

"NOTES FROM VIETNAM"

By

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The passage of time tends to cause problems to diminish and become less meaningful. With this axiom serving as a motivator, with the battlefield fresh in mind, and with this thought by Conant to further spur me on: "Behold the turtle: He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out", I offer the following comments regarding infantry in Vietnam:

#### The Infantry Soldier:

Contrary to common belief, reinforced by many comments from senior infantry commanders in Vietnam, I did not find that the average infantry AIT graduate was, "the best trained infantry soldier we have ever sent to battle." I am not attempting to demean the individual soldier, criticize our training system where I recently served at the highest (DA) and lowest level (command of an AIT infantry battalion), or embarrass the quotation makers. It is my only purpose to report my observations based on two tours as a battalion commander in Vietnam with the hope that lessons may be drawn from my experience. ✓

(1) Although I found the average infantry replacement technically proficient from an academic standpoint, he did not know how to put his knowledge into practice. In other words, he knew the theory of blocking and tackling cold, but he could not throw a decent block or ground his opponent with a smashing tackle without a lot of "in country" practice which unfortunately was expensive in terms of unnecessary casualties. My assessment is that basic and AIT training has failed to stress on a repetitive basis the gut fundamentals which would cause the new infantry replacement in Vietnam to react instinctively to a given combat situation. The product of our individual training system may well be the finest infantry individual replacement we have ever produced for war, but in a conflict such as Vietnam, he still is not adequately trained.

(2) In a war such as Vietnam which calls for maximum skill in the basic infantry subjects and the ever present need for security, the new replacements which joined my battalion were sadly inept concerning the fundamentals and grossly relaxed when it came to that all-important subject of security and alertness. He was simply not completely trained; not mentally alert; not careful enough; and too prone to stumble along staring at the ground and trying to figure out a unique way to compute the number of days he has left.

Following that "All American" litterbug habit, the average replacement paid little attention to the scads of debris that he scattered all over the battlefield. Hence, he unknowingly provided his frugal opponent with

many of the necessities of survival and with the raw material that could easily be converted into weapons that could be used against him.

Individually, the average replacement was poorly disciplined and had to be closely watched and literally forced to do basic tasks like keeping his weapon cleaned and oiled, using correct light and noise discipline, employing effective cover and concealment and maintaining sufficient interval during movement.

The latter, proper interval, takes on great importance in Vietnam because of the enemy's large scale employment of mines and boobytraps. Over fifty percent of my battalion's casualties (233 WIA and 26 KIA) came from these insidious devices. (This percentage, incidentally, tracks exactly with French casualties from 1946 to 1954.) Here again, my soldiers were insufficiently trained, when first arriving in country, to deal with mines and boobytraps. After proper battlefield training, my men knew how to handle themselves. However, the old "bugaboo" --- poor discipline --- was always there causing my men to bunch up, move too fast, move along the quickest and easiest route which was also the "boulevard of mines" and to generally be careless.

Another critical weakness was the soldier's preparation to deal with the indigenous population, which is probably a common US world-wide malady. He was not sufficiently oriented concerning: the customs of Vietnam; the purpose of the war; the fact that he was a guest in Vietnam and how to conduct himself as an invited guest and not an "occupational trooper". Too frequently, because of his inadequate orientation, he played the role of the "ugly American" and through some thoughtless act, he negated all the good that had been done by his fellow soldiers' sacrifices.

On the plus side, the average infantry replacement was a hardcharger and well motivated, unusually brave, physically tough, and when led by strong "ass-kicking, name taking" type infantry sergeants and lieutenants who demanded that he be "uptight", the average replacement developed into a first-class infantry soldier. If you will recall, I provided you with a paper in December 1968, concerning my observations and recommendations regarding infantry AIT. My recent experience served only to reinforce those points. We strongly need to revise our infantry AIT program.

#### The Infantry "Noncom":

Top grades (E8 and E9) were knowledgeable, dedicated and tactically proficient. Good E7s were hard to find. The few that I had in no way

measured up to their contemporaries that served in my battalion in Vietnam during 1965/1966. The seasoned platoon sergeant, traditionally the ramrod of the rifle platoon, was no where to be found. He is replaced now by a 20 year old noncommissioned officer and unfortunately, too few of these young NCOs had the "fire and desire", and all are critically short on experience and practical leadership know-how.

The painful area with the infantry "Noncom" was the middle management NCOs - E5 and E6. Ninety percent of the latter were NCO Candidate School graduates (NCOC). The NCOCs knew their job from a technical standpoint, but were generally deficient in the leadership qualities required on the battlefield. About twenty percent of these NCOs were "redhot" and as effective as any group of NCOs I have known. The rest were nothing other than well trained riflemen who displayed no natural leadership qualities other than having an above average IQ and being physically tough.

(2) The basic reason for this deficiency was the reluctance of many of these NCOs to be ruthlessly demanding, coupled with their absolute failure to supervise their soldiers. Constant on-the-job leadership training, virtually wholesale reductions, establishment of demanding standards, the use of simple SOPs and checklists for every task, and close supervision tended to shore up this weakness, but at best this was only a finger-in-the-dike solution. The only real solution is to start at the source of our NCOC program - the procurement system. This system should be reevaluated and we should only put people in the NCOC program who are highly motivated, display leadership potential and who want to accept the challenge of small unit leadership. In addition, the training program should be tough as nails and conducted almost completely in the field. Benning must forget about unsatisfactory attrition rates and concern themselves only with producing a quality product. The Phase II portion of the training (OJT with AIT brigades) must be tightened up to insure that the NCOC is further challenged and develops from this first actual experience of leading troops. My AIT experience, plus conversations with several hundred graduates in Vietnam has convinced me that presently, Phase II is a waste of time.

#### The Infantry Lieutenant:

(A) The average infantry lieutenant who joined my battalion was not prepared to lead a rifle platoon. He was not completely trained in the theory of combat in Vietnam, and extremely weak in soldier management, leadership, practical knowledge, small unit combat operations and almost devoid of actual field experience. The old saying, "good judgment comes from experience and experience is gained from bad judgment" is certainly applicable here. Out of sixty-eight infantry Lieutenants who joined my

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battalion, only two had ever stood in front of a TO&E platoon before. The rest were out of service schools, training centers, and other non-TO&E assignments. As a result of no experience in the art of handling a platoon, these young and on-the-average, well meaning officers, were completely lacking in self-confidence and were, with rare exception, almost valueless as platoon leaders without at least a thirty day OJT period with a "stud-type" platoon leader.

Our mass production officer training system worked well in WW II and Korea. In these fights, the lieutenant normally operated in a centralized environment where the "old man" could spoon-feed him, the pace and technical sophistication of the fight was less demanding, and with rare exception he had "old Sarge" to lean upon. Not so in Vietnam where he operates as an independent force with a platoon sergeant who could well have been his fraternity brother at college last year, against perhaps, the most skillful infantry opponent our army has ever encountered. We must take a hard look at our platoon leader training. Does it produce confident, rugged, knowledgeable infantry leaders or superficial jack-of-all-trades who are not prepared for the demands of guerrilla warfare, but can "issue the tissue" adeptly?

It has been suggested that we need a six month platoon leader's course, designed similar to Ranger School. A course which would be virtually eighty-five percent field work and all "hands on", practical type training built on the premise of "what a soldier physically does" he will learn." A seasoned infantry field grade officer should act as the company commander and pass on to his charges all of his experience. Those lieutenants who cannot "hack" it should be eliminated and only the lieutenants who have proven that they are capable should be graduated and turned out to troops.

#### The Infantry Junior Combat Leader:

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The biggest shortcomings of the young infantry leaders (including NCOs and officers - O1-O3s - with an average of less than four years service) are the failure to be demanding, and their reluctance to insure that their men do the basic things which keep them alive on the battlefield.

I believe one of the reasons for this deficiency is that many of the social values acquired as a civilian, conflict diametrically with what is expected of a leader. Our training system should recognize this conflict and alter those values. A case in point of just one civilian instilled value which drastically conflicts with combat leadership - this value is popularity.

Great emphasis is placed in the American society to instill the "virtue" of being a popular fellow. The formal part of this training starts at kindergarten when the importance of socializing is first introduced and is thereafter never ending. The informal training begins at mother's hand almost at first breath. Hence, the young man when first entering the army has had about twenty years indoctrination of "being a nice guy." After four years of college ROTC training or forty-six weeks of BCT, AIT, OCS training, he is supposed to be the well prepared leader who always places the welfare of the troops just below the accomplishment of the mission. But in actual fact, the average leader has a virtual pavlovian instinct towards being popular. He must be a good guy! Thus, he becomes a "joiner" instead of an "enforcer."

In Vietnam, good guys let their people smoke at night and take portable radios to the field; allow night ambushes to set up in the abandoned hootch, so they can have protection from the rain and will only need one guard by the door so everyone else can get a good night's rest. Good guys let their men leave their boots on for several days, resulting in inordinately severe immersion foot. Good guys don't check to insure that their men protect themselves against mosquitos or take the required malaria pills and salt pills. Good guys end up killing their men with kindness!

The average young leader in my battalion generally knew what was required, but did not have the moral courage to enforce the rules. He preferred to turn his head and look the other way rather than make vigorous on-the-spot corrections. Common deficiencies such as: dirty ammunition and weapons, improperly safed weapons and grenades, incorrect camouflage techniques and the improper use of terrain (using natural cover to provide protection from small arms fire) went uncorrected. The end result of this is: the soldier's habits become sloppier and sloppier and carelessness runs amuck and unchecked. This resulted in casualties -- casualties that could have been prevented had the leader demanded.

My experience has been soldiers in combat will only do what is required of them and if under weak, permissive leaders, they will try to get away with everything they can. This results in the violation of every basic rule in the book. As an aside, I believe that all the while that they are placing their lives in jeopardy (this could be an unconscious psychological attempt to rebel against "the establishment.") They know they are wrong and will respond to the requirements of a positive, demanding leader. Results: fewer casualties, greater respect for the leader who cares enough for his men to make them "play the game" correctly.

I believe that another serious shortcoming in our small unit training program (NCOO, OCS and basic courses) is the failure to teach leaders the importance of supervision and the techniques of supervising. The average small unit leader today, seems to take it for granted that what he wills, will be done, and hence, there is no requirement for him to check.

The nature of combat in Vietnam greatly extends this problem because small units normally operate on a widely decentralized basis in rugged terrain that greatly restricts inspection visits from higher headquarters. These conditions generally prohibit the more experienced senior NCOs (E8 and E9) and officers (field grade) to check the platoon and pass on "tips of the trade." Hence, without an experienced demanding leader, a carelessly lead platoon is headed for a violent collision which normally ends in disaster. The infrequency of combat (as compared to WW II or Korea) and seemingly security of many areas has a tendency to lull soldiers and leaders into a false sense of security. Consequently, alertness and security becomes relaxed and proportionately the likelihood of enemy attack increases. (Mao: "When the enemy is weak: attack.")

Our training system must inculcate the leader with the burning need to keep his people alert every moment they are in Vietnam. And to never let down their guard! The leader must be instilled with the need to supervise his people 24 hours a day. He must check: fighting positions for adequacy; if soldiers know the mission, situation, and where the IFFs are; is proper field sanitation being practiced; is all battlefield debris destroyed to deny the enemy a source of supply; are his people all sleeping under cover and protected from "first round bursts"; are his subordinate leaders "heads up" and demanding that their men are alert and tightly controlled. A never ending list of little things must be checked: magazines clean; weapons test-fired; IFFs out; sectors of fire known; medics looking at feet, monitoring salt tablets and malaria pills, and watching out for "jungle rot"; stand-to being conducted; to name a few. But the main thing is the leader has to constantly check - following the saying: "The best fertilizer in the world is the boss's footsteps...they make things grow." Our school system must teach the leader the importance and the mechanics of checking.

Our training system must get our small unit leaders out of the classroom and into the bush (reference instruction along the lines of the platoon leader's course discussed earlier). Here, they must be taught by the finest, most experienced combat leaders we have, the gut fundamentals of infantry combat. We must ruthlessly prune the chaff from the curriculum and drill the basics into the trainees, employing the same instructional techniques as those used in airborne training to teach the five points of performance. Every block of instruction

should be reduced to the salient "points of performance," and each student should be required to demonstrate his knowledge by ruthless examination. Student leaders who show ineptitude should be eliminated and not "recycled" in order to show a "low attrition rate."

#### SMALL UNIT INFANTRY OPERATIONS

In Vietnam, today's most successful infantry tactics and techniques were yesterday's heresy and madness. When these "overly reckless" ideas were first introduced by farseeing innovators in 1965 and 1966, few commanders took them seriously. Most, because of parochial conventional orientation, looked upon these new concepts with contempt not unlike many reactionary English lords' attitude towards the longbow - before Crecy. But today in Vietnam, these once "wild schemes" have become standard drill. The "guerrilla concept", "checkerboard", "cloverleaf", "jitterbug", "bushmaster", "LRRP", to name a few, are all part of virtually every infantry commander's bag of tricks. These bold techniques have changed the thrust of the war from uneconomical multi-brigade operations to fights that are fought almost exclusively by the squad and platoon.

These operational changes did not occur by the wave of a magic wand. No, indeed; hard work, boldness with attendant risk, imagination, and then through the process of evolution, concepts that worked were polished, expanded and developed and failures quickly rejected.

I do not believe our infantry leader training program - to include the complete spectrum of training infantry leaders - has kept pace with the tactical innovation developed on the battlefield, nor with what type leadership/tactical training is required to develop first class small unit leaders. Hence, I believe our system for training infantry leaders is not in step with the demands or the realities of the counterinsurgent battlefield. The changes that are required do not call for violent revision of our infantry doctrine, but they do call...no demand...no scream for a revolutionary change in our system for training infantry leaders. Following are a few items that should be considered as part of a study designed to produce a better infantry combat leader:

Emphasize practical work. Get the students out of Building #4 and into the bush. Reduce the curriculum to the barest essentials and forget about all the nice-to-have material that has no tangible value on the battlefield, but is taught only because the student may need it someday in garrison. The curriculum must be looked at from the standpoint of "What does an infantry lieutenant/sergeant need to know to fight his element?" The question, "What is essential?" and "What is nice to have?"

SMALL UNIT LEADERS by [unclear]



must be repeatedly asked as each subject is examined. Only those gut items that are critical to combat must stay. All else must be winnowed out. We must accept the risk that our young combat leaders, fresh out of Benning, may not be too "red hot" concerning garrison activities, or might initially stumble badly as staff officers. The overriding criteria must be that the training objective produce deadly competent, highly motivated and skilled leaders.

Benning must realize that it is not a school for field marshals, nor an Ivy League temple for advanced degrees; and that it is merely a school for mechanics - mechanics in the infantry trade.

I believe that Benning has gotten so wrapped around the axle on techniques of instruction, in an attempt for optimum sophistication, that it has lost perspective as far as training "rough, ready, and determined" combat leaders. Teaching techniques that produce business managers at the Harvard Business School have little application in the development of infantry combat leaders.

Concentrate all instruction on combat leadership. Teach leaders to be forceful; to strongly exercise their authority by "kicking ass"; and develop confidence in the leader by making him mentally and physically hard; instill in the leader that he can do the job without much help (and if my recent experience is any indication, he won't have much help!) The Ranger course is a first step in this direction. It must be expanded, made harder (according to excellent authorities - comments from ten ex-instructors - it has gotten unbelievably soft in the last few years) and it could well serve as the vehicle for a much needed six month platoon leader's course.

Stress fire, maneuver, and control. Quit stressing the necessity to close against a dug-in guerrilla opponent. (Because to close, normally costs excessively in casualties, regardless of the infantry's skill; if the guerrilla is fighting out of well-prepared positions he probably did not get trapped, but planned it that way; the idea of fighting a guerrilla who is in Phase II or III of insurgency - like Vietnam - should be the destruction of his formations at the smallest cost, and this simply can not be achieved by attacking him during his occupation of defensive positions.) Drive home the following points:

- a. How to employ scouts...(duties of a scout; who makes the best scout and tactical employment).
- b. The importance of security...(constant, never-ending, all-around).
- c. How to use cover and how never to get an element into a situation where cover does not exist.

d. Teach the leader that deception should be basic to his modus operandi. Teach the value of stay behinds, decoys, and phoney positions.

e. Stress not to develop patterns. (To analyze everything from the standpoint of "Am I forming an operational pattern and will the enemy zap me because of my rut?")

f. Stress doing the unexpected and the unconventional.

g. Make the combat leader an expert concerning:

(1) Mines and boobytraps (teach items like at approximately 1600 hours boobytrap casualties increase because of fatigue and get proportionately higher as the day continues).

(2) Small unit patrolling (stress the importance of patrol rehearsals. As a minimum, cover actions to be taken at known danger areas).

(3) Night and day land navigation (95% of my new lieutenants and sergeants read maps and compasses like "wrong-way Corrigan").

(4) Night and day ambushes (my leaders only had a vague idea about ambushes).

(5) Rifle platoon in the defense in a jungle environment. Stress here the absolute requirement for LPs because of the enemy's now frequent use of RPGs and the absolute necessity of firing in DEFCONS - prior to darkness. Emphasize fire discipline, use of claymores, M79s and frags.

(6) Employment of gunships (emphasize here that gunships are not the magic panacea to all problems when a friendly unit is in trouble. My experience has shown that the young leader is quick to call for gunships when in fact, artillery is the only heavyweight in helping out the endangered unit).

(7) Adjustment of artillery fire. (The majority of my infantry leaders could not quickly adjust artillery and mortar fire.)

h. Stress platoon formations and immediate reaction drills. In this regard, teach the leader, by actual experience, of how to adjust his formations to the terrain and enemy situation. Stress the need to always have a defensive position picked out in his mind's eye; to always have his unit near cover; to always have a fire support element (M50) set up to provide covering fire.

i. Stress not using platoon objectives. Give the platoon an AO, mission and let them go. Also forget about time. Don't attach a time frame to a piece of ground. Once you do an element will get into trouble racing to take the objective on time.

j. Stress the use of the five paragraph field order and keeping men informed.

k. Drill in the importance of:

(1) The criticality of radio communication.

(2) Insuring the RTO is one of the best, most responsible men in the platoon and that maximum cross training be conducted to insure depth in RTOs (there is a great need in a good fight for back-up RTOs).

(3) Stressing the need for radio and battery maintenance.

(4) Teaching the importance of the location of the radio for good COMMO (I have moved a PRC radio two feet and gone from 1...X...1 COMMO to 5...X...5).

l. And finally, but most important, burn into the small unit leader's mind that to defeat the guerrilla, he must think and act like a guerrilla. He must adopt the guerrilla's tactics, stealth, cunningness, drive, motivation, and operational techniques. He must, as a leader be, more ruthless in his demands upon his people, than the guerrilla is with his subordinates. He must understand that the guerrilla can only be defeated by rugged, "gung-ho", superbly led soldiers who can, because of outstanding training, "out guerrilla the guerrilla."