

Bob Burleigh died a number of years ago of a brain hemorrhage.

"KY BINH"

THE ARVN CAVALRYMAN

by Major Robert H. Burleigh

"Mot, hai, ba, bon, di!" The young Vietnamese cavalry lieutenant speaks these words over the radio and his troop of fifteen armored personnel carriers is instantly on the move. As is the case on most operations in the Republic of Vietnam, they are relatively unaware of exactly what awaits them as they move across the rice paddies toward their designated objectives.

At the same time several questions enter the mind of their American senior advisor—an Armor captain who has recently arrived in Vietnam and is embarking on his first combat mission with the armored cavalry troop. How will these small, slender soldiers react if and when they come in contact with the Viet Cong? Will they be aggressive? Can they be trusted?

As the thick dust from the now dry paddies rises from the tracks of the carriers and virtually covers everything and everybody, the captain thinks back to the numerous articles and editorials he read back in the States. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he remembers how the journalists had contended almost unanimously that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was not contributing its fair share to the war effort. He thinks back to

the claims made by some prominent correspondents that the officers and soldiers are incompetent and that they are afraid to close with and destroy the Viet Cong. And then there were the politicians with their accusations that ARVN was not pulling its weight on the rope of this tug-of-war conflict. All of these articles had greatly interested him—particularly after he had received orders assigning him to the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. He realized then that he would be working with those people who comprised ARVN and that the more he could learn about them before his arrival in the country the better qualified he would be as an advisor.

And now here he is perched on top of an armored personnel carrier behind his counterpart, the Vietnamese lieutenant, and still wondering how they will react. Suddenly, the loud cracking of .50 caliber machineguns brings an abrupt end to his train of thought.

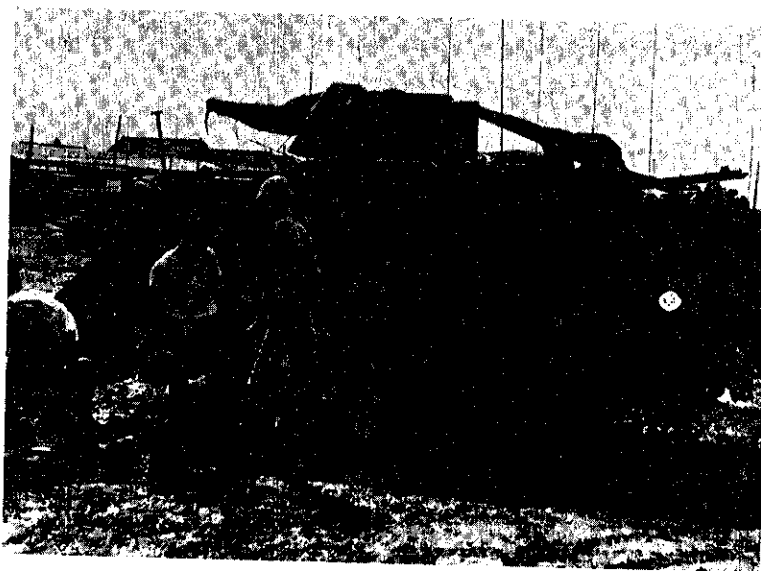
The lead platoon has engaged a group of Viet Cong. Its platoon leader spotted them running toward a woodline. The captain's counterpart is on the radio immediately, issuing orders to his troop at a furious rate.

As if by remote control, all the tracks begin to maneuver to bring maximum fire on the enemy. The troop's support platoon with its internally mounted 81mm mortars has already begun to deliver accurate fire on the woodline. The ARVN artillery observer attached to the troop is on his radio, presumably requesting additional fire support from his unit. The tracks of the line platoons are all on line and charging the objective. It is all the advisor can do to hold on as the command tracks follow in the attack, constantly maneuvering to positions where the troop commander can best control the action. It is at this point that the apprehensions of the American captain disappear. "These soldiers," he thinks, "are not just aggressive—they're little tigers!"

The above, of course, is a hypothetical situation; however, similar things are happening every day in the Vietnamese war. Having served as an advisor with the ARVN 10th Armored Cavalry Regiment for one year, I have been shocked (and usually outraged) by many of the comments appearing in some American publications concerning these soldiers and their fight against Communist aggression. Since my return from Vietnam, I have been somewhat disappointed in discovering that a large percentage of our citizens have accepted as gospel the accusations of these journalists.

I do not maintain that the entire Vietnamese army is an organization to be set up as an example for all to follow. It is just like any other army in the world today—it has its good units as well as the bad and the mediocre. Some of the soldiers are outstanding and some are poor. However, it appears that the American press, with some few exceptions, has chosen to concentrate the greatest number of column inches covering ARVN on the bad units and the inadequate soldiers. This is a gross injustice not only to the many honorable Vietnamese soldiers but also to the American people who have a right to know all of the truth. In all fairness, I must also point out that this article is based on the officers and men and the tactical operations of only one unit of ARVN—the 2d Troop, 10th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

The Vietnamese cavalymen with whom I was associated are an outstanding group of soldiers and a real credit to any cavalry unit. They are most proud of the fact that they are a part of the *Ky Binh* (Cavalry). They wear their black berets with a great sense of pride (as do the advisors) and are probably the cockiest soldiers in ARVN. They have every right to be proud because they are first-rate.



"... the troop never had over one carrier deadlined at any one time because of a mechanical failure." ▲



ARVN cavalry mounts ready to charge forth from sandbagged stalls. ▼





The CP—another example of doing more with less.

Once the advisors to the cavalry troop have established good rapport with the soldiers, they are considered part of the unit. The mutual respect is beyond belief. The advisor learns to share every joy and every sorrow experienced by the soldiers. When a trooper is injured or killed, he feels the same compassion for him as if it had been a member of a unit which he was commanding. Why? Because he is a part of that unit and the soldiers in it are



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just as much his "comrades-in-arms" as they would be in an American unit. The men will not allow you to forget this. The advisor is continually reminded of it by their actions—their smiles, the pat on the back, the invitation to join in a volleyball game.

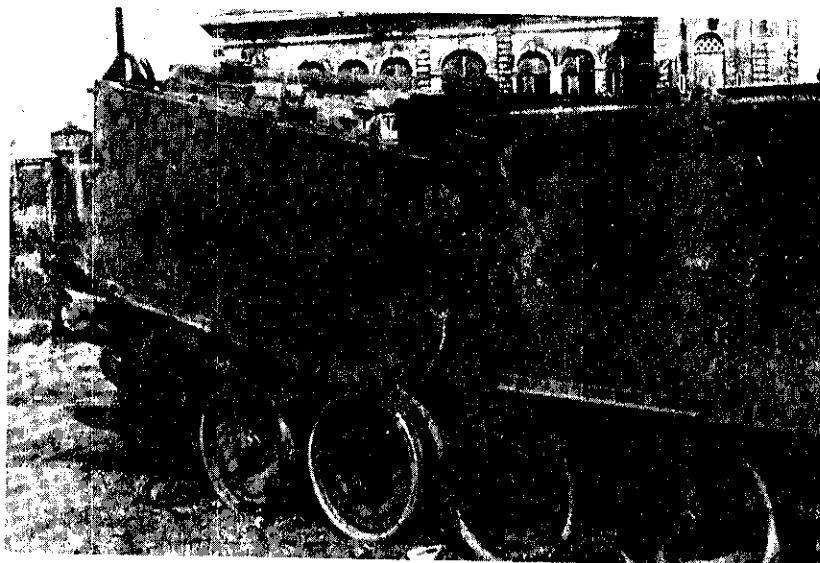
Prior to my assignment to Vietnam, I heard some individuals remark that many Vietnamese soldiers are cowards. Within our troop, I found that nothing could be further from the truth. To substantiate this I can cite a reaction mission which we were called upon to undertake on 14 August 1967 when the city of Tay Ninh came under attack. Mortar and rocket rounds began falling at approximately 0150 on the city's *Chieu Hoi* center. At 0158 our troop was on the move in the direction of where we thought the mortars were located. (Note that this is only eight minutes from the time the first round hit!)

During the operation, at 0250, the Viet Cong triggered an ambush of the troop. It was initiated by firing on and hitting a platoon leader's carrier directly on the gas tank. The platoon leader, a recently commissioned second lieutenant, received only minor injuries from the blast. Despite the intense automatic weapons and small arms fire, immediately he jumped from the damaged vehicle and ran to the track following so he could continue to command his platoon. As he attempted to mount that vehicle, an automatic weapon almost decapitated him.

At the same time, the troop commander and the troop medic dismounted from their APC's and ran to the burning track to pull the wounded from the vehicle and get them to safety. The burning vehicle exploded about five minutes later while the troop was still engaged with the Viet Cong. As a result of the actions of the commander and the medic, all of the soldiers on the burning vehicle were saved and the only fatality was the platoon leader who had attempted to continue commanding his platoon.

The Viet Cong lost four KIA (US body count) and one RPG7 captured. Two weeks later, a *Chieu Hoi* who had been involved in the action told authorities that approximately thirty of his group had been killed as a result of the troop's rapid reaction. For this action, the troop received commendations from both the Vietnamese Province Chief and the American Senior Advisor. These officials stated that without the aggressive show of force of the unit the province capital headquarters at Tay Ninh might have been overrun.

At Tay Ninh, a track was hit and destroyed
but the entire crew were saved.



Something should also be said about the mutual professional respect between ARVN and US units. During our tour in Rach Kien, Long An Province, the troop habitually operated with the reconnaissance platoon of the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry. After several operations, the battalion commander decided that he would give the reconnaissance platoon a well-deserved rest on one operation. The operations order designated a platoon from one of the line companies to be attached to us. Upon hearing this, the members of the reconnaissance platoon went to their lieutenant and informed him that if anybody was going with the ARVN 2d Troop, 10th Cavalry, it was going to be them. The operations order was subsequently amended and the reconnaissance platoon went with our troop on the operation. This pleased not only the American soldiers, but the Vietnamese as well. They were going on another operation with their friends.

Concerning the tactical ability of the troop, I can only say that the Vietnamese probably taught me as much, if not more, than I ever taught them. Their formations and their ability to maneuver quickly and adapt to new situations were outstanding. Every track commander without exception was quick to respond to orders. They were well-skilled in the complex art of guerrilla warfare and they had the knowledge and the foresight to deal with it. Many times I became convinced that they had a sixth sense when it came to detecting Viet Cong. They appeared to know instinctively where "Charlie" would be. Their methods sometimes seemed somewhat unorthodox by our standards. However, they were successful and who can argue with success—particularly on the field of battle.

A great deal of criticism has been aimed at ARVN's lack of maintenance consciousness. It is, however, illuminating to note that during my one-year tour the troop never had over one carrier deadlined at any one time because of a mechanical failure. Other operational shortages were the result of enemy action. In addition, failure to repair the vehicle was normally the result of a shortage of parts and not the inability or lack of initiative on the part of the mechanics or crew members. There was a tendency in the troop to neglect partially the wheeled vehicles and the individual weapons. Their philosophy on this was that it was more important to devote the greatest amount of time and effort to the tools of their trade—the armored personnel carriers and the crew-served weapons mounted on them. The latter were extremely well-maintained. On extended road marches, crew members habitually checked their vehicles from top to bottom at every halt. Following operations, the crew-served weapons were immediately dismounted for cleaning. However, only half of the troop's weapons were dismounted at any one time.

The Vietnamese cavalryman has been cheated by many who do not know him well. He has not been given what is due him. He is a brave, heroic soldier who is fighting to rid his country of Communism and to give his family and his friends the same privileges which we enjoy today. He is a proud man—proud of his country and proud of being a part of the *Ky Binh*. The Vietnamese cavalryman is proud of and feels honored to wear the symbol of his profession—the black beret. I was proud to be allowed to wear that same black beret. If I am again assigned to Vietnam, I hope to wear it again.