

Five Rounds

by Col Thomas E. Campbell, USMC(Ret)

This story is about core values like honor, courage, and commitment and about basic skills like marksmanship and selecting field positions. It is a story about the role these values and basics can play on the battlefield. And, not least, it is a story about a reality of human conflict—its inevitable costs when both sides believe in their cause.



An NVA Soldier.

The sun rose slowly playing daylight through what had previously been lit by a forest fire. The man sat on his haunches deep in a narrow hole that he had dug a few days earlier. His head throbbed and he was thirsty. He looked up and watched a red hot tree limb break and fall next to the edge of his hiding place. He flinched, clutching his rifle closer to him. He was afraid of fire. He listened to the noises around him for a moment and was relieved to only hear the sound of the fire.

He looked at his rifle. He thought again how very beautiful it was and carefully, as he had been taught, pressed the magazine release forward with his thumb. The curved steel ammunition holder slipped quietly out of its recess. He noted with satisfaction that there was no noise. He carefully pulled back on the bolt and saw the base of a dull yellowish green cartridge case that was in the chamber. He let the bolt go forward slowly with only the slightest sound. He now examined the contents of the magazine carefully. Inside he could see the pointed ends of four 7.62mm cartridges, which gave him a total of five rounds. He felt better as he recalled the Ia Drang Valley battle where he had fought for 3 days with only 20 rounds. He quietly reinserted the magazine in his rifle. He carefully felt the three pockets of the canvas magazine pouch strapped across his chest. The pockets contained four empty magazines, which were spotlessly clean and oiled as was his rifle.

He felt better but wished the fire would move away from his hiding

place. He wishfully thought of rice—something he had not had since the day before. His mind dwelled for only a moment on rice because he had been taught to put food from his thoughts. His company commander had told them repeatedly that in a battle with the Americans you must be prepared to go without food. All of their strength must be devoted to carrying arms and munitions to destroy the foreigners. His mind and experience—he had fought for 3 years since his 15th birthday—acknowledged that this was the truth. Besides, there was never enough food to go around. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was always hungry.

But he also knew that sometimes officers didn't understand and, after all, a good soldier knew how to take care of himself. A decision he had been pondering all night was now decided. Again he listened carefully to sounds around his position and still heard only the fire crackling. He slipped his arms from his pack straps and swung it in front of him on the ground. It was light. He opened it carefully and reached to the bottom where he found three familiar objects and carefully removed two of them. One was a dirty white piece of silk fabric that he had cut from an American parachute flare. He unfolded it and found an almost intact, round American C-Ration cracker. He noted to his great satisfaction it was not mildewed and began to eat it slowly. He loved these crackers and was even kidded by his comrades because he would always trade the small cans of American C-Ration meat for the cracker cans. His

friends thought him foolish, but the meat made him sick, a fact he had never let them know. Sometimes, after a big battle, he could barter one can of meat for two or three cans of crackers. He smiled to himself at how clever he had been to disguise the truth.

In his other hand he held a yellow gourd with a cork on a string. He carefully shook it and heard water slosh in the bottom. He removed the cork and put it to his lips and slowly tilted. When the gourd was almost straight up he felt the cool liquid run into his mouth. He gave a soldierly curse to himself as he realized that his primitive canteen was empty. He licked the spout, replaced the cork, and put it quietly back in his pack. He now contemplated the remaining half of the American cracker and decided that he was more thirsty than hungry. He carefully wrapped the remainder in the silk and put it in his pack, slipped the straps over his arms, carefully listened and thought about how he had gotten to this place. And about his orders.

His mind was dull with fatigue from the past 10 days. The battle west of Quang Ngai with the American Marines—the destruction of his heavy weapons company and the loss of all six of their beloved 12.7mm heavy anti-aircraft machineguns—the retreat to his division's base camp—the masses of wounded and dead—the sudden orders south to this place in the An Lao Valley all ran together in his mind as one horrible event. It was his worst battle experience since joining the army.

His orders now came to him. He

would obey his orders. He would hold his position until told to withdraw. All nine soldiers holding this deserted hamlet had the same orders from their company commander. All of them had had orders like these over the years. He remembered those were his orders in the Ia Drang Valley, and he had carried them out even though the artillery and fire bombs from the air had never let up. He remembered he had wanted to run away but didn't. That was his first big battle. He had been given a medal. They said he had killed 10 enemy soldiers. He never said anything, but he was not sure he killed anybody. It was hard to see in battle. He did know that he had aimed his rifle very carefully before shooting and had 10 rounds of ammunition left when they finally withdrew.

This was like the Ia Drang Valley. All night the artillery had exploded around his position. Then it would stop, and he would hear the loud airplanes over his hiding place. He was afraid of the airplanes because they dropped fire bombs. This time they didn't. Only bombs that exploded and the loud wailing machine-guns that shot explosive bullets. He was so tired he had slept through some of it but still had a headache from the terrible noises. A bomb that fell close to his hole had started the fire which was the worst part. The fire had burned hot most of the night. He had thought again about running away. His orders always came to mind and he stayed, true to his oath taken as a boy.

He had been there 2 days awaiting the attack from an enemy unit that he could see up on the east side of the valley. He wished they would do something because he was growing tired of waiting. Then he thought, "I have my orders." Besides they were only ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), and a few well placed shots and they would run back up the hill and call more artillery and airplanes. They had no courage to fight rifle against rifle. Maybe during the lull his company commander would order them to withdraw. He thought about that and decided that his company commander would not withdraw. Officers never did the logical thing.

Then he heard the noise. He sat still and listened intently to the far off, now

close, whistle of incoming artillery. And then a pop-poop sound instead of the anticipated crunching explosion. A white phosphorus round exploded far to his rear. Fear welled in his chest. Two more exploded in the open outside of the treeline where his hole was dug. Then six more in the same area, and his senses and cunning began to overcome his fear.

He shifted slowly into his firing position and spoke softly to himself, "The cowards will come now behind the smoke and maybe fight." Like all men who must fight and face death alone he unconsciously talked to himself. He knew in a little while they would come through the smoke.

He waited with his rifle in his shoulder peering over the sights. "Without the American artillery and airplanes they are weak with no courage. After I make a few widows, they will run away," he said hopefully to himself. He thumbed the selector from safe to semiautomatic. He was ready now, but he was scared as always. He hoped the airplanes would not come.



Like ghosts two soldiers came out of the smoke walking quickly about 300 yards to his front. He lined his sights on the one to the left. Something was not right. He raised his head and peered over his rifle. Now he saw what was wrong. The soldiers were Vietnamese but had on darker uniforms than the ARVN wore, and they were carrying the new American M16 rifles, which he had only seen with U.S. units. He didn't know who they were. He hoped they would still run away when he shot one or two.

The 2 soldiers were now joined by another 20 that he could see. All had slowed down their pace and were moving cautiously as they entered the forest covered hamlet. He looked to his front where Phuc's position was but could see nothing.

It was then he noticed a man with no rifle, only a pistol. Behind him was a soldier with a radio on his back.

"This is great good fortune for us. I

can now kill an officer and then they will panic."

He drew his rifle close to his shoulder. He was now excited, fear forgotten. He carefully aligned his sights on the officer's chest and took in the slack on his trigger when his target suddenly disappeared. He looked up over his sights and there were no enemy soldiers to be seen. It was only then he heard an AK-47 fire from Phuc's position and recognized that it was the second shot he had heard. The enemy now began to fire—at first a few scattered shots that rose to a steady din of intense automatic weapons fire. He could see where the fire was going. It was around Phuc's hole about 50 yards to his front.

He knew he had not been seen and was proud of his work on his position under the base of a fallen tree. His firing hole was through the exposed roots. He wondered how well Phuc was doing. He began searching again for a clear shot at the officer.

He could now see soldiers rising up and dashing forward. There were five moving toward Phuc's position, but he couldn't get a clear shot. He focused his vision away from Phuc and onto the soldiers moving closer to his hidden position. From his right two men rose and ran in front of him. He

aimed carefully at the soldier nearest him and squeezed the trigger. He felt his rifle kick into his shoulder. He looked over his sights but could not tell if he had hit his mark. Instantly dirt stung his eyes and then he heard the familiar crack of many bullets impacting his tree. He pulled his head down into the root network. The fire continued and then shifted to an area around a tree five or six yards to his left.

He looked again through his sights and saw a soldier on his knees firing at the tree to his left. He squeezed the trigger and again felt the kick. Again he looked and there was no body in sight. He cursed to himself. Two shots and he had missed both times. "Be skillful. Every shot must count. Those are your orders," he said in a loud voice.

The enemy fire was dying down now. He knew they would start moving again. He waited, peering through his sights. Then a voice, and in front of him soldiers rose from the ground, he didn't know

how many. Directly in his sights was the man with the pistol now talking on the radio. Several enemy soldiers and the officer walked warily toward Phuc's position with their weapons pointed down. Several shots were fired into the position. Then they all stood looking down into Phuc's hole. He squeezed the trigger and the rifle jammed his shoulder again. He saw the officer twist and fall. "I got you. Now run away and hide like the cowards you are." His experience was that whenever you killed an ARVN officer they always ran away because they didn't know what to do next.

He felt heat next to his face as a bullet barely missed. He slipped down again. The bullets impacting his tree stump were now a constant thud.

He couldn't look through his firing hole because of the rounds passing through. He eased down in his position and looked to his right. Over the edge of his trench he saw an enemy helmet moving slowly toward him. He aimed carefully. A face appeared. He shot and the face disappeared. He thought, "Another miss," cursed and said again much too loudly, "Be careful. Every shot must count."

He heard a noise to his back and swung around quickly. A soldier stood pointing his rifle at him. He shot without aiming and the soldier fell toward him. And then there was another. He aimed and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. He was puzzled why his rifle had not fired. He moved to clear the bolt, and something very heavy and hard hit his chest. He wondered what had happened. The sky became very light, and he noticed he did not have a headache anymore. He wondered why his rifle jammed. It never had before. It was a beautiful and good rifle.

The Vietnamese Marine battalion commander and an American advisor sat on the edge of a small fighting hole skillfully dug behind the root network of a fallen tree. The area was burned out from a fire the night before. A dead NVA soldier was lying in the bottom of the position. His rifle, pack, and four empty magazines had been piled neatly on the side of the hole. He was young, handsome, but looked ugly in death. The battalion commander was reading from a diary taken from the man's pack. He held a North Vietnamese medal that had been folded inside the diary. The only other items found in his pack were a half-eaten C-Ration cracker wrapped in a dirty parachute cloth and an empty gourd canteen.

The American advisor was talking on his radio running a medevac, the fourth of the morning. He finished, turned to the battalion commander and waited patiently for him to finish reading.

Finally, the battalion commander looked down at the dead soldier in the hole and spoke in English to the American, "This soldier's diary tells it all. A very interesting story. He is part of a heavy weapons company—12.7mm anti-aircraft guns."

The American looked puzzled and said, "Where are the guns? We haven't captured any, and the valley is clear for 4 clicks north of here."

The Vietnamese smiled and said quietly, "They lost them a week ago in a battle to the north with U.S. Marines. These 10 men were all that was left. They were ordered to this valley to stop our advance so that their division could escape to the west. It is all written right here in this diary." He waved it and smiled.

He now spoke slowly in Vietnamese to his six officers standing on the far side of the fighting hole. They listened soberly, each glancing down at the dead NVA in the bottom of his hole. One bent down and picked up three empty cartridge cases next to the tree stump. Another jumped down in the trench and peered through the firing hole. The officer in the trench looked around his feet and picked up two more spent cartridges. He handed them to the other officer who now held five rounds in his open hand.

They began to talk quietly, pointing back towards the area they had just fought through and went on in low voices for quite some time, reconstructing what occurred here. The American listened but could not follow the talk in any detail. He looked down at the dead soldier.

Finally, the battalion commander said, "Here is what happened. These 10 men are all that have been here for the past 3 days. We thought they were a battalion, and your artillery and air strikes yesterday and last night did not even wound one of them. The company commander we lost in this zone, Huan, was killed by this soldier," pointing down to the dead NVA. "The officers who fought here say they lost 10 Marines around these positions including the two killed right here—10 Marines lost to this soldier and the one in the other hole. To the 10 men of this unit we took 27 casualties, 17 of them killed." He paused and looked at the dead NVA. "We attacked these 10 men



A Vietnamese Marine Officer.

with 600 Marines, and we fought all morning to kill them. And this one had only five rounds."

The Vietnamese and the American looked thoughtfully at each other for a moment. They had been together a long time, and each knew the other's thoughts.

The battalion commander stood up. He spoke softly and motioned to two Marines standing several meters away. They quickly dropped their packs and with easy digging motions of veterans began to bury the NVA soldier where he had died in his fighting hole. The officers stood and watched quietly. The American thought back over the last 16 months with these men and could not recall them ever burying any enemy soldier. The rule was they lay where they fell, and we moved on. As they left the small, deserted hamlet with no name, he noticed the Marines quietly burying the other nine dead enemy soldiers where they had died.

USMC

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>>"Five Rounds" is a work of fiction, but it is based on an actual firefight that took place in March 1967 involving the 2d Battalion, Vietnamese Marines. The conduct of the attack and the casualty figures for both sides are accurate.