

RECON PATROL



Story and photos by
SSgt Tom Bartlett

Swiftly, silently and deadly, Recon Marines checked a fishing village in search of Viet Cong disguised as friendly Vietnamese.

HE SERVED in the Vietnamese Army for 36 months, a draftee, then joined the Viet Cong. This paper says he have rifle—M-1. He have two grenades, too.”

Lt Vinh Cong, Liaison Officer/Interpreter of the ARVN, or Army of the Republic of Vietnam, was reading papers taken by a Marine recon patrol, headed by Capt Pat Collins. Capt Collins had returned from a night/day patrol and was reporting to LtCol Don Blanchard, Commanding Officer, 3d Reconnaissance Bn., near the Da Nang Air Base.

Holder of the Bronze Star for action in Vietnam, Capt Collins is a company commander with the battalion.

He informed the colonel that the patrol had killed one Viet Cong and had taken three VC suspects, confiscated one rifle, one grenade and some rounds of ammunition.

From the one dead VC, the Marine patrol had taken a wallet. The ARVN lieutenant was interpreting the papers found. “He had children and a wife,”

the ARVN said. “This letter from friend in northern part of Vietnam near 17th Parallel.”

Another paper from the wallet carried the words of a VC fighting song. “Can you sing it?” asked LtCol Blanchard.

“No, sir, colonel,” replied the lieutenant. “This a VC song, I can no sing VC songs!”

The motto of the 3d Recon Bn., is “Silently, Swiftly, Deadly,” and men such as Capt Pat Collins have proved that they can live the motto as well as recite it.

“He’s a wonderful, regular guy,” state Capt Collins’ men. “He says ‘The hell with what we did yesterday and the day before. Here’s what we’re going to do today.’ And he pulls it off.”

“We even use ‘Zippos’ once in a while,” another of Capt Collins’ men boasted. A “Zippo” is a flame-throwing tank.

“We’ve used LVTs and the Ontos during our missions,” claimed still another member of “Delta” Co. “Sure, we use the regular stuff, like rubber boats, SCUBA gear and such, but sometimes the heavy stuff helps, especially when

it becomes necessary to ‘influence’ VC strongholds.”

Following Capt Collins’ report to the battalion commander, he was debriefed by Capt Edward Chapman, Battalion Intelligence Officer, (S-2) and Commanding Officer, H&S Co.

S-2: “How about your second objective?”

Collins: “The village? We saw five VCs, around 0800, moving west. They were wearing the standard black, cotton uniform. They were all carrying carbines.”

“At the same time, three VCs were moving east. Cpl Bill Hisel killed one of them. One of that group, the three-man group, wore an orange scarf.”

“Around his neck?” asked Capt Chapman, “or around his head?”

“Neck.”

Capt Collins continued: “We received sporadic fire all morning, from around 0730 to 1100.”

S-2: “How many weapons did you see?”

“One sniper with a carbine, moving. We stalked him for an hour. He remained in the same area.”

S-2: “Was he moving around a rice

paddy, shooting?"

Collins: "Mainly in the tree line, there," and he pointed to a huge map on the wall. Continuing, he said, "Around 0930, we observed one VC carrying an M-1. Two of my men staked out an area, waiting for him to return home."

S-2: "Was he previously sighted?"

Collins, pointing to map: "To the east, in the company of a Viet Cong with a carbine."

"Apprehended?"

"Couple of hours later, but without a weapon. The two-man stake-out nabbed him as he came home," Capt Collins yawned.

Capt Chapman: "Didn't have a rifle? Did he put it in the house?"

"No."

"Did your stake-out check the house?"

"Right, but the snipers started firing again, and we figured we'd better get moving. I'm sure he didn't have a weapon on his return home, though."

"Then this second VC comes diddeeboppin' down the road," Capt Collins continued. "He came down the trail, running, carrying a rifle and a bayonet, and falls right into the ditch with my stake-out. This is the VC that Hisel killed, and he's the one that we took the wallet from."

"He was definitely a Viet Cong. In fact, the papers we took from the wallet prove that he was a tax collector for the VCs."

Following the debriefing, Capt Collins recalled, "Last night's raid was good. It was obvious that the people and the Viet Cong didn't know we were in the area. They walked around without a care in the world."

Later, in a Jeep with the confiscated papers, rifle, grenade and bullets, (which were being taken to the Division Intelligence Section,) Capt Chapman said: "The Viet Cong is learning fast that he's no longer the master of the trail. They know now that we can and will move at night and under adverse weather conditions. Men like Capt Pat Collins are beating the VC at their own game; just look at the results of this patrol."

"Not a Marine was scratched."

The Recon Marines, utilizing the "Silently, Swiftly, Deadly" motto, move into Viet Cong territory in small groups, setting night or daylight ambushes and stake-outs. The results have been close to spectacular.

Recon Marines have taken 15 VC prisoners and over 125 VC suspects. They have inflicted 322 VC casualties, made over 625 contacts and have confiscated more than 500 Viet Cong documents.

All this in four months. . .

Not all the Recon patrols are "dingers" or the type where the noise of battle erupts and dies. Sometimes, nothing at all happens, but when traveling with Recon, there's the thrill of knowing that when something does

happen, Recon will know how to react.

Every man assigned to the 3d Recon Bn., has been on at least one patrol. This includes the cooks, drivers and clerks.

Prior to a patrol, a heli-recon is generally made of the area to be patrolled. One or two officers and the platoon sergeants for the patrol board choppers for a bird's-eye view of the terrain.

During a recent heli-recon, made prior to a combined beach recon and an early morning village sweep, the recon-ers spotted nine Viet Cong strolling down a path beside a river. Asking the pilot to fly lower, the Recon Marines broke into laughter as the VCs dove for cover, some into thorns and bushes, three in a cactus patch and a couple more into the river.

The area was marked on a map for future reconnaissance.

The sharp-eyed observers also noticed some barbed wire in the area which was to be patrolled. The wire hadn't been there five days earlier. They also made an aerial check of a hill where two Recon Marines had been wounded by a booby trap.

Swinging back again, they selected possible landing zones and heli-pick-up points, and scanned the area with binoculars for possible water sources.

The helicopter swung around Dong Den, an isolated mountain, whose peak had been hammered flat by demolitions and the pounding of Recon members. The flattened mountain now serves as

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Gysgt Bob G. Holloway and Cpl Bryant Collins exchanged notes following a patrol debriefing from the night before.

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an observation post for nine Marines.

The group is flown to the mountain top by helicopters, and two days later, it is relieved in the same manner.

The mountain affords a view which extends from the Laotian border on clear days, to the China Sea. Nearby Elephant Valley breaks up the boredom for the Marines. Occasionally, they can observe the Viet Cong using elephants to haul heavy loads through the maze of jungle below.

Returning to camp, the patrol was formed and briefed on its mission, consisting of two parts; a night patrol along "Red Beach," and an early morning sweep of Ap Xuân Duong, a small fishing village near a tiny peninsula on the China Sea.

1stLt Doug MacCaskill, Platoon Leader, 2d Platoon, "Alpha" Co., headed the patrol, consisting of 21 men, two demolitions men and two corpsmen.

Normally, a patrol is made up of a 23-man platoon, but because of the nature of this assignment, the demolitions men were needed to blow up concrete fortifications or rocky caves.

Preliminary reports indicated that a group of junks had been sailing in a "herd" around the peninsula. Night patrols along "Red Beach" had spotted a number of these junks sailing without running lights, in violation of navigation laws.

One night, some 15 small junks were clustered around a large five-masted vessel. An armed helicopter was called in and made a flare drop.

Sgts Kenneth Lester and Charles Fine examined an old French bunker which faces the South China Sea.



Marines on a heli recon flight over "Red Beach" spotted nine VC's, who leaped for cover in brush and cactus.

The junks circled around the larger ship, "just like the covered wagons used to do against the Indians," said one of the patrol members.

A Navy patrol boat was called in to investigate, but nothing was found. The junks had "disappeared" before the gunboat arrived.

1stLt MacCaskill inspected his men at 1800, double-checking the demolitions equipment. Boarding a six-by truck, the patrol roared down the road, sending up a cloud of dust and dirt. They arrived at an ARVN Ranger

camp around 1930, and were told to relax until 2100.

"The canteen's open. No beer. Coke and orange soda only" cautioned SSgt Robert M. Troy, 2d Platoon Sergeant.

What do members of a recon patrol do before their jump-off?

Recon hit the canteen and gathered around a sole, wobbly, candle-lit table. "Hey, Doc, how about a song?"

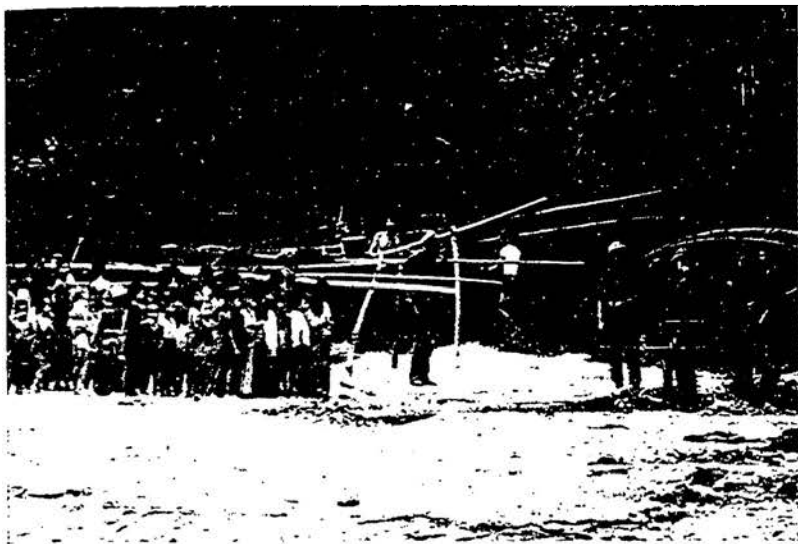
"Doc" is HN Mike Armstrong, graduate of the Mountain Warfare School at Pickle Meadows, Calif, and SCUBA school. He's a qualified radio operator, capable of operating the PRC-10 and PRC-47. "Doc's more of a Marine than some Marines," a recon member stated.

Like a clean-shaven Mitch Miller, "Doc" Armstrong led the men in song, accompanying himself with a pair of spoons which he banged on his knees, slapped with his hands or flipped across his chest. "Witch Doctor" was followed by a college song, and then "She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain" was sung with gusto by the soda-swigging patrol.

A huge group of Vietnamese Rangers crammed into the canteen to watch the Marines.

Then the canteen fell silent as one of the men began softly, "From the Halls of Montezuma . . ." There was no laughter or embarrassment as the group joined in on "The Marines' Hymn," sung softly and slowly.

The "Hymn" was followed by a couple more college songs, and then the word was passed to "Fall in!" As the patrol financially squared away their debts with the canteen operator, the



Marines of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion maintained guard against possible VC trickery in a fishing village.



(ABOVE) Marines observed fishermen in the South China Sea. (BELOW) The 2d Platoon of "A" Company took a much-needed break after patrolling their way across a peninsula.



same voice began again "The Marines' Hymn."

Twice, in an hour and a half!

"We're about as 'gungy' as any Marine unit," a member stated. "We're proud of the Corps and proud of our battalion's record. We sing the 'Hymn' every time we get together. We sing it slow and soft; seems better that way."

The patrol was split into two squads; one was to skirt the beach and the other to slice across the upper bank bordering the South China Sea.

There were nine checkpoints along "Red Beach." The patrol would spread out into small groups, sit in position for about two hours, then move onto another checkpoint for another two hours. While in position, half would watch the sea, beach and land, while the others napped.

Any sightings would be called back to the main checkpoint, then relayed back to the Third Regiment, on call to provide any air, sea or artillery support which might be requested.

"In the morning, just before the crack of dawn, we'll cross the beach diagonally, cross the railroad tracks leading into the village and then enter through the barbed wire surrounding the village," said 1stLt MacCaskill.

Prior clearance had been made with the Popular Forces, (local Vietnamese troops who patrol the village.) Informing Vietnamese troops is a precautionary measure and averts fire-fights with Allied troops.

During the night watch on the beach, six junks were sighted, running without lights. These were reported, and later, a Navy patrol boat towed one into port for carrying illegal cargo.

As the patrol headed down the beach in the black of night, the surf smashed against the shore. Ahead, blobs of black seemed to float across the white expanse of sand. These were Marines of the first squad.

Occasionally, one of them would step on a mound of soft sand, and slide, teeter or stagger like a drunken phantom.

A flare popped close ahead, and the blobs became men flattened until they resembled lifeless splotches in the sand.

Around 0130, the patrol scurried for cover as an LVT painted the blackness with a piercing searchlight which roamed the beach like a theater spotlight seeking the star of a Broadway review. And then the shade of night slammed down once again on "Red Beach" and the area was, once again, in the hands and custody of Recon.

At 0430, the platoon began eating "C's" and the menu varied according to the stomach of the individual. Most ate just the canned fruit of a B-1 unit, but the more hardy relished the ham and lima beans, steak and spuds or

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bacon and eggs . . . cold.

1stLt MacCaskill gave last-minute instructions: "When we get into the village, I don't want to bog down. Investigate all holes or pits. Any small brush, probe, then skirt it. If it's the least bit suspicious, scope it out. We'll back up and blow it."

It was thought that the Viet Cong junk fleet had brought supplies ashore and had hidden them in the rocks on the peninsula bordering the fishing village.

"The peninsula is going to be rough going. There are vines, thorns, rocks and pot holes all over the place. A real maze of growth and obstacles. Check everything and every place," the lieutenant cautioned.

The patrol entered the village. Sleepy-eyed children stared. Adults still in their night clothes filled doorways to watch the Marines move

through the town. Recon had swept into the village before the people realized their presence.

The patrol spread out, isolating the peninsula from the village and the sweep began. An M-79 man seemed to be swallowed up in the tangle of vine and leaf.

A rifleman was using the barrel of his weapon to jab and probe at a cluster of brush. Another Marine picked up a huge boulder and dropped it into a clump of small branches and debris. There was no "ouch" in reply to his probe, so he advanced on to another objective.

Slowly the patrol probed, crawled and squirmed into and out of the peninsula. Uniforms became soaked with sweat as the closeness of the peninsula's vegetation choked the sea's breeze, stifling the patrol. But still the Marines bull-dozed and clawed their way through.

Skin yielded harshly to the thorns;

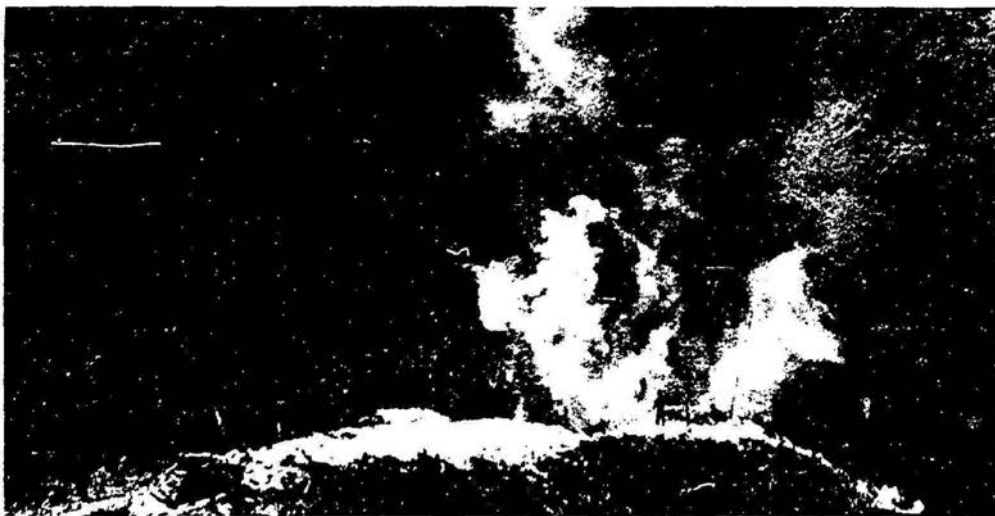
vines pulled at boots and rifles, and the ants fell from trees onto the sweat-soaked Marines.

Finally the patrol stood on the boulder-lined bank facing the sea, flicking away the ants and spiders from their uniforms or wiping away blood from the thorn scratches.

Only one rock and cement fortification had been found. Sgt Walter Zawistowski and SSgt Robert Ynacay set two 15-pound charges and blew the structure.

After the dust had settled from the blast, the patrol re-formed and moved by column toward the village. The noise of the demolitions and the sight of the Marines had drawn a huge crowd on the sand.

HN Armstrong passed out candy and chewing gum among some of the children, and noticed that one grimy little urchin had an infected cut on his arm. The "Doc" went to work to clean up the cut while some of the other mem-



(ABOVE) Smoke, sand and debris flew skyward from a demolitions blast that destroyed a Viet Cong cement emplacement. (BELOW) Marines on patrol shared their rations with village children.





bers of the patrol doled out what was left of their breakfast rations.

The children, no longer afraid, gathered around the men in green. The adults smiled in approval at the treatment HN Armstrong was giving the little boy with the infected arm.

And all the while, a small group of Marines faced the villagers, smiling and joking with the people, but with their weapons at the ready.

The junk fleet had been seen in that area. Supplies possibly were brought ashore. Recon made a thorough sweep of the area. The people seemed friendly enough, but which of the villagers were Viet Cong and which were not? Which fished for food and which for VC supplies and arms?

"We'll play it cool for a while," 1stLt MacCaskill said. "But we'll keep

watching, and in time, we'll make another sweep. It'll take time, but we'll find the hiding place of those supplies.

"Perhaps that little kid, there," and he pointed to the boy with the infection, "will inform, or maybe that old man there, the one smoking the C-ration cigarette.

"It takes time; it takes a lot of work, and it takes friends to fight this kind of war.

"Time we have plenty of," MacCaskill said. "Work? That's how we keep in shape.

"Friends? Sometimes I wonder."

And with a shrug of his shoulders, the lieutenant yelled: "Fall in, point out. Let's hit the road."

And the recon patrol headed down the beach . . . "silently . . . swiftly . . . deadly. . ."

END

The "Doc", HN Mike Armstrong, was surrounded by youngsters.

(BELOW) Villagers stopped work to watch Marines on patrol.

