



CAP

Bravo 3 & 4

Story by: Sgt. John Martin

Submitted by: Ted Zoutis

As twilight faded into evening, the dusts of the day became the mists of night. There would be no moon, but the Marines of Bravo 3 would, in a sense, be "moonlighting." For, in addition to their daily job of building friendly relations with the villagers of Tui Loan, they had the responsibility of setting up ambushes by night in the hope of catching Victor Charlie unaware.

The mission of the Marines who make up Combined Action Platoon CAP 3, Bravo Company, 2d. Combined Action Group is like that of more than 100 such outfits which fall under the III Marine Amphibious Force Combined Action Program. In the process of "nation building," the men in various platoons work with Vietnamese Popular Forces (PFs) and help the villagers to improve their standard of living.

"The men become an integral part of village life," said LtCol Byron F. Brady, director of the Combined Action Program. "It's not like just trudging through Vietnam. They have more responsibility in their village than they ever had in their own hometown."

And the men in Bravo Company have more responsibility than some of the other CAP units. Along Route #5 in the Hieu Duc District is the "rocket belt," which arcs Da Nang in a seven-mile radius. Seven miles is the ideal range for Charlie in throwing rocket strikes at the seaport city.

The "knots" in this strategic belt include the six CAP's of Bravo Company, under the command of 1st. Lt. William F. Willett. However, unlike most knots, the job of the Marines is not to hold the belt together, but to break it up, wherever Charlie might attempt to perform his dirty work.

Because of the different conditions surrounding each CAP, the sergeant-in-charge of a particular area must improvise his own defense plan from the layout of the local terrain. In the case of Sgt. Gregory Bigpond, the platoon commander of Bravo 3, the geography called for close-in security.

Bigpond, a full-blooded American Indian, surveyed the terrain and made his plan. Several thousand meters to his right front was Hill 10, the headquarters for the 1st. Battalion, Seventh Marines, and far to the left front was Hill 55, the Command Post for the Seventh Marine Regiment. Approximately 800 meters to the direct front was the small knoll which served as the headquarters for the Bravo Company command. In back of Sgt. Bigpond's village was the 1st. Tank Battalion.

Sgt. Bigpond also took his own compound into consideration. At various other CAPs, some Marines manned positions within the compound all night. But Bigpond would not allow that until the platoon had constructed adequate defense trenches around the perimeter and the standing rule was "No one stays all night at Bravo 3."

"Time check," Said Sgt. Bigpond.

Cpl. Ralph Haughton, who was called "Mo-Town" because he was from Detroit, checked his watch and replied, "It's three minutes until nine."

Darkness had fallen about two hours earlier, but Bigpond did not dispatch his fire teams until 9 p.m., so the V.C. sympathizers would have no valuable information to convey to Charlie.

"Okay," said Bigpond, "Peters, Lindsey, Lay, and Riddle. Head on down to the bridge and set in with the PFs." The bridge lies in the center of the village.

"Sgt. Zoutis," he told his second-in-command, "you've got Duhon, Biagi, and Downing. You've also got three PFs with you tonight. Move out to the right and set up an ambush in the tall grass along the road."

Sgt. Bigpond turned to Cpl. Blackwell. "Okay, 'Duck,' (he used the Marine's nickname), take Stone, Ringler, and Besnon and man the bunker up the road."

Then, leaving Haughton and Van Slyke to guard the area near the entrance to the compound, Bigpond and Scalise stole to the left front and set in on the edge of the village.

Although he had given his men their orders for the night in a casual tone of voice, Sgt. Bigpond had by no means positioned them haphazardly. Earlier in the evening he and Sgt. Zoutis had conferred with Trung-Si Vo Van Vy, the sergeant of the PFs, and decided on the exact places to put the PFs and the Marines.

"We work pretty well together," remarked Sgt. Bigpond. "Vy wants one thing, and I want another. But I give a little and he gives a little and we always manage to come up with an agreement."

Once in their positions, the men relaxed for awhile. "Between midnight and 3 a.m.," Sgt. Bigpond had warned them, "are the 'Bewitching Hours.' This is the time when Charlie is most likely to strike."

Now, while waiting, a cigarette was permissible if cupped between the hands. But a light was nothing extraordinary out here. The wky was constantly lit up by illumination flares from the ground units of the Seventh Marines.

At the bunker, Cpl. Douglas Blackwell and Pfc. Dennis E. Ringler were keeping watch over the ground area lit up by the flares. Between them was poised an M60 machine gun with several hundred rounds of ammunition. As the Marines were on a 50 percent alert, Cpl. Ken Benson and Cpl. Charles Stone had "first sleep." Stone, who had voluntarily extended twice in Vietnam and was working on his 21st. month "in country," stayed awake for awhile to pet Ringler's dog, Bor Brush.

Although by no means a sentry dog, Bore Brush was handy to have along. During the day, he bristles and growls at any Vietnamese friend or foe. At night, his senses are even more keen. But Bore Brush was quiet for now.

At the bridge, Cpl. William J. Peters reminded Pfc Michael Lindsey and Pfc. Steven Lay to be exceptionally alert. For this day was a Vietnamese holiday and, after the Tet offensive, they weren't going to give Charlie an even break if he should try to pull the same trick tonight. HM3 James A. Riddle, the platoon corpsman, was also with them. By day, the "Doc" held sick call in the village and made inspections of the local hospital.

At approximately 1:30 a.m., well into the "Bewitching Hours," Sgt. Ted Zoutis heard sounds of activity to his front. During the day, Sgt. Zoutis questioned suspicious looking Vietnamese through his excellent command of the Vietnamese language. At night, an illumination flare was his best tactic in telling friend from foe.

He set off the flare and saw a group of Viet Cong moving out of a bridge culvert beneath the road. Steering him M-16 into their midst, he opened fire and his men followed his example. Cpl. Ronald O. Downing and Cpl. Don Biagi were blasting at the enemy with an M60 machine gun. LCpl. Gerald Duhon switched his M-16 to fully-automatic, and the three PFs aimed in with their M-1s.

The flare went out and the Marines waited in silence. A check of the area would be made in the morning.

The sound of the brief skirmish had traveled far. Near the compound where Haughton and Pfc. GERALD Van Slyke waited, Van Slyke hurriedly rolled over into a defensive position and found himself in a puddle of mud. But he stayed there until he was convinced that the guns had not signaled an all-out attack. At first light, he would change to dry clothes.

Presently, after Pfc. David Scalise had contacted Sgt. Zoutis by radio, Sgt. Bigpond called the other ambush sites to inform them what had happened and to remain alert.

But as far as Bravo 3 was concerned, the action for that night was over. Always in the distance, of course, could be heard the booming of Marine artillery and, if one looked closely, he could see "Spooky," the Air Force cargo plane turned Charlie killer, spraying its payload of deadly rounds on a likely Viet Cong position.

At 5 a.m., Sgt. Bigpond contacted his fire teams again and ordered them to return to the compound. Here, they would man the bunkers within the Marine area until first light and, then, a portion of the platoon would hit the rack for a few hours' sleep.

Breakfast was not a big thing at the compound, but Sgt. Bigpond and Cpl. Haughton wandered into the "galley" bunker and emerged a few moments later with a stack of tuna fish sandwiches for the troops.

Later in the day, when everyone was rested, they would turn to and continue their work on the compound. Some of the men would return to work on the perimeter defense. Others would hold police call. All of them would clean their weapons.

With expected variances, that is the daily routine for the men of Bravo 3 and other CAP units like them. But they never take their responsibility lightly. "Remember the Tet offensive?" said Sgt. Bigpond. "the enemy hit Hue and Saigon but not Da Nang. Know why? We stopped them right out here before they could link up. CAP units called artillery in all over them and the grunts blew 'em away."

First light came, but Doc Riddle couldn't go to sleep right away because Lt. Jim Neidhart, USN, a doctor from the 2d Battalion, 13th Marines, was scheduled to show up to inoculate the villagers as part of a MedCap program.

Sgt. Zoutis delayed going to sleep so he could close out the entries in the log book. Sgt. Bigpond and Cpl. Haughton were just too tired to try sleeping. Besides, Bigpond had a platoon sergeants' meeting to attend at 2:30 P.M. It didn't look like he would get much sleep at all this time. But then, being a "moonlighter" can sometimes do that to a guy.