cold and drenching. They blew at an angle and the individual rain drops stung my face

and exposed hands. I threw on a poncho though I hated wearing it because of the loss of ease in reaching weapons and ammunition. But I did not want to get soaked to the skin. In a few minutes, I was shivering. We kept moving. Many of the men just ignored it and resigned to the discomfort trudging on steeling themselves to the hardships.

I brought the platoons in a bit closer and we slowed our rate of advance. We were moving through generally open country so the rain masked our movements. We couldn't see shit but neither could the bad guys if they were watching.

The rain stopped on cue an hour later and we took a quick break to rearrange gear, get rid of ponchos and catch our breath. The air was now clear and cool, the rain having washed away any dust. Everything was steaming but it really wasn't that warm. The rain had cooled things off considerably. It was actually quite pleasant except for the wet ground and vegetation. Everything was dripping.

Sweeping our route of advance with my glasses, I spotted a good overnight spot in the distance and we moved purposefully in that direction. We would stop about 400 meters shy of the location and move to it as soon as it was dark. We did this to confuse any watchful eyes.

Once we were in our final overnight location, we would dig in and send out some patrols and set up some listening posts. Standard procedure for such a movement through open country. No cooking fires. Cold chow. Another can of fruit cocktail and a pound cake. My favorite C ration meals. I actually was looking forward to it but would have loved a hot cup of coffee even more.

I called back to the TOC and confirmed our plans ensuring they knew the coordinates of our overnight position to ensure the artillery did

not inadvertently drop anything on us. I set up some additional firing points to protect our position.

We moved into our faux overnight position, watched the sun go down and then moved surreptitiously to our real overnight. We moved silently and as smooth as silk. Exactly the way it was supposed to be done.

We dug in, sited in the machine guns, set out Claymores and rotated sleeping. The night was cool and the air was surprisingly pleasant and crisp. I walked the perimeter and chatted up the platoon leaders.

I carefully checked the machine gun fields of fire --- a quirk of mine --- and was happy that they were overlocking and tight. The Claymores were set to drive and channelize any approaching enemy into the fields of fire of the machine guns. Anybody visiting in the night would pay a high price of admission the way those Claymores and guns were laid in.

It had been a hard day of humping and we had moved about fourteen miles with about another five to go tomorrow morning. Fourteen miles was a good day's work but we had had no action or alarms and thus it was one of those days you were tired but not stressed out. It felt good to be that tired. An honest kind of tired. Not quite a walk in the park but still no complaints.

I caught some good shut eye under a poncho half rotating on and off with the RTO to monitor the radios. A couple of other units were in action and the guns were firing all night long in support. That gave me a lot of confidence that if we needed them, they would be there.

The patrols and listening posts had an uneventful night slapping bugs --- bugs in January --- and we were ready to move long before the

sun reported for duty. We moved out in the low visibility of the false dawn.



There was a watercourse which would lead us directly to the edge of the rice paddies five miles to our front. I had spotted it on my overflight and thought it would make a great axis of advance. It swung around a bit and we would be exactly where I wanted to set up to observe the rice paddies and the village in the distance.

I was surprised to find that there was quite a bit of rock, gravel really, on the bottom of the dry watercourse and that made our movement much swifter. No wet grass or vines. There were some trails leading to and from and across it and it was obviously in use as a high traffic thoroughfare.

About an hour into our movement, I got a call from the first platoon leader whose unit was on the point for our column of platoons.

“Eagle 6, Eagle 1-6, over.”

“You may want to get up here and take a look at this, Eagle 6, over.”

I called a halt to our movement and the platoons following spread out on both sides of the dry watercourse as I made my way forward. I

liked the way they immediately covered both sides. That was the way we had drilled it.

“What’s up, Hayes?” Robert --- Bobbie --- Hayes was a West Pointer in his sixth month or so of combat service. He was a good platoon leader and had developed nicely into a journeyman like soldier. I liked him and, more importantly, I trusted his judgment and instincts.

“Looks like the whole damn NVA was moving on this trail last night, sir. Look at these prints,” he said.

He led me to a dark black high speed trail leading off the watercourse which showed evidence of extensive traffic. The surface was covered with sandal prints for about a four foot cross section. There was good overhead cover so the trail was a particularly effective means of night time movement.

I took a careful look and knelt to see how wet the footprints were. As I knelt touching them, Hayes said: “Looks like they had to have been made after the rain yesterday and they were likely carrying some heavy shit. They’re deep and distinct. Look at how sharp the edges are. No water in them.”

What really caught my eye was that the footprints were pointed in both directions indicating that the trail had been used in both directions.

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

I thought about it for a few seconds and said: “Let’s take a precaution and send a squad down the trail in each direction for a couple hundred meters. Set up ambushes and we’ll hold up here for an hour. Got it?”

Hayes nodded and moved quickly to brief his platoon sergeant and squad leaders. The squads moved out shortly thereafter. The ability to set up a hasty ambush while on the move was the mark of an experienced and capable unit. No big deal to issue a quick frag order and to hop to it. Lieutenant Hayes and his platoon were more than equal to the task.

I brought the rest of the platoons up and we formed a defensive perimeter so the ambush squads could withdraw into our position if hard pressed. I briefed the platoon leaders as to the plan and we waited. I made damn sure that the perimeter knew that we might have men returning on the fly and to ensure they did not become friendly fire casualties. When the action starts, it gets confusing.

An hour later, there had been no activity and we resumed our movement toward the rice paddy complex. We'd had a good rest. The day had warmed up and we were loose.

The trails and the substantial activity stuck in my mind. I had a feeling we were being watched. Maybe I was just paranoid. Rifle company commanders are advised to be a bit paranoid. It came with the job. It was an essential survival skill.

An hour later, as planned, we were at the edge of the rice paddy complex. It was huge and extended far into the distance toward the village itself to the northeast. I deployed two platoons abreast looking across the paddies at the opposite tree line about 400 meters away. We were on a little arm of the huge complex. It was much wider up to the northeast.

I had the platoons --- first on the left and second on the right --- pull back 10 meters from the edge so they would not be observed. They lay down in the tree line and were careful to use the natural camouflage to

hide themselves. The platoon leaders and a couple of sergeants glassed the opposite side looking for movement.

I had third platoon safeguard our rear and held them in reserve. I had briefed the third platoon leader on my concerns about being watched and had him pay careful attention to watching our six. I did not want anyone wandering onto our trail from the rear.

We waited. We watched. We waited. We saw nothing.

I was prepared to watch and wait for a couple of hours and used the time to send a sit rep to battalion, doublecheck all the fire support freqs and to take a look myself. The men ate, dusted off weapons and checked ammunition. We made sure that those humping additional machine gun ammo were close to the machine guns. I positioned the machine guns in good positions to ensure we had good interlocking fires if it was necessary to engage across the rice paddies. We were a long way off from the opposite side so likely only our machine guns could reach the far side with any accuracy.

We watched. We waited. We saw nothing. It was getting a bit monotonous.

I went back and conferred with the third platoon leader, First Lieutenant Kent Trice. Trice was a VMI grad. A year behind me at VMI and the best platoon leader I had. In addition, third platoon was clearly the most aggressive and best drilled platoon.

Trice was within a couple of months of DEROS and had made it thus far unscathed. I had recommended him for a Bronze Star for a patrol action in which he had captured an NVA paymaster and a bunch of currency and documents a month earlier. It had not yet come through

though I was told there were no problems with the award. He did not know I had recommended him for an award.

“Trice, that watercourse we were following circles around the left edge of the rice paddies up ahead. I may want to slip third platoon over on the left edge and let you take a look at what’s in those trees up there if nothing moves here shortly.”

Lieutenant Trice had not been up to see the rice paddies and looked at the map. He traced the dry creekbed on his map. “Yeah, seems to go right along the left edge and into those trees. Wonder how deep it is? Any cover from the banks?”

“I eyeballed it and it looks like you could slip along the right edge and not be seen from the right but you would likely be observed from the left. If I’m a betting man, if there are any shitheads up there, they’re on the right side looking right at the village across the rice paddies. That chopper report of ground fire yesterday had it coming out of the point of land on the right side.”

An uneventful and boring hour later, three NVA soldiers were suddenly spotted walking along the same edge of the rice paddy complex that we were holding. They walked spread out a bit with one soldier in front and another in the back walking along the rice paddy dike as if out for a stroll with their rifles slung over their shoulders and what looked to be an officer between them carrying a large pouch over his shoulder. We were in ten meters deep, so they had not spotted us yet and might not spot us at all. I was hoping for as much.

The radio crackled: “Eagle 6, you seeing what I’m seeing? Eagle 2-6, over.”

“Affirm, hold fire and let’s see where they go. Over.”

I glassed them hard. One of my favorite possessions in the whole world was a set of U Boat binoculars from World War II that my Father had come into possession on a lucky hand of poker during the war. I loved the story but I loved their accuracy much better. They were Zeiss glasses and I could see forever with them. They were knocked up a bit and I always wondered what kind of action they had seen.



I quickly noticed that the enemy soldiers' uniforms looked pretty new and showed no real field wear. Their pith helmets were clean and new looking also. The officer was armed with a pistol in a holster. I instantly wanted that damn pistol and holster as a souvenir. As it would turn out, I got it. Or one just like it.

When the three men reached a paddy dyke that bisected the area and led to the opposite tree line, they abruptly took it and moved a bit more rapidly as they were now out in the open. They swiftly made it to the other side and seemed to take a path which paralleled the edge of the tree line and simply disappeared as if there were an opening in the tree line at that spot.

I marked it carefully in my glasses and identified landmarks left and right of the point at which they disappeared.

“Eagle 2-6, did you see where they disappeared into the tree line? Over.”

“Got it, Eagle 2-6.”

Now this was an interesting development and it was now abundantly clear that there was something in that tree line on the opposite side. I began to ponder the possibilities. I reported it to battalion via the duty officer at the TOC. A few minutes later, I had a quick chat with the battalion commander. Our chat was inconclusive but we agreed that I would take some action to develop the situation a bit further and he would get the balance of the battalion reaction force alerted and ready to go if the fight blew up in my face.

I got the platoon leaders together and briefed them on my plan. It was not much of a plan.

There was a substantial paddy dyke parallel to the tree line and our position about half way across the 400 yards that separated us. We would move forward and set up two platoons on line behind that rice paddy dyke to take advantage of its cover. We would be pretty safe except for any mortar fire that might be dropped on us.

If we attracted or initiated fire, third platoon would move along the left side to follow the creek bed and maneuver to turn the right flank of the enemy position. If we stumbled on a large unit, we would withdraw to the position from which we had left and wait for the cavalry to come. At that time, the battalion commander would be calling the shots.

I would spool up the fire support and be ready for counter battery fire in the event of enemy mortar fire and otherwise scout around to see what kind of artillery and air power we could bring to bear the situation. We would take about thirty minutes to get into position and be ready to go. We synchronized watches.

“So, we’ll be ready to go by 2:30 PM. Nobody moves until I give the signal. Got it.”

I heard three “yes sirs”.

I worked the radios like a crooked Chicago Alderman working the phones soliciting bribes. We had 8” guns. We had a couple of Snakes. We had some fast burners, Navy jets slumming and looking for some action. We had a strong hand.

At exactly 2:30 PM, I whistled up the first and second platoons and ordered them forward. They moved out smartly with a couple of squads moving in each platoon and their machine guns and their other squad holding firm to provide fire in the event the other tree line erupted.

The squads made it about a bit more than halfway and then the opposite tree line gingerly opened fire. Lightly at first as if they had just awakened from a slumber and then a bit heavier. It did not seem they had been laying in wait for us but rather that they were caught off guard.

The first two squads of each platoon made it safely --- running the last half --- to the protection of the dyke. The dyke turned out to be more substantial and higher than I thought.

I did not wait for anything else to develop and turned the 8” guns loose on the opposite tree line. The spotter round was a bit long and I adjusted fire to bring it right along the tree line. They fired for effect and entire trees were blown into the air. The M110 8” gun was capable of throwing 200 lbs projectiles and could land one every two minutes per gun. I thought we had at least four guns firing based upon the pattern of their hits.

On the second salvo, there were a number of secondary explosions inside the tree line. I reported that and poured on the fire.

By now the first squads over were engaging the tree line and the machine guns were laying down a strong base of fire. The platoon leaders were doing a great job of directing their machine gun and M-70 grenade launcher fire.

Under the cover of the artillery and our own fire, I sprinted forward to the dyke myself with the balance of the platoons. While we were in the open, we were not attracting any mortar fire and I started the third platoon down the watercourse to turn the enemy's right flank.

We were engaged in a pretty spirited exchange, trying to attain fire superiority and had taken a couple of wounded. Doc was working on them. I was thinking about where we might have to establish a medevac extraction point if anyone was too seriously hit.

Our machine guns were really firing effectively and M-79s, the platoon leader's artillery, were booming. We seemed to have things in pretty good control. I was a bit concerned about ammunition supply but then I always was.

The fast burners were monitoring the company net and heard the action. Normally they would have operated through a FAC or forward air controller but they were monitoring the company net and spoke directly.

“Eagle 6, this Trident 7. We're up here in the sun and we've got some napalm, bombs and 20MM at your disposal. We can use the work.”

“Trident 7, standby. I'm going to clear the gun target line and turn you loose. Standby, over.”

“Red Leg 6, Eagle 6, cease fire. I’m going to turn loose some fast movers. Say again, cease fire and standby to resume in 2 mikes⁷. Over.”

“Eagle 6, last shot on the way, over. Red Leg 6.”

“Trident 7, this is Eagle 6. I’m going to mark the tree line with smoke. Authenticate the smoke color and then you are cleared hot. Firing smoke now. Over.”

My RTO fired a red smoke shell from his M-79 and it hit right where the NVA patrol had disappeared into the woods.

“Eagle 6, Trident 7, I see red smoke. Over.”

I could see the last 8” round impacting and cleared the jets in to bomb the tree line.

“Trident 7, Eagle 6, you’re cleared hot to hit that red smoke and all up and down that tree line for 300 meters in both directions. Red smoke is center of mass. Over.”

“Tally ho, ya’ll. Here comes the US fuckin’ Navy. Trident 7, over.” I had to laugh at those hotdogs. They were really something. They were damn good. Landing on pitching decks made for damn good close air support. I was happy to have them bravado and all.

The jets came in from the sun and expertly turned to fly directly over the tree line and about 50 yards deep. They seemed to come down to fifty feet to drop their bombs. They did not miss. They dropped two bombs each and then pulled straight up and circled back for a second pass.

“Hey, Eagle 6, we’re taking some ground fire on our way in and out and it looks like a pretty big gun. I saw it as I was coming down the

⁷ “mikes” is military slang for minutes

second time. Why don't we let you hit that with some more arty and we'll hang around for another 15 minutes or so. We've still got lots of ammunition and we can give you a couple of strafing passes. Trident 7, over."

By this time, the third platoon was almost to the tree line and getting ready to penetrate and begin working their way to the right to rollup that flank.



At VMI, I had studied tactics until I was blue in the face. I loved the study of tactics. We used to go out to White's Farm and attack that same damn hill. One day we would turn their left flank. The next day we would turn their right flank. One day we would move past them and attack from the rear. We learned how to attack in squads. Then platoons and then companies. We did it on foot and we did it in APCs⁸. We never really mastered companies but we were going to become platoon leaders and we had time to learn how to handle a company. It did not come easily.

⁸ APC --- armored personnel carriers

We studied Erwin Rommel's book from World War I, Attacks.

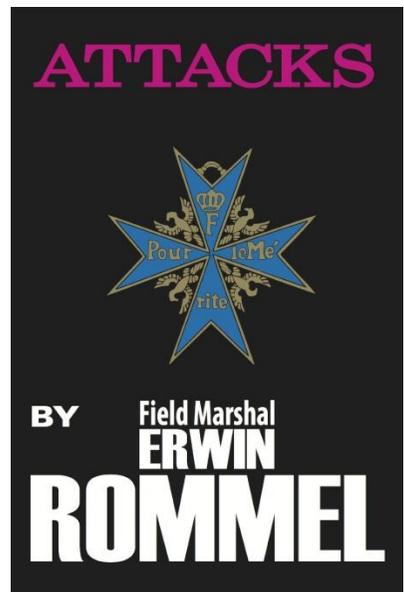
Rommel, the Desert Fox of World War II, was a Field Marshal and we took to calling ourselves Field Marshals. Bit of blasphemy but we were just cadets and thus irreverent to an extreme.

His book was really quite good and showed the necessity of thinking and acting tactically in every situation. This was World War I in Italy and the terrain and actions were all fairly small units --- platoons and companies. Rommel was a Captain himself in those days.

It was widely considered as the best primer on tactics though I thought he could have used some better maps to make his point. Of course, I was not a Field Marshal just yet so maybe my criticisms were a bit suspect or unwarranted.

At the Infantry Office Advanced Course, we got another dose of Attacks but this time we had a bit more knowledge and experience; and, understood how damn difficult it was to fight a rifle company when you couldn't see all of the platoons. We read old Erwin a bit closer and got a bit clearer message.

Those of us who had seen a bit of action also understood the harsh realities of fire superiority, artillery support and air support and running out of ammunition. There was a Captain in the class who had lost his entire platoon in an engagement with an NVA regiment in a tricky spot.



He had also left his sense of humor and joy de vivre on that battlefield. He bitterly opined that Rommel had failed to address those particular tactics when you were outnumbered about fifty to one.

On my prior tour as a platoon leader I did not really engage in a single fight in which tactics figured in the final resolution. My platoon was the bait a couple of times in a hammer and anvil operation in which we lured NVA units into a trap sprung by a battalion hiding in wait for them in a well-orchestrated killing zone.

I am pretty sure that playing the bait was not particularly instructive and did not convey any useful tactical experience.

I had conducted plenty of ambushes but those were mostly the application of blunt force trauma and the Claymores and hand grenades and machine guns carried the day.

Truth be known this engagement was the first time I had ever had a chance to maneuver and use tactics on the scale or of the type espoused and taught by the Field Marshal. I guess it was time I learned a bit about tactics.

Class was certainly in session and I was taking notes.



I got back on the horn with the artillery fire direction center and began to again rain 8" artillery on the tree line and a couple of hundred yards deeper. I was rewarded with several secondary explosions. We were pretty close so we could feel the explosions but the shrapnel was more contained. I walked the fire back about 2-300 meters deeper into the wooded area. I kept repeating the same fire mission.

“Red Leg 6, Eagle 6, over.”

“Go ahead, Eagle 6. Over.”

“How much longer can you keep this up Red Leg 6? I’m getting some pretty good secondaries where you are hitting. Eagle 6, over.”

“Eagle 6, I’ve got a couple of additional batteries getting ready to fire in support of your targets. We’ve got plenty of ammo. What do you need, over?”

“Red Leg 6, keep firing for effect with HE⁹ and mix in some VT¹⁰ if you’ve got it. In a few minutes, we may be ready to assault that tree line. I don’t know yet. Eagle 6, over.”

“Roger, got it, Eagle 6. Let me know when you want us to cease fire or shift our fires. Red Leg 6, over.”

⁹ HE --- high explosive

¹⁰ VT --- variable timed artillery rounds, airbursts which shower shrapnel on troops on the ground creating lots of casualties

“Eagle 3-6, Eagle 6, did you monitor that traffic with Red Leg, over?”

“Affirmative, Eagle 6. We’re into the tree line and moving to the east. There’re a number of bunkers. Well built and in depth. Look like alternate and supplementary positions. We’ve captured quite a few and killed a lot of NVA. The bunkers seem to go forever facing your direction. We’re continuing to move forward and roll up the flank. We also hear movement to the north. They may be bugging out in that direction. We could use some more grenades. We’re using captured NVA grenades to clear the bunkers. Over.” Lieutenant Trice was calm and precise in his transmission but one could sense he understood only too well that he was decisively engaged and that he was besting a much larger unit due to his attack being on their flank. Now was not the time to get too cute.

Now I was in a fix. If the third platoon continued to move forward, they would shortly come into the area in which we were actively engaged and I would have to shift our fires and the fires of the artillery to ensure I did not want to hit third platoon.

I took the path of least resistance. I called in more fire support. I called the forward air controller and asked for some Cobra support.

“FAC, this is Eagle 6 over.”

“What you got Eagle 6?”

“FAC, this is Eagle 6, do you still have some Cobras in the area? Over.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a flight of two just lifting off, refueled, rearmed and ready to go. Ten minutes from your poz¹¹, Eagle 6. Can you use them?”

“FAC, yeah, I want them to hit a tree line as we assault it. They’re going to have to come in and stay low because there might be a big ZPU in the neighborhood. Over.”

“Hey, Eagle 6, got it. I’m going to bring them up on your frequency and you can coordinate directly with them. The snakes are using “Snake 6” and “Snake 4”. Talk to Snake 6 on this frequency, over.”

“Break, break, this is FAC calling for Snake 6, you on the air, over?”

“Snake 6, got it. Break. Break.. Eagle 6, I’ve got you west of that village just north of here. I’ve got the smoke and can be there in about 5 minutes. You gonna clear the gun target line or want me to stay wide of it, over?”

“Snake, 6, Eagle 6, I’m going to clear the gun target line and have a couple of Navy jets take a last pass and then it’ll be your show. Come up from the south, stay low. There may be a ZPU in the trees somewhere. We’re going to assault across the rice paddies. I’ve got a platoon in the tree line on the west end. I’ll set up some smoke boundaries to lay it out for you. Over.”

“Snake 6, on the way and will look for the smoke. Over.”

I rang up the artillery. “Red Leg 6, Eagle 6 here. Fire your last salvo and cease fire until further notice. Give me a “shot” on your last gun firing. Over.”

¹¹ Poz --- position

“Red Leg 6, affirm, Eagle 6. Last shot firing now. All yours.”

With the gun target line getting ready to be clear, I whistled up the Navy jets who had been lurking in the sun.

“Trident 7, Eagle 6, last pass. Give me everything you’ve. I’ll put smoke on the western limit. No fire beyond that. Over.”

“Trident 7 looking for the western limit smoke. Tally ho, here we come. Tally ho!”

My RTO looked at me at inquisitively and readied to fire a smoke grenade from his M-79. He knew to fire it 100 yards left of the first smoke. He looked at me and I nodded.

He fired the smoke --- white smoke --- and it landed perfectly.

“Eagle 6, Trident 7, we’ve got white smoke, say again white smoke, and we’re coming in hot.”

The planes were low and slow and firing 20MM cannon every inch of the way. The tree line seemed to vibrate with their fire and it was impossible to imagine that anyone could have survived that fire. But I knew better.

When they were halfway to the white smoke, I alerted the first and second platoons to be ready to assault. They would move on a continuous line and close with the enemy inside that tree line. Meanwhile third platoon would be coming a bit deeper and from the left side. Erwin Rommel would have been proud of our plan. It was elegant in its simplicity which old Erwin had preached in his book.

“OK, Snake 6, we’re ready to go. Come up and hit that tree line with everything you’ve got. We’ll be right beneath you so shift and move out as soon as we cross the open ground. Eagle 6, over.”

The plan was set in motion and I could do nothing to stop it from happening now. I hoped to Hell that the enemy in that tree line was destroyed or so disoriented as to be unable to defend themselves.

The Cobras worked their magic hovering side by side while unleashing a barrage of rockets and mini-gun fire and the platoons crossed the open rice paddy without taking a single casualty. They caused a rain of cartridge brass on the troops moving below.

There was a bit of enemy fire but the Cobras discouraged it quickly from building. Any enemy fire drew an immediate and deadly response from the Cobras.

As soon as the men were in the tree line, it became apparent that there were a number of bunkers and ground positions but that they enemy had left in a hurry. There were a number of enemy killed and wounded littering the area. Some of the bunkers were still smoking from the rockets unleashed by the Cobras. The assault drove through the line of resistance and ebbed to a halt about 50 yards deep. There was sporadic firing but no concentrated resistance.

“Eagle 6, Eagle 3-6. I can see the other platoons at the edge of the tree line up ahead. We’re about 50 yards deeper and the enemy is pulling back. There are a lot of them. There are a couple of anti-aircraft guns back here but they’re out of commission. We’re going to hold here until you tell us otherwise. Over.”

“Eagle 3-6, stay where you are and go to ground. I’ll alert first platoon to your presence. Over.”

“Eagle 6, Eagle 1-6, I’ve got them in sight. No problem.”

We drove through the area and found a well-developed complex of bunkers --- primary, alternate and supplementary positions, well sited, well-built but abandoned now --- that would have been occupied by a much larger force than ours.

It was apparent that they had been driven out not by our assault but the concentration of fires that we had unleashed on them. There were several ammo dumps which had exploded --- those secondaries we had seen. There were four anti-aircraft guns --- double barreled ZPUs --- which had also been destroyed. It was scary to look at that firepower and think of what that meant.

Intel would later scrub down the site and opine that we had routed a regimental headquarters at the least and that it was likely defended by at least a battalion which had gotten mauled by the fire power we had unleashed on them.

Battalion sent in another company to assault from the air just north of our position to develop the situation but there was no real chase. The NVA had just disappeared --- vanished --- leaving substantial amounts of KIA, WIA and gear in their wake. This was unusual for an NVA unit indicating how quickly the situation had turned to shit for them.

That night we were withdrawn via helicopters. We damn sure earned that ride home. We had four WIA and otherwise no KIA or MIA. Not a bad week's work. We never did check out that village.

That was the first and only time I ever maneuvered a rifle company against an entrenched enemy. I think my VMI tac officers and Erwin Rommel would have been proud of me. I was pretty damn lucky to have had the fire power we were able to employ. That stint with the 82nd as a

company commander had given me the experience to be able to put it all together.

I ran that rifle company in the 101st Airborne for another three months. We had a couple of other good fights but nothing like that day. I then went back to being the battalion S-3 I had originally been assigned as. It was a welcome change. But on warm sunny days when the tocsin sounded, I did miss the excitement of being a feudal Chinese warlord.

Sometimes now long removed from those days, late at night, I'll take a look at my captured P-38 pistol and holster and remember what it was like to close with and destroy an entrenched enemy by fire and maneuver. It was a warm sunny day not far from the Cambodian border when I ran an 101st Airborne rifle company. About a lifetime ago. I was 26 years old. My kids are now older than that.

Thanks, Erwin, for writing that damn book. I made an A in tactics at VMI in the classroom and I think I made one on the battlefield that day.