

“What now, Lieutenant?”

(This is the story that gave the name to my personal book about my experiences with the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam in 1966-1967. It is one of many short stories included in that book, available from Deeds Publishing, entitled, “What Now, Lieutenant?” It is included here as a sample of a short story you might want to write about some of your experiences).

We had been in Vietnam less than a month and had just flown to Tuy Hoa from our base camp at Pleiku. Our battalion was “op-con” or under the operational control of the 101st Airborne Division’s First Brigade. We were all excited to be working with the famous 101st “Screaming Eagles”. Their fame stemmed from World War II when they jumped behind the lines on D-Day in 1944, and with their stand at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. The 101st Airborne had been in Vietnam over a year and had been involved in some heavy fighting.

The second day in Tuy Hoa, word came down that a platoon was needed to secure an engineer unit clearing mines from a road west of Tuy Hoa. The road had last been cleared by the French before their defeat in 1954. Since we were the best company in the battalion, we were selected for this first “real” mission since our arrival in country. I was both pleased and apprehensive when Lieutenant Fiacco told me my platoon had the mission.

We were to be picked up by “deuce and a half ” (two and a half ton) trucks early the next morning and taken out to join the engineers on the road. I found out the engineer unit we were supporting had been with Captain Bill Carpenter, the famous “Lonesome End” from West Point’s football team, when he had called an air strike in on his own position when he had been overrun less than three months earlier. I vividly remembered having read about Captain Carpenter’s experiences while we were at Fort Lewis.

We were up bright and early, checking our equipment and weapons thoroughly, making sure we had plenty of ammo, testing our radios to be sure they worked right, and just generally feeling nervous, very green, and inexperienced.

The big green trucks picked us up on schedule. Soon we were speeding west through Tuy Hoa, watching the people closely. Regardless of what people told us about the towns being relatively safe, we did not trust anyone. Sticking to our training, we kept our weapons at the ready, ready to pounce from the truck and respond to any hostile action.

A few miles outside Tuy Hoa, we saw a unit of American troops laying at ease along the side of the road. A lump came in my throat as I realized this was it. We had to get off the trucks and do what we were sent over here to do.

As I climbed down from the truck, I scanned the troops looking for someone with captain’s bars. When I could not find him, I asked one of the men where the captain was and he said, “That’s me”.

I really felt like a green rookie after looking at him. He had no rank insignia, his uniform was well worn, in marked contrast to my still new jungle fatigues. Knowing he had been almost overrun with Captain Carpenter put me more in awe - for the first time I was on a genuine combat mission with real combat veterans.

“Glad to have you, Lieutenant Babcock,” he said. “I want you to patrol out in front of us and make sure we don’t run into any ambushes. Stay at least a quarter mile in front, work both sides of the road, but stay off the road. It is heavily mined. Any questions?”

My concept of combat engineers was they went first and cleared the road and we would follow along and be available as a quick reaction force if they ran into anything. I quickly remembered the Infantry’s job is out in front, not behind anyone else.

“No sir, no questions. Are you ready for us to move out now?” “The sooner you can get out there the sooner we can get on with our work,” he replied. I overcame my instinct to salute as I turned and headed back for my platoon.

Walking back to my platoon, which Sergeant Roath had formed into a loose perimeter along the road, I took off my helmet, took the gold lieutenant’s bar off my camouflage cover, and tossed it into the muddy water filled ditch alongside the road. I sure did not want to bring attention to my rank if that experienced captain was not going to show his.

My troops listened closely as I briefed them on our mission. We saddled up and moved past the engineers and along either side of the road, careful not to set foot on it. Stepping on a land mine was not in our plans that day.

The morning sun beat down on us unmercifully as we moved along uneventfully. Soon we approached a valley cutting off the right side of the road and forming a box canyon at the foot of steep mountains about 400 yards from the road. (Throughout this book, I will use ‘yards’ instead of ‘meters’. We always referred to distances in meters but most American readers better understand yards - the distances are roughly equal).

The engineer captain called me on the radio, “Oscar 61, check out that valley to your right flank. Someone shot at a helicopter from in there yesterday.” With that information, I was not too excited about the next phase of our mission. “Wilco,” (Army lingo for “understand and will comply”) was my reply as I stopped our movement and prepared to move into the valley.

Since caution is the better part of valor, I remembered my training and decided to prep the area with an artillery barrage. Frequently, I had simulated calling in artillery fire but this was my first time to call real fire on a real target.

Charlie Battery, 4th Battalion, 42nd Artillery responded quickly as I called in and adjusted several 105mm artillery shells. As the shells crashed into the box canyon, I felt comfortable I had the artillery aimed at the right target if we needed it. (Many times after this, the same artillery battery responded like the true professionals they were when we called for fire support).

While I adjusted the artillery fire, Sergeant Roath set up a machine gun crew and a rifle squad along the road, ready to support us with fire. With a knot in my stomach, I moved into the valley with my other two squads, one on either side of the valley. We made sure we stayed close to the foot of the mountains and not out in the open where we would be easy targets.

Our finely honed senses soaked in everything as we worked our way up the valley to the end of the box canyon, ready to fire on the first thing that moved. An Army tactics instructor would have been proud of us - each man crouched low, keeping the proper distance from the man to his front, and constantly searching for signs of movement. No sign of activity was seen as we came to the end of the canyon.

With the same caution, we searched every potential hiding place in the canyon and on the surrounding mountains as we returned to the road. Still nothing. Breathing a sigh of relief, I radioed back our negative report and started moving down alongside the road again, wondering what our next challenge would be.

As we moved, loud explosions pierced the quiet as the engineers periodically found mines and blew them up. The day continued to get hotter and the sun continued to beat down. Despite the heat, we were too keyed up to let our guard down. My next opportunity came from our left flank, about 100 yards off the road.

“Sir, come over here - I’ve found some mortar shells,” came from one of my men. When I moved over to check it out, I saw several 82mm mortar shells concealed by brush in a shallow hole. (The Communists had started using 82mm mortar shells during the Korean War, a single millimeter larger than the American 81mm shells. When captured, our 81mm shells would fit into their 82mm mortar tubes but their 82mm shells would not fit into our 81mm tubes and could not be used against them.)

I radioed our find back to the engineer captain. He responded, “Good job, blow them up and move on.”

Since we did not have any plastic explosive (C4), I had to use the only thing available to me - a hand grenade. I moved the platoon into a perimeter, behind cover, out of range of the grenade. Taking a grenade off my belt, I straightened the safety pin so it would come out easily, and tied a fifty foot piece of string to the pin.

Having been indoctrinated on the dangers of booby traps, I was very careful not to move any of the shells as I searched for a hole to slip the grenade into. I found a small hole and slipped the grenade down among the mortar shells.

Sergeant Roath and Sergeant Benge, my third squad leader, stayed close and found a little ridge of dirt, about fifty yards away, to hide behind. Pleased with how in control I was, I sent them to cover, walked to the end of the string, yanked it, and ran like hell. Covering the distance in no time, I dived over the ridge and slammed myself onto the ground. I hunkered down, trying to “make myself one with Mother Earth” and waited for the massive explosion.

We waited and nothing happened. I started to notice the sweat, and the heat seemed more intense.

All eyes were on me as my platoon peered out from their positions, wondering what had gone wrong. The piece of string was still clutched in my hand. I pulled it in and, sure enough, the safety pin was firmly attached. We either had a dud grenade or something else had gone wrong. Sergeant Roath looked at me, grinned, and said, “What you gonna do now, Lieutenant?” More sweat started to roll down my face as I contemplated my next move.

I knew I had only one choice, go see what was wrong. With my entire platoon watching me, I cautiously crawled back to the cache. Expecting an explosion at any minute, I slowly closed in on the mortar shells. As I rose up on a knee to see what the problem was, I could see the safety lever on the grenade. It had partially flipped away but had hit one of the mortar shells and stopped, not allowing the firing pin to hit the fuse.

Here I was with a live grenade, safety lever barely in place, and a pile of enemy mortar shells I had to assume were booby trapped. To say I was concerned is an understatement.

But, I knew I was the only one who could do anything. To back away now was to show my platoon their platoon leader was a coward. Sweat continued to roll down my face and back as I eased up closer to the mortar shells. Carefully, I slipped my hand down through the hole I had dropped the grenade through and firmly grasped the safety lever against the body of the grenade. As I started to pull my hand back out the hole, it would not come out. My hand, with the grenade in it, was too large for the hole. Now I was really in a predicament!

I had a live grenade in my hand with no safety pin. If I let it go again, chances were good the safety lever would fly off and let it explode in five seconds - and I was pretty sure I could not make the fifty yards to cover from my crouched down position in that length of time (world class sprinters are barely that fast and I did not think my adrenalin would make me into one in five seconds).

If I moved the mortar shells to get my hand and the grenade out, I would have set off any booby trap that might have been set.

I lay there for what seemed like an eternity with more sweat rolling down the back of my neck. My mind whirled as I looked around the perimeter at my men, each watching me intently. Sergeant Roath eased up toward me and with another grin said, "What you gonna do now, Lieutenant?"

"Get back, Sergeant Roath, no sense in both of us being in this mess," was my reply.

Finally, I decided to take a chance on the booby trap and jerk my hand, and the grenade, out of the hole. When I did, several of the shells moved – but, fortunately, nothing exploded.

My next decision was an easy one. Getting up, I walked over to a rice paddy, and threw the hand grenade as far as I could. It exploded with a roar, shooting a spray of water high into the air. I radioed the engineer captain, "I will mark the location of the shells. You can blow them with C4 when you get to this point. I am moving out. Out."

We continued our mission along the road. About a half hour later, a tremendous explosion shook the area as the engineers set off the captured mortar shells. Suddenly, I felt very tired. I wanted to sit down and rest, but could not.

We continued to patrol. We had expected to be finished and back at base camp before dark but such was not the case. As darkness engulfed the area, the engineer captain finally decided to quit for the day. The trucks, which had been following the engineers all day, pulled up to take us back to Tuy Hoa. We now had to ride back down the road we had just spent the day walking.

Expecting to be ambushed at any time, we were ready to fire at anything as we sped through the small villages with our lights out. The Vietnamese families, squatting in their huts, eating rice, were oblivious to our concerns. Fortunately, none of them came out of their houses or we might have blown them away.

It was nearly ten o'clock when we finally made it back to base camp. Sergeant Angulo, our mess sergeant, had saved hot chow which the troops quickly devoured. Lieutenant Fiacco met us at the gate and took me to Colonel Morley to debrief our day's actions. I could tell both of them had been worried about our not returning until so late.

When I finally got back to my tent and went to bed, I slept well. It had been a hard and exciting day. My first real combat patrol was under my belt and, more importantly, I had earned my keep in the eyes of my platoon.