

SECRET MARINE AMBUSH IN LAOS

Bizarre rules said the United States couldn't interfere with NVA convoys within plain sight across the Laotian border. The 9th Marines thought otherwise.

By Michael R. Conroy

Among the bizarre rules of engagement during most of the Vietnam War were the restrictions placed on engaging enemy forces moving reinforcements and supplies along the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran from North Vietnam down the Laotian panhandle and through Cambodia to supply points within South Vietnam. (See Norman Hannah's *Perspectives* article on the Laotian fiasco elsewhere in this issue.) While enemy convoys along the trail could be attacked by air, and in some cases by artillery, ground activity was restricted to secret MACV-SOG (Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group) cross-border operations.

These restrictions were especially frustrating for U.S. units operating along the South Vietnamese-Laotian border areas where the Ho Chi Minh Trail was in plain sight.

For example, on February 20, 1969, Captain David Winecoff led Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment (2/9), to the top of a 1,044-meter-high ridge in the A Shau Valley, known as Tiger Mountain. The battle-weary Marines took up positions directly overlooking Route 922, which was across the border in Laos and was a major artery of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

At 2130, an outpost excitedly reported spotting a fast-moving enemy convoy traveling east to west on Route 922 just 500 meters away. The prevailing rules of engagement permitted cross-border activity only in exercise of the right of self-defense against enemy attacks, and therefore no action could be taken against this tempting target by ground forces. The Marines watched in helpless awe as a stream of enemy vehicles passed within their view. Captain Winecoff reported the enemy movement to battalion headquarters, but in spite of Hotel Company's pinpoint observation, artillery and airstrikes weren't able to knock out the vehicles.

"The company, of course," said Captain Winecoff, "was talking about 'let's go down on that road and do some ambushing!' I don't think the politicians really thought they were going to let us go into Laos. I know if the military had their

way we'd be over there in Laos, and the company was all up for it. With the Paris peace talks going on, I wasn't sure what action was going to be taken."

Traffic moved on the road throughout the night while the Marine commanders considered a cross-border incursion. For the preceding couple of days the regiment's 1st Battalion had caught hell on the west flank from artillery and mortars firing from inside Laos. On the evening of February 20, Lt. Col. George Fox, the 2nd Battalion's commander, had suggested to Colonel Robert Barrow, the regimental commander (later to become commandant of the Marine Corps), that he was in a position to block Route 922.

"The military necessity, in my view, was to interdict that road," said Fox. "So, I had no qualms, myself, about invading Laos, if you want to term it that. As a result, we discussed it for a few minutes and I then mostly forgot about it as being beyond the bounds of political expediency." But Colonel Fox kept the idea in the back of his mind and ordered Hotel Company to remain in position to carry it out. Deeming the interdiction of the road clearly essential, Colonel Barrow passed the plan outlined by Colonel Fox on up the chain of command.

Major General Raymond G. Davis, the 3rd Marine Division commander, requested permission for the 9th Marines to mount a cross-border raid from his immediate superior, Army Lt. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, commander of XXIV Corps. General Stilwell sent a message to his superior, Marine Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman, Jr., the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) commander, recommending a limited raid into the heart of enemy Base Camp Area 611 to a maximum penetration of 5 kilometers along a 20-kilometer front, adding, however, that if the raid was "beyond the realm of political acceptability, a lesser course of action should be taken."

In Saigon, later the same day, General Cushman passed the suggested course of action on to Army General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, noting that "while recognizing the political implications of General Stilwell's pro-

A U.S. Marine M-60 machine-gunner prepares to cut loose against North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltrators near the Laotian border. On the evening of February 21, 1969, Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment (2/9), took the war into Laos itself.





Lance Corporal Kenneth Korolyk turns his M-60 on an NVA sniper. Marines were frustrated with rules of engagement that had them battling the NVA on one side of the Laotian border and watching the enemy move supplies on the other side.

posals...balanced against the military value of the unique opportunity, I fully endorse both."

Cross-border reconnaissance patrols were initiated by General Abrams in an effort to gain further intelligence upon which to base his decision. Colonel Barrow had wiretap intelligence indicating the time of movement of enemy artillery pieces along the trail—weapons that would be employed with devastating effect upon his forces. From his vantage point, Barrow did not feel that he could wait for a reply to his cross-border raid request. The need for cross-border raids, Barrow remembered, "was becoming increasingly critical.... The combination of what I would characterize as military necessity and opportunity came at the right time. We were a matter of a few hundred yards from this road and the trucks were using this thing, and they're probably resupplying. I personally immediately saw the opportunity to do something. I'm protecting my forces. U.S. Marine casualties and all these sorts of things are tied up in it. The political implications of going into Laos were pretty unimportant to me at that point. So I said, 'Do it!'"

Fearing a fatal delay if he waited to receive permission to cross the border, Colonel Barrow did not inform his immediate superiors of his decision to do so. Recognizing that he might be placing his career in jeopardy, Colonel Barrow personally assumed responsibility for ordering Hotel Company to cross the border and establish an ambush site along Route 922. Barrow recalls thinking that he was willing to pay whatever the price because it was the right thing to do. "I don't regret having done it a damn bit," he said later.

Early in the afternoon of February 21, Captain Winecoff received a secret order from Colonel Barrow. It took almost an hour to decode the message. The captain was shocked to find he had been ordered to enter Laos with a combat force. "I had one platoon that was extremely tired... and I had two other platoons which were pretty tired out on patrol," he recalled. "And to take a company out on patrol that night when it meant night movement and with specific instructions to be back in Vietnam at 0630 the next morning, [was] kind of a hard order to digest."

Every squad from all three platoons had been in contact with enemy forces the previous day, and because of his concern over the general fatigue level of his company, Captain Winecoff sought a 24-hour delay in which to rest his weary troops. Barrow's response was terse: "Go ahead with the mission... there's a very good reason for this mission, which we can't go into now, but it's vital that you get down and interdict Route 922 tonight."

Although the company had undergone instructions in ambushes and quick-reaction drills, the lack of time prevented a well-planned premission rehearsal. Additionally, Winecoff knew that since the company's position was being periodically probed by enemy reconnaissance units, it was imperative that a platoon be left in place as a deceptive measure. The captain issued a brief warning order to his two patrolling rifle platoons.

The 2nd Platoon was halted in place as it was located along a reasonable route to a likely ambush site. The platoon was ordered to harbor up and get as much rest as the situation allowed. The 2nd Platoon would be hungry as the men had

no rations on their patrol. Thirty-two meals were set aside to be delivered to them.

The 3rd Platoon was ordered to return immediately to the company's position where they would remain as a diversionary force. The platoon would be thinly spread out, with each squad filling in one of the three platoon's positions to give the appearance of a company-size unit. Although this scheme would leave the 3rd Platoon vulnerable to attack, it was hoped that these tactics would deceive the enemy as to the company's secret mission.

Captain Winecoff instructed the 1st Platoon members to get as much sleep as possible for they were facing a long night. In addition to the rifle platoons, an artillery forward observer team, an M-60 machine-gun team and a 60mm mortar team would go on the mission.

His plans completed, Winecoff lay down for a nap before time to move out. His sleep was brief, as the upset commander of the 3rd Platoon returned from his patrol wanting to be included in the coming action. The lieutenant was counseled on the importance of his platoon's part in the captain's overall scheme. He was also directed to use the company's two remaining 60mm mortars to provide the ambush patrol with harassing and interdiction fire between the hours of 1900 and 2100.

The 1st Platoon, reinforced by the company command group, forward observers and heavy weapons teams, moved out at 1630, descending a small trail where they were to rendezvous with the harboring 2nd Platoon just prior to dark to decrease the risk of mistaken identity. They had only moved a short way when Winecoff discovered that the rations for the 2nd Platoon had been forgotten. A detail was dispatched to pick them up, delaying movement by half an hour.

Almost immediately upon resumption of its movement, the 1st Platoon's point element had an encounter with two NVA (North Vietnamese Army) scouts. After a brief exchange of rifle fire, the enemy was scared away from the platoon's direction of movement. Upon breaking contact, the Marines moved out at an increased pace in order to put distance between the ambush force and the enemy scouts. Winecoff felt that the single platoon would appear to be a defensive patrol to the enemy.

At 1730 the 1st Platoon linked up with the 2nd Platoon. Winecoff briefed the 2nd Platoon commander while his hungry Marines eagerly consumed their rations. Winecoff and his two platoon commanders, accompanied by two riflemen, made a quick reconnaissance in the direction of the proposed ambush site under cover of approaching darkness. After personally viewing the terrain, Winecoff returned to issue his oral ambush order to all unit leaders down to the fire-team level. Platoon leaders were counseled to listen while the team leaders relayed the orders to their charges.

Winecoff stressed the importance of the daring mission, informing his men that a high-priority target might be coming down the trail that night. The direction of movement and the nature of the target were unknown but would probably be enemy units moving either away from or toward the main battle area, depending upon the intent of the enemy commanders. Winecoff emphasized that he alone would initiate the ambush.

Extraordinary precautions, such as taping down dog tags and smearing mud on exposed flesh in lieu of camouflage makeup sticks, were taken by the Marines. It was almost dark when the men were reminded that the regiment's units to the east were in heavy contact. The sound of artillery fire could be heard echoing in the distance.

It was a dark night with no moon. Because of the double-canopy jungle and the heavy cloud cover, no stars were visible. The compass and the previous meticulous map study were the Marines' only navigational aids. The rather large patrol would have to move in single file to achieve maximum control,



TOP: A lance corporal of the 9th Marines examines a North Vietnamese 12.7mm machine gun captured during fighting in the A Shau Valley region. ABOVE: Private First Class David S. Whitman rests warily after his rifle company of 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, fought its way to the top of a mountain overlooking the Laotian border.



While one Marine sets up a Claymore mine, another installs its detonator cord. Claymores triggered Captain Winecoff's ambush on the night of February 21, 1969.

and the Marines would have to keep in physical contact with one another to prevent separation. In darkness so black the Marines could not see their hands in front of their faces, the platoons moved into their ambush staging site. The order of march was the 1st Platoon, the command group, mortar crew, artillery forward observer team and the 2nd Platoon. A radio was with the 1st Platoon near the lead element and at the rear of the column to ensure that radio control was available in case of separation.

As the column filed along a small, fast-running creek bed, which muffled the sounds of their movement, the 3rd Platoon began its schedule of H&I (harassing and interdiction) fire. The creek led toward a stream that would have to be crossed en route to the selected ambush site. The creek had to be abandoned, however, because the Marines stumbled and fell frequently on the slippery rocks, making undetected movement impossible. The nervous Marines were certain that the enemy had heard them. Moving out of the creek bed and along a small ridgeline lessened the noise of the patrol's movement. The column stopped frequently to listen for sounds of enemy movement.

Their position was precarious because the distance and circumstances precluded rapid reinforcement if the ambush patrol was prematurely discovered by enemy forces or counterattacked in the ambush site. Anti-personnel mines seeded along the Ho Chi Minh Trail as part of the air war over Laos could also prove disastrous in creating casualties and giving away their position. Only blind luck would allow the Marines to avoid them.

As feared, two Marines near the center of the column became separated. A gap developed as the lead element continued and the rear of the column halted. When Winecoff was informed of the situation, he broke radio silence to halt the point element while contact was re-established.

Reunited, the patrol pushed on, the crisis averted. As the column reached the last ridge overlooking Route 922,

visibility was increased due to the less dense foliage overhead. Pulses quickened as the men reached the ridge and a dramatic scene was revealed off to the west. A long column of advancing trucks with dimmed headlights was moving in their direction, coming to a halt overlooking the stream paralleling the road. The Marines were startled when a nearby truck that had been parked in the jungle turned on its lights and started its engine. The truck proceeded east several hundred meters in the general direction of the ambush's killing zone. The intent of the NVA commanders was now clear. They were reinforcing and were possibly gearing up for a serious counteroffensive.

The truck cut its engine and coasted to a halt right in front of the patrol's point-man scout who was only 35 meters away across the stream.

The Marines held their breath. They were in an area littered with dead leaves, fallen trees, branches and brush caused by the relentless bombing and defoliation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. Movement had to be held to an absolute minimum as the slightest readjustment of one's position created a loud rustling among the dried leaves and branches. Had it not been for their excellent noise discipline, the patrol's presence and their mission could easily have been compromised.

In spite of taut nerves, the disciplined Marines did not fire their weapons. They were forced to sit and watch as the large enemy convoy crept past. At 2200, Winecoff sent the 1st Platoon commander and his chief scout, an experienced sergeant, on a reconnaissance patrol across the stream to scout the location selected for the ambush site, allotting two hours for this important mission.

The Marines on the ridge were instructed to carefully settle in for what proved to be far from a routine wait. They could see another convoy of half a dozen trucks creeping toward their position, using a halt, listen and creep-forward technique. Two of the trucks passed the Marines while the recon team was out, increasing the already heavy feeling of suspense.

Also increasing the mounting tension were voices that could be heard off in the distance to the east. Had the enemy scouts encountered earlier brought back patrols to search for the Marines? Was their presence in the proximity of the Ho Chi Minh Trail known? The Marines would be in extreme danger if their location and intent were even suspected. This was

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"Throughout the morning of February 22, the actions of Company H ricocheted around the command echelons of the 3rd Division and intervening commands all the way to, I understand, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and beyond," noted Colonel Fox, the 2/9 Marine commander. "I did not get the details of the ambush until Hotel Company settled back in Vietnam. It was my 45th birthday. What a present!"

In the meantime, General Abrams forwarded his reply to the February 20 III MAF request to cross the border, responding that only MACV-SOG (Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group) forces would be permitted to operate inside Laos.

By this time the battle was *fait accompli*, and all echelons recognized it as a singularly significant victory. The

Marine commanders informed General Abrams that the ambush had been conducted in self-defense under the existing rules of engagement. While the ambush had been dramatic and effective, its real value lay in the leverage in terms of precedence, success and value it provided in requesting a continuation of operations in Laos.

Based upon Colonel Barrow's request and General Stilwell's recommendation, Abrams reversed his earlier position and authorized Barrow to send a full battalion 2,000 meters into Laos on a 15-mile front, requesting only that there be no public discussion of the foray across the border, fearing possible adverse effects on international policy.

Knowledge of the operation in Laos was ordered limited. William Sullivan, the U.S. ambassador to Laos, and Prime

nothing compared to what happened next. From somewhere in the direction the voices were coming from, a powerful diesel cranked up loudly. Hearts skipped a beat as the sounds of a creaking and clanking tracked vehicle moving in their direction filled the Marines' ears. It sounded like a tank! The tracked vehicle stopped twice to probe the darkness with a powerful mounted searchlight.

The tank stopped in the middle of the road at the point where the stream turned to the south to intersect it. The searchlight was turned on and seemed to be focused in the direction of the waiting Marines. The men wondered if their scout team had been spotted. Had the ambushers been seen or heard? Had the tracks of the scouts crossing the road given their position away?

The panicked Marines hugged the earth, praying. They shut their eyes so the bright glare of the searching light would not totally destroy their night vision. Their actions were a study in unit and personal discipline.

"It stayed right in the ambush site location for the longest time," Winecoff said of the tank. "We thought we were spotted. It was a very exciting moment for Hotel Company because the spotlight was fanning up and down the river and on the bluff, and it was playing over the lead elements of the company."

The fearful tracked monster finally turned its searchlight off and rumbled on up the road, stopping about a mile away without conducting further searchlight stops. This led the Marines to wonder if the searchlight operator had spotted them and was reporting their position. Another thought was that this was a routine precautionary measure taken prior to moving something significant down the road. Did Colonel Barrow know what it was? Was a tank column the important target of the ambush?

The reconnaissance team returned quite late. "What took so long?" Winecoff asked. They had heard but not seen the tank as they had immediately covered themselves in a bomb crater to avoid detection. "Every fallen tree looked like a fallen soldier," the scout reported. "We pounced upon one log with drawn knives because we were so sure." After a short debriefing, the previously selected ambush site, approximately 1,750 meters inside Laos, was approved. There appeared to be no

Minister Souvanna Phouma were not informed until the operations was well underway. When informed, the prime minister expressed understanding of the action and deemed it essential to keep the matter secret but hoped that the operation would be of short duration.

Sullivan, who squawked when informed of the operation, had placed restrictions on U.S. ground activities in Laos that worked to the distinct advantage of the North Vietnamese Army. Sullivan's ground rules meant, basically, that no American soldier was allowed to fight on the ground in Laos.

On February 25, near the hamlet of Ap Dalone, 2,500 meters inside Laos, Hotel Company's Corporal William D. Morgan was killed in action in a battle for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor. Morgan is one of six U.S. servicemen to win the Medal of Honor for combat actions in Laos. The other five men were members of MACV-SOG.

Additionally, while in Laos, the battalion lost seven other men and suffered 33 wounded. At no time were these casualties reported as having taken place in Laos.

On April 25, a *Time* magazine article stated, "The allies so far have launched no major ground operations in Cambodia and Laos." On August 12, 1973, Seymour M. Hersh reported in *The New York Times* that "President Nixon personally authorized a secret Marine Corps combat operation inside Laos... in enemy controlled territory near the A Shau Valley."

In his 1973 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the committee that elements of the 9th Marine Regiment had been authorized to go more than a mile inside Laos and that "this was the first and only time where United States ground combat forces went into Laos."



Troops of the 9th Marine Regiment secure a battle-scarred hilltop in the A Shau Valley region after a heated engagement with NVA regulars in February 1969.

trucks on the road nearby. The column again moved in single file 1,500 meters south in pitch darkness. Crossing the stream in silence was not easy. The bank, which was made up of loose dirt, had a 70-degree slope dropping about 15 feet to the water below which was 1 to 2 feet deep in most places. If the company had crossed earlier, the searchlight would have discovered their tracks in the dirt.

The company found the selected site in the darkness. Winecoff's plan called for establishing the ambush force on the far side of the road so that any assault through the killing zone would be in the direction of their withdrawal to Vietnam. Halfway across the wide road the Marines were startled when the drivers of several nearby trucks to the west started their engines. The Marines quickened their pace and stopped 25 meters up a slope on the far side of Route 922 to establish hasty ambush positions.

Winecoff established a single line facing the road rather than a 360-degree defensive perimeter. The 1st Platoon was established to the right of the command group. The 2nd was directed to the left. The Marines quickly took up firing positions facing down on the road in a classic ambush posture.

There were immediate problems. Winecoff was displeased with the haste required by the approaching vehicles. He had not had a chance to check observation points, security and fields of fire. Claymore mines and flank security were not yet in place. He decided not to initiate an ambush on the approaching vehicles unless the drivers spotted the tracks the Marines had left in crossing the road. Those tracks appeared luminous to the Marines.

As a precautionary measure, Winecoff passed the word down the line that he would not initiate an ambush against this convoy unless it proved necessary. Within two minutes the enemy vehicles passed through the ambush killing zone without spotting the Marines or their tracks, which their vehicles helped to erase.



A Marine 155mm howitzer lobes some high-explosive obstacles in the path of North Vietnamese traffic plying the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Artillery from the Vietnamese side of the border, preregistered by a forward observer, assisted Winecoff's ambush.

As soon as the convoy was safely past, Winecoff made an oral check to see what kind of observation the individual Marines had of the trucks as they passed. Some of the men did not have very good fields of fire, and adjustments were made accordingly. Flank and rear cutoff teams were established. Winecoff and Lieutenant Allen Guins moved forward to set up three Claymore mines next to the road. While Winecoff was positioning his firing device, he fell into a hole all the way up to his armpits. Scrambling free, the captain discovered that he had fallen into the aperture of a solidly constructed roadside bunker. The A-frame structure was made of logs 6 to 7 inches in diameter, with several feet of earth covering its top. There was another large opening facing the road. This was a protected position that truck drivers could dive into if caught in the open by artillery fire or airstrikes.

Winecoff set his Claymore up next to the opening in the top of the bunker. Carefully playing out its wire, he moved back up the hill and connected it to his triggering device. He then informed the command group of his discovery, asking if there were any volunteers who would like the opportunity to have a ringside seat for the event about to unfold on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The chief scout and the chief radio operator quickly volunteered. They took one of the radios, a red-lensed flashlight and a LAAW (light anti-tank assault weapon) down to the bunker, where they settled in to await further developments.

Shortly after 0100, the Hotel Company Marines began hearing an occasional shot being fired from the west where the tracked vehicle had stopped. A single NVA soldier was spotted walking down the middle of the road conducting a recon by fire against suspicious areas along the trail. Winecoff wisely decided that he didn't want to bag one NVA soldier with his carefully placed ambush, and to be certain that his men would not trigger the ambush in reaction to this tactic, he passed the word to let the soldier pass through the killing zone. The scout in the roadside bunker broke radio silence at 0200 to report, "Heavily loaded six-wheeled truck with lumber sticking over its tailgate." Remembering his orders stating that there was a very good reason for this ambush, Winecoff allowed the single vehicle to pass, feeling that sooner or later a significant target would enter the killing zone.

The truck disappeared down the road, and the ambush site grew quiet again, with nothing moving along the road. Looking down the slope, Winecoff could see absolutely nothing in the darkness. Enemy voices in conversation were occasionally heard from a distance of several hundred meters to the east. The Marines wondered what the enemy was discussing. The voices carrying so clearly in the valley made it easier for the Marine commanders to effect tight noise-discipline as they waited for a suitable target to come down the road.

Suddenly, at 0239, the silence enveloping the ambush site was shattered as NVA drivers on both sides and up and down the road all started their engines at the same time.

The dimmed lights being turned on created a visible line of vehicles.

"It's a convoy! Look at the size of it!" a Marine exclaimed.

The Marines braced for action, the reason for the tight security measures now apparent. The voices that the Marines had heard were obviously small groups of drivers waiting for word to move out. The Marines' excitement was compounded as the vehicles drew near. The size of the convoy, though, was frightening. The convoy was so well spaced as it approached the ambush site that it would be difficult to catch two vehicles in the company's killing zone at the same time.

At 0300, just before the lead vehicle rounded the bend to enter the ambush killing zone, the chief scout, following Winecoff's instructions, stuck his head out of the bunker next to the road and flashed his red-lensed flashlight for a split second, allowing the commander to fix the location of his Claymore.

The sergeant ducked back into the bunker. Winecoff waited with eyes riveted to the spot where his mine was situated. The lead vehicle, moving cautiously, came into sight, then cut off its engine and coasted down the road. This truck was allowed to pass into the 1st Platoon's area. Winecoff continued to wait as a second truck came into his field of vision, also turning off its engine and lights, but the lights of a third truck could now be seen. With the second truck centered on his Claymore, Captain Winecoff detonated his mine at 0303, triggering the ambush. With a loud roar and a boiling cloud of thick black smoke the truck exploded into flames, killing its three passengers. The keyed-up Marines cut loose with their own weapons up and down the line. The 1st Platoon commander triggered his Claymore but missed the cabin of the truck and failed to stop it, although Winecoff's exploding Claymore had also set this truck on fire. Observing the miss from his roadside bunker, the quick-thinking scout fired his LAAW and stopped the lead vehicle. The 2nd Platoon commander's Claymore failed to detonate. Reacting quickly, the alert truck driver in the third vehicle threw his engine into reverse and began backing out of the killing zone.

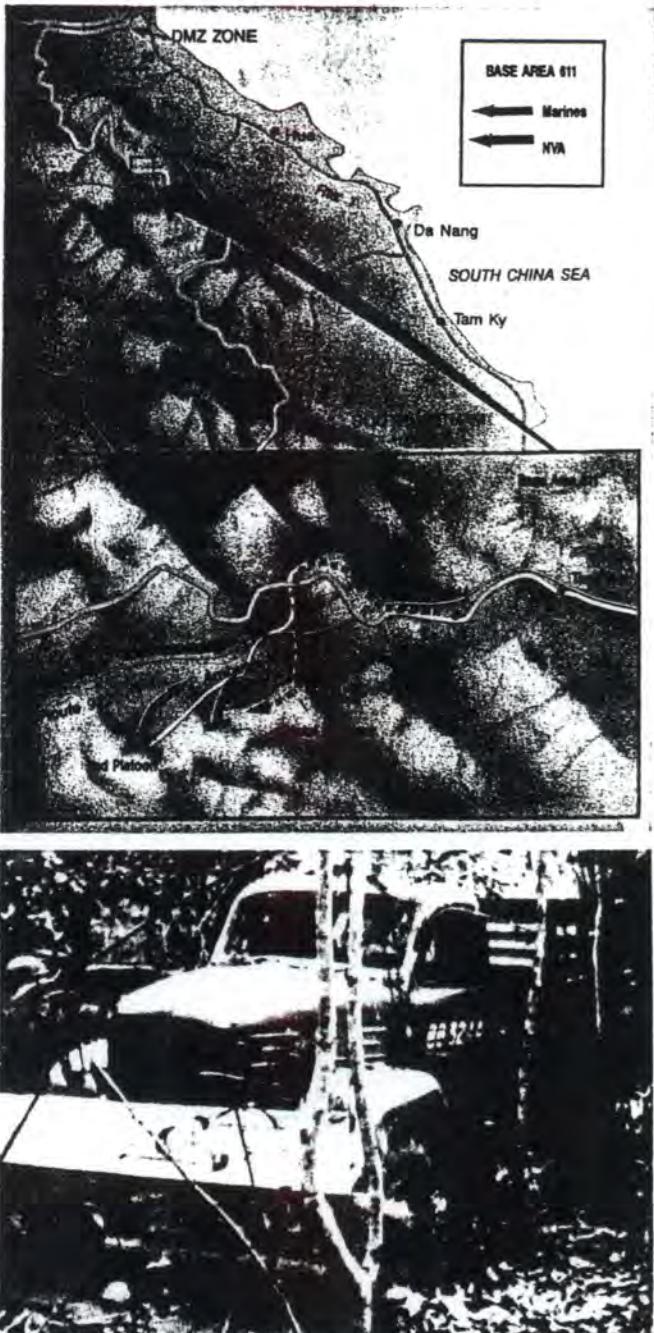
The forward observer had preregistered artillery rounds falling on the company's flanks along the road within 30 seconds. One of the trucks ran off the road, which was blocked by flaming debris, as the truck hit by Winecoff, which had been loaded with several tons of small-arms ammunition, burned. The Marines fired the ambush a bit longer than was necessary; however, they had been waiting a long time, and their excitement was keen.

Aware that an enemy force might respond to the sounds of the ambush, and with the memory of the enemy tank off to the west fresh in his mind, Winecoff took time only for a quick search while assaulting through the ambush site, making sure everything within the killing zone was destroyed.

The flank security and search teams were called in, and the company proceeded to retrace its steps out of Laos, but the men's exhaustion forced Winecoff to give his unit a two-hour rest while still inside Laotian territory. During their security halt, the Marines heard something crashing away in the jungle nearby. They could not tell if it was a tiger disturbed by the battle noises or a truck driver taking evasive action from the artillery bombardment of the roadway.

All three of the vehicles that had entered the ambush killing zone could be seen clearly on the road below. The second truck continued to burn and cook off small-arms ammunition for the next three hours. It was a heartening site for all the Marines who could see it.

Winecoff's column moved back across the border and then halted until morning, some 500 meters up the ridge across from the stream. The ambush had brought all traffic along that sector of Route 922 to a halt. As dawn broke over the landscape below, the company observed enemy truck drivers hurriedly moving their vehicles short distances off the road



TOP: On the night of February 21, 1969, Hotel Company's participation in the patrol activities being undertaken by the 2/9 Marines took a slight diversion—across the Laotian border. ABOVE: A Chinese-built North Vietnamese truck, captured during a South Vietnamese foray into Laos in 1971.

and concealing them from aerial reconnaissance. Winecoff plotted and reported on the enemy activity. Hotel Company returned to Hill 1044 while the artillery forward observer team stayed behind to see if more damage could be inflicted by artillery fire. The enemy's losses were not extensive—10 NVA soldiers had been killed, and three trucks with their loads of ammunition and other supplies had been destroyed. The ambush did, however, put the NVA on notice that the Laotian sanctuary was not necessarily a safe haven. □

PEN award-winner Michael R. Conroy, a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War, wrote about Fire Support Base Cunningham in the A Shau Valley in the August 1991 issue of Vietnam. His new book *Don't Tell America* will be released in September 1992 by Eagle Publications.