

The Risks of War

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It goes without saying that war presents a very dangerous and dirty business. We see images on television and in the movies of bombings, firefights, the injured troops, the whole panoply of dangerous bullet-ridden engagement with the enemy. Ken Burns has just given us ten episodes showing the horrors and absurdities of my generation's war to once again remind us.

What is little known is that a low percentage of casualties are the direct result of enemy action. I have heard numbers as low as ten percent, with the assurance that this low percentage has been a fairly fixed number going back at least to the Napoleonic era. In fact another durable measure is that about thirty percent of actual battlefield casualties are the direct result of friendly fire.

So why are so many others knocked out of action? First, even the non-combat work is dangerous: stevedoring at ports, construction projects, driving heavily laden trucks on narrow tracks in mountainous terrain. Secondly, disease takes its toll. Soldiers often live in what can only be called primitive conditions and in environments like jungles where disease microbes are quite at home. They mix with civilian populations who have never had a vaccination and who carry diseases that in the developed countries died out in the Middle Ages. Let's not forget that soldiers find themselves living cheek by jowl in large numbers with sanitation lacking.

This last point brings me to my topic - the need to provide sanitation in places with large numbers of people, but no sewage facilities. Soldiers

in World War I regularly reported that their first experience of the trenches came when the stench of the trenches reached their noses before they even got to the front. Not only was it the stench of death as human and animal remains rotted in place, it was also the latrines. Behind the trench line you would find pit latrines. With huge numbers of troops and static lines, these quickly became a powerful source of unpleasant odors and more importantly, disease sources. Sanitary conditions, or rather their lack, are just another risk of war.

In Viet Nam, the military developed various means to handle the problem. On the huge logistics bases, something approaching a proper sewer treatment was put in place for at least part of the base. For forward fire bases, more primitive solutions prevailed. The most common solution was to build a classic outhouse. The problem arose that many fire bases were built on volcanic outcroppings situated among the rice paddies. My battalion's fire base was in just such a situation - a big hill of rock overlooking miles of rice paddies. This meant that you could not dig a pit below the plywood outhouse.

So where did the human waste go and how did you dispose of it? The expedient was to cut a fifty-five gallon steel barrel in half and place it under the seat, with a flap in the rear of the outhouse to remove it. Each morning, someone had to remove the barrel and burn its contents. The bigger firebases allowed local laborers, so this task was handled by Vietnamese papa-sans. The so-called "first cook of the shit-burners" was the top of the pay scale, making fifty cents a day for his services. He typically had a cheek full of betel nut and a reefer hanging from his lip, so he was not too terribly upset with his task. Every morning on a big firebase the fragrance of burning excrement filled the air.

It turns out that fresh, wet human feces does not burn well. The only way to empty the barrel was to add some diesel fuel, then stir the mix with a steel fence stake while it burned. The papa-san would collect perhaps a dozen of these barrels, draw some diesel fuel, pour it in the barrels, light the mix, then go from barrel to barrel stirring constantly. After a few hours, the solids were burned into oblivion. So far, so good. Papa-san collected his fifty cents and the outhouses were good to go another day.

So what happened on the forward fire bases with only American soldiers? Just what you might guess - this unpleasant task became the responsibility of the infantry troops. When my platoon got on the firebase for a few days between missions, this task fell to us. My troops did not see this as the employment opportunity it was for papa-san. American soldiers would draw much more diesel than was allotted to a Vietnamese for this job. The GI would fill each barrel to the top, light it and walk off. No stirring with a stake here! What would happen is that the oil would burn vigorously on the surface until it was exhausted, leaving the stinking pile in the barrel with a light char on top, but no reduction in volume. The GI handled this situation as you might expect: he cursed violently, got more diesel and started the process all over - with predictable results. Only when the sergeant major intervened and stood over the GI and made him stir were satisfactory results achieved.

Each morning while we were carrying out this sanitation task, behind us the artillerymen had their own work to do. Every artillery shell is shipped with the maximum powder charge - seven fist-sized bags of gunpowder. If you weren't firing maximum range, you removed the appropriate number of powder bags before you fired the shell. Since a typical night had rounds fired for all the platoons in the field, by

morning, a huge pile of these powder bags built up. The artillerymen would dispose of them by starting a fire and then throwing the bags on one-by-one. Because the bags didn't compress the explosion as did the artillery tube, all that happened was that each bag produced a good-sized fire ball as it hit the flames.

The US soldier has always had a reputation for creative field expedients designed to make his life a little easier. The boys in my platoon were no exception. One morning when a couple of them had moved a dozen outhouse barrels to the area to be burned, the light bulb went on. They very helpfully went up to the artillerymen and offered to handle their work of burning the powder bags for them. They took this huge pile of explosive powder bags down and packed each barrel full of the powder charges. They lined the barrels up so they were touching. Then, standing back, they threw trip flares at the barrels until one landed directly in a barrel. A huge "Kaboom!" went off as columns of fire about forty feet high blazed up. The steel barrels acted to channel the flames and to give just a little compression to make the conflagration something between fire and an explosion.

That day's waste was disposed of - the barrels were empty. Unfortunately, their load did not burn in the instantaneous combustion. On the contrary, it blew forty feet up, then rained down on both our front line bunkers and the artillery bunkers, guns and sleeping hooches. We had turds land across our entire sector of the firebase. Military sanitation standards call for disposal of human waste, not spreading it across the firebase, but our experiment that morning didn't deliver quite the expected results.

That afternoon the firebase commandant came to my sector and said he had heard an unconfirmed report that we had been the victims of a biological warfare attack. He could scarcely contain his laughter as he surveyed our turd-encrusted bunkers. Fortunately a heavy rain the next day washed it all away.

We certainly didn't repeat this experiment. The artillerymen got no further help from us. So was this a failure of military sanitation? A friendly fire incident? An industrial accident? A field improvisation gone badly wrong? Who cares? It just proves once again that war is indeed a very dangerous and dirty business!