

BAD THINGS HAPPEN WHEN YOU TAKE A WAR LITTORIALY
(A tail of two NILOs)

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Captain John E. Vinson, USN (ret.) -- NILO Tra Cu - 1968-1969

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Commander Peter B. Decker, USN (ret.) --- NILO Duc Hoa 1969 – 1970

Under the rubric of “Littoral Warfare”, the Chief of Naval Operations has floated an initiative to expand the Navy’s role in Iraq into a “Brown Water” one and, it therefore seem appropriate to offer some lessons learned from the Navy’s last foray in this rather hostile environment. This is the second in a series of articles written to that purpose.

To the Northwest of Sai Gon (sic. Ho Chi Minh City) a peninsula extension of the Cambodian border juts into what was once the Republic of Viet Nam. The peninsular projection bares some resemblance to indigenous birds beak and is therefore, colloquially known as the “Parrot's Beak.” It is flanked by two of the four major rivers of the Mei Kong Delta: the Vam Co Dong and the Vam Co Tay. As part of his response to the Tet Offensive of 1968, VADM Elmo Zumwalt (COMNAVFOR-V) ordered elements of the Third Riverine Divisions up two of the four creeks. They were mostly Patrol Boats-River (PBRs), the spiritual DNA of the littoral combat ships of today. More germane to the reader ADM. Zumwalt directed then, Captain Rex Rectanus, to deploy NAVFORV staff intelligence officers in support of these ongoing operations. These junior officers were know as NILO's (Naval Intelligence Liaison Officers) within six months of their forward deployment, all seven 3rd Riverien NILOs had been awarded the Purple Heart and two and received that award twice.

Each NILO post was different. There were two in Hau Nghia Province: Call sign Pacer (John Vinson) was attached to RIVDIV 552 at Tra Cu. This Advanced Tactical Support Base (ATSB) was a narrow chuck of hardpan maybe 300 yards long and not more than 50 yards wide. This ATSB was a hellhole; it had no reliable communications, no running water (hot or cold) it took incoming fire from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) with appalling regularity and the guys ate C-Rats or NVA rations more often than anything else. Call Sign Logger (Pete Decker) was collocated with a Navy Border Control Station on the compound of the Divisional Combat Assistance Team (D-CAT 99) to the 25th ARVN Division at Duc Hoa about ten miles west of Highway One, The Street Without Joy. He had hot water most of the time and only took the short-rounds intended for the ARVN Division across the street. He was there because the 25th Division’s compound had a Japanese-built airfield, circa 1942 and because his mission was border reconnaissance, he flew in the venerable O-1/Bird dog (a high winged Cessna 160).

Bereft of both the capabilities and connectivity’s normal associate with intelligence support to operating forces conducting combat operation on a non-linier battlefield, a rather successful do-it-yourself project developed. RIVDIV 552’s requirement set was a rather simple one: (a) Identify the optimum locations for PBR ambush position and (b) provide indications and warning of impending enemy attacks on ATSB Tra CU. The

former was achieved through a synthesis of past history and predictions of intended movement based upon sightings of logistic craft build-ups along the Cambodian border. The latter was normally accomplished by noting enemy unit movements that were not logistical in nature. Did it work? Yes, it really did, sometimes.

ATSB Tra Cu was not just left out there as a target. In addition to a significant active defense capability (4.2 inch mortars and .50 caliber machine guns) it had Duffle Bag. That was the acronym for the Unattended Ground Sensors (UGS: seismic, magnetic, infrared, and acoustic). Laid out in patterns along/near known enemy infiltration routes the PIM of enemy units could be deduced from sensor activations and the diversity of systems allowed the operators to differentiate enemy from animal activity; at times we could even hear the bad guys as they wandered towards us. As an aside, the CO of the Navy Riverine Duffel Bag Unit at Tra Cu was Lt Anthony (Tony) Principi, USN who would also serve as the Secretary of the VA many years later.

With this information, we could either position PBR's to intercept the bad guys or call-in H&I (Harassment and Interdiction) fire on the previously registered sensor string positions. This made for lively nights and long days as sensor string activations were prosecuted and damaged strings were replaced and re-registered. But, hey, that's why they paid us the big bucks, right? Sometimes, however, things got confused.

Normally, in the late afternoon (1630 local), NILO Duc Hoa would launch for the last-light VR (Visual Reconnaissance). The flight path would proceed up the Vam Co Dong River at 1,500 feet looking for any indication of enemy activity on either bank. The purpose was to identify any likely ambush sites prior to the deployment of the PBR's from Tra Cu. It also was intended to eliminate blue-on-blue engagements when boats from the ATSB to the north (Go Da Ha) heading south would receive fire from a peninsular area in the river just as the PBR's from Tra Cu heading north took fire from the same area. Stopping that little bit of fratricidal mayhem was a major accomplishment in and of itself. The VR missions would then range out across the Plain of Reeds looking for any indications of mid-day movement that threatened the boats or the ATSB and end up on the border at last light as the bad guys lined up for their final navigational sightings. Neat concept, and simple to execute but it did not always play out that way.

Although shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles had yet to make it into the enemy inventory, heavy machine gun fire when the FAC was up-sun from the gun could really blow your whole day. On one afternoon in particular, NILO Duc Hoa was looking over a bunker complex located in a tree square about two miles north-west of Tra Cu. The plain of Reeds was dotted with these remnants of farming attempts.

A tree square was simply a football field size plot of hardpan, laboriously built-up upon which farm huts and shelters could be built. Trees were planted as wind breaks but decades of war seen all of them deserted. It was a natural place for bunkers and a good day light layover for those that intent on attacking Tra Cu.

As the VR aircraft was completing its third orbit of the tree square, the duffel sensor operator radioed, "Bang, Bang, Bang" and NILO Tra Cu announced that Duffel Bag was scoring the firing at the tree square. To which NILO Duc Hoa responded "Bull Shit, be advised, we are taking ground fire!" and things went down hill from there.

An immediate call for fire from three different arty batteries resulted in the standard "wait out" while the necessary clearances for fire were obtained. In the interim, NILO Duc Hoa on strapped and began peppering the tree square with the M-60 that could be attached to the side of the aircraft using a jeep's windshield hinge and was fed from a sandbag filled with the belt ammo the M-60 required (this was high tech stuff folks!).

Almost immediately, uniformed personnel began moving about the tree square and the ground fire became considerably more intense. The VR aircraft opened the target area and called for immediate fire. Co-incidentally, NILO Tra Cu indicated that the "Aero-Rifles" were en route to his location.

The Aero-Rifles were a helo-borne company (minus) that could be inserted, like a fire brigade, on lucrative targets of opportunity identified by specific entities. NILO Tra Cu through extensive liaison had become one of those entities. Coordinates, wind direction, and general situations data was exchanged and the arty mission was changed to pre-insertion preparation or a battery-six (six guns/six rounds each); hell was in season.

As the smoke cleared from the final salvo, the nine slicks of the insertion party put boots on the dirt lead by NILO Tra Cu. NILO Duc Hoa meanwhile began setting up a fire mission with the "eight-inch battery" for an emergency extraction and calling for helicopter gunship support. What followed was a firefight that lasted until well after sundown where in a North Vietnam Infantry Company was literally decimated with the final body count standing exceeding 300 enemy KIA. After the area was secured, all the documents, papers, annotated maps and the op plan were delivered to NILO Tra Cu. The documents clearly revealed that we had engaged a NVA Battalion minus with and local VC scouts/recce and supply carriers assigned to it. The Maps and op plan revealed that the Battalion's mission was the elimination of ATSB Tra Cu and the Province Headquarters and Riverine PBR re-supply support facility located about 30 kilometers up river. The captured NVA and VC were turned over to the province Chief and his US Army Advisor and we were not given the opportunity to interrogate them. This enemy operation was a strong indication that the Riverine forces were seriously hurting NVA and VC operations in the area. This is also a prime example of successful Naval Intelligence support and Intelligence driven operations. NILO Tra Cu intelligence and recce reports from NILO Duc Hau prompted the implant of the Duffel Bag sensors that tree square area.

So what lessons can be drawn from all this? Intelligence support is obtaining and providing accurate, useful and evaluated information on a timely base to the operating forces. Liaison means insinuating your self into the extant infrastructure in such a way that your requests for assets or support will be honored and making sure that the quid pro quo is appropriate. Additionally, littoral warfare requires a departure from the traditional

mindset of naval operations; flexibility is the key to success. Finally, the reader should appreciate that bad things really do happen when the navy takes war littorally but, our community is just like that greeting card company: we care enough to send the very best.