Bad Day at Dalat

By Colonel Larry Saul

The resounding crash of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and the staccato report of several automatic weapons were the first indications that things had just taken a turn for the worse. It didn't take long to figure out that this was going to be ugly. Along the length of the kill zone, the scene was one of smoke, flame, and bodies lying about—the unmistakable sight of death and destruction. A quick glance revealed that we were pinned down, under highly accurate enemy fire, and had taken numerous casualties. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had launched a thoroughly successful ambush against a U.S. unit in the central highlands of Vietnam.

In early May 1970, Delta Company, 815th Engineer Battalion, assigned to the 937th Engineer Group, 18th Engineer Brigade, and its sister unit, the 102d Engineer Company (Construction Support), moved from the area around Dak To and Kontum, in northern South Vietnam's II Corps, to an isolated base camp adjacent to the inconsequential village of Phu Heip, near the village of Di Linh, Lam Dong Province. Di Linh is situated roughly equidistant between the two provincial capitals of Bao Loc and Dalat, astride national highway QL-20. Dalat is the capital of Tuyen Duc Province and was the home of the Vietnamese National Military Academy and summer home for the president of South Vietnam. This idyllic town had been a tourist destination during the French colonial period. Dalat had a decent, well-maintained airstrip and served as a logistical support base for U.S. units in the area. Supplies and mail were shipped there for distribution. The main class of supply was Class I. For Classes III (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) and V (ammunition), units conducted major resupply convoys to the sprawling logistical support bases at Cam Ranh Bay or Long Binh. A rudimentary post exchange (PX) and Army post office (APO) were located at the airstrip. These were a major attraction for the troops.

The resupply convoys were becoming routine events. "Ad hoc" describes the composition, organization, and command and control of recent convoys. Troops volunteered for the somewhat dangerous task of convoy security for a variety of reasons: It offered a break from the routine, a chance to see some new scenery, and a chance to get away from our small base. The troops could shop at the PX and use the APO.

There had been little enemy activity in the weeks leading up to 21 May, a direct result and benefit of the allied incursion into Cambodia. Consequently, volunteering for security duty seemed like a safe bet. The security force consisted of no more than 15 personnel. The security detail would provide the "shotgun," or truck commander in current parlance, for the vehicles and also constitute the reaction force traveling in trucks at the front and rear of the convoy. Gun trucks were

"Wild Thing," Delta Company's gun truck, was equipped with two .50-caliber machine guns, a 7.62-millimeter machine gun, a six-barreled 7.62-millimeter "minigun," and a radio.

The high-pitched sound of the minigun's 6,000 rounds per minute struck fear into the hearts of the NVA.

either 2 1/2-ton or 5-ton cargo trucks with locally fabricated armored compartments mounted in the cargo bed. On occasion, the armored compartment was the hull of an M113 armored personnel carrier (APC). The trucks were usually armed with four machine guns—a mix of 7.62-millimeter M60s and .50-caliber M2s. On occasion, a 7.62-millimeter "minigun" was mounted. The minigun was a highly effective weapon. Designed for helicopter gunships, this electrically powered, six-barreled weapon could fire 6,000 rounds per minute. When fired, it made a terrifying sound. The NVA feared it.

The gun truck served several purposes. Obviously, it was a source of heavy firepower. It could fight off enemy attacks in ambush kill zones, allowing the other vehicles to clear out of the zone. The drivers, truck commanders, and gunners were brave men. The tactics employed, and the terrific firepower they possessed, made them very attractive targets for deadly and accurate enemy RPGs and machine gun fire.

We used a set pattern: the lead vehicle—an M151 1/4-ton vehicle, better known as a jeep—would be the convoy commander's, who was nicknamed the "Charlie Charlie." Following that would be the 2 1/2-ton cargo trucks, the famous "deuce-and-a-halfs." These included both mess and supply section trucks as well as the awesome gun truck.

Once the convoy was lined up for departure, it was standard operating procedure for the Charlie Charlie to conduct a convoy briefing. Incorporated in this briefing were the route, radio call signs, procedures for reaction to enemy contact, and the chain of command. On 21 May, no briefings were conducted, nor were rehearsals or precombat checks performed. We had become very complacent. This gross oversight would have serious implications later that day.

In recent weeks, our area of operations had been very quiet; the convoys had not encountered enemy activity. Closer to Dalat, we came across more and more local people. Small hamlets dotted the countryside. Woodcutters and farmers populated the villages, especially in the flatlands at the base of the mountains just outside the city. These peasants had one desire—to live their lives peacefully despite the war raging around them. Consequently, we saw more civilian vehicle traffic in this area. Drivers had to remain alert to trucks, pedestrians, farmers herding water buffalo, and youngsters playing near the road. Everyone remained alert and on the lookout for any possibility. As a result of the heavy foot and vehicle traffic, our convoy slowed down considerably and then came to an abrupt halt. Troops dismounted from the trucks and milled about haphazardly.

The Charlie Charlie drove back from the front of the convoy with the news that a civilian truck had swerved into the path of our lead 2 1/2-ton truck, resulting in a collision. We waited casually by our vehicles, not even bothering to take up defensive positions, thinking there was no real threat of an attack. We were lulled into the false security of thinking that we were too close to Dalat for enemy action. Moments after the Charlie Charlie drove off to inform the remaining vehicles in the convoy of the situation, an enormous explosion of rockets, command-detonated mines, and heavy automatic weapons fire erupted.

The Charlie Charlie's jeep came screaming back to our position. It was apparent from the look of sheer terror on his face that things had just taken a horribly ugly turn for the worse. The gunner of the jeep's pedestal-mounted M60 machine gun was crumpled in a bloody ball. Small arms fire had riddled the side of the jeep, severely wounding the machine gunner and destroying the radio. In short order, we had suffered a major attack and had lost a number of troops and the use of our radio.

While lying in the protection of a roadside ditch, we were able to look the length of the kill zone. From our position, we could see the friendly side of the road, and the convoy's trucks scattered about haphazardly. A few were on fire and smoking from well-placed RPG rounds. Several soldiers were lying in the road. From the looks of it, most of them were dead. A few could be seen moving, but when they did, a fusillade of enemy small arms fire would engulf them. Above the sounds of the enemy gunfire could be heard the unmistakable reports of the gun truck's heavy .50-caliber machine guns. If anything could

The UH-1 "Huey" served as a workhorse in Vietnam. At the scene of an ambush, casualties are loaded for evacuation to a field hospital.

Crewmen of "Wild Thing" frequently volunteered for dangerous duty as machine gunners.

break the enemy attack, it would be the overwhelming firepower of the gun truck. At least twice, the truck drove into and out of the kill zone. Our company gun truck, nicknamed "Wild Thing," was running back and forth, up and down the road. One soldier dismounted from the gun truck, retrieving the wounded and placing them in the relative safety of the armored box of the truck. With complete disregard for his own life, this young soldier pulled several wounded men to safety. Sadly, we had no medics to treat the wounded. This was an inexcusable omission.

The Charlie Charlie determined things were out of control and that we could not survive for long in our precarious position. He ordered us to retrieve the wounded closest to us, then mount up into the remaining vehicles and move out. We had his battered jeep and our overloaded 3/4-ton truck, plus a number of the 2 1/2-ton trucks and Wild Thing. We drove helter-skelter for Dalat.

We raced through the streets of Dalat, knowing we needed to get our wounded to the U.S. aid station quickly. Some of them were desperate for immediate attention. The realization that we needed to get back to the ambush site with additional ammunition, manpower, and heavier firepower was undeniable. We knew full well we had friends trapped in the kill zone.

While the medics tended to the wounded, we made final preparations for the trip back to the kill zone. We were reinforced with a platoon (-) of military police (MP) equipped with V-100 armored cars and a gun truck. The MP platoon leader took command and developed a plan.

The drive back down the mountain to the ambush site was short. We used the time to double- and triple-check our weapons, check ammunition, and make final preparations. The tasks we needed to accomplish, and the attention to detail required, helped keep the anticipation and fear in check. There was no traffic on the road from either direction.

We approached the kill zone, but when we were within one or two kilometers of the ambush site, we still could not hear any gunfire. As we drove around the curve leading to the site, we saw that the civilian truck that had collided with our 2 1/2-ton truck was gone. The MP V-100 armored cars moved quickly up to the near edge of the kill zone, near the spot where we had initially deployed from the 3/4-ton truck when the ambush started. The gun truck took up a firing position with a field of fire down the length of the kill zone.

The scene ahead was one of carnage. Lifeless bodies could be seen lying in the road. Smoke and the overwhelming smell of cordite hung over the position like a pall. It was hell. The armored cars and the gun truck were prepared to provide the dismounting troops with overwatching and suppressive fire.

It was obvious that the enemy was gone. Once again, his hit-and-run tactics had worked very well. We had to treat casualties and account for the soldiers we knew had been trapped in the kill zone. We had several men wounded, some grievously. Initial casualty reports stated that we had two confirmed dead. Two great young Americans had died while serving their nation. One of the fallen was a popular young sergeant. Later, word spread of his heroic act of pulling his wounded comrades into the gun truck.

Within a few minutes we accounted for all but one of our troops, those killed or wounded. There was no sign of the missing soldier anywhere. As is typical in any action, personnel accountability is critical. We had to determine the status of every member of the convoy force. As of that moment, everyone focused on finding the missing soldier or his remains. We were all horrified to think of what might have happened to him. Typically, the Vietcong and NVA killed junior enlisted men outright. No one wanted to ponder his fate. It was too horrible to consider.

This had been a very successful day for the NVA. The ambush had accomplished exactly what it wanted. For a very short time, the NVA enjoyed a brief tactical victory, albeit on a very small scale. The goal was to kill Americans, and it succeeded. A few more American soldiers would be going home in body bags.

Resupply convoys were an essential operation. There was no alternative. Units had to conduct routine convoys to Dalat, Long Binh, and Cam Ranh Bay. This was the only means of getting large and outsized equipment and bulk supplies such as fuel and ammunition. Convoys were, and remain, combat operations and must be treated as such. Even today, units

must plan, resource, rehearse, and conduct convoys, since these are critical combat operations.

What lessons were learned from the events of 21 May 1970? What conclusions could be reached? They were simple, and all were leadership-related.

- German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel said more than a half century ago that "in battle, death sanctions all faults." On 21 May, we had a lot of faults:
  - No commissioned officer was detailed to lead the convoy.
  - No clear chain of command was delineated.
  - No operations order, rehearsal, or concept briefing was prepared or conducted.
  - No redundant communications systems were set up within the convoy.
  - No convoy briefing for the drivers, truck commanders, or security force was conducted.
  - No proper cross-leveling of noncommissioned officers among the trucks was executed.
  - No medic accompanied the convoy.
  - No reaction plan in the event of enemy contact was planned or executed.
  - Neither precombat checks nor serviceability inspections were conducted.
- Another Rommel dictum is that "the more sweat on the training ground, the less on the battleground." We failed to conduct rehearsals or establish drills in the event of an ambush. We could have minimized the effects of this catastrophe with a proper rehearsal.
- A convoy is a combat operation. It requires detailed planning, from predeparture to conclusion. Contingencies must be anticipated and plans developed to meet any possible enemy action.
- Failure to plan means that you are planning to fail. Should you fail to consider the enemy, you deserve what you get.

The only happy ending of the 21 May 1970 fight came in February 1973, when his NVA captors released the missing soldier. His name was never identified on any prisoner of war list, and he had long been given up for dead. His survival surprised and elated everyone. The great young men of the 102d Engineer Company and Delta Company, 815th Engineer Battalion, served their country with pride and distinction. The vast majority did their job, served their tours, and returned to civilian life. Today, they are middle-aged and have gotten on with their lives.

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