SAFE
From Friendly Fire

J. D. BOYLE

The United States infantryman has proved to be a versatile and strong soldier under arduous combat conditions. The enemy is a formidable obstacle in most cases, and the infantryman needs strong leadership and direction. There is no room for accidents, yet accidents do happen. The sad fact is that, in many instances, they could have been avoided, saving soldiers from unnecessary injury and death.

I know. I was a victim of friendly fire 20 years ago in Vietnam, sustaining a gunshot wound to a shoulder. Fortunately, however, as a result of this incident a failsafe system was instituted in my company to prevent a recurrence. There are still lessons to be learned from this experience, and the same principles still apply.

The situation developed during a routine night ambush patrol operation. I was new to the company, having been sent in as a replacement about two weeks earlier.

Several days before, I had been on a night ambush patrol moving through the denuded landscape of the Hobo Woods. Halfway to our ambush site, we had been ambushed in turn by a column of Viet Cong. The encounter had been brief, and the enemy had escaped into the night. This had been my introduction to war, and it made the point that this was a serious situation.

In addition, before I arrived, the company had undergone an all night attack by a superior enemy force, and the fierce battle had cost the company numerous casualties. (In fact, I replaced one of those soldiers who had been injured or killed.)

As a result of these two encounters, the mood in the company perimeter that evening in August 1967 was one of nervous anxiety. Many believed that the enemy was ready to launch another strike against the company. The main topic of discussion was the shared feeling that the patrol would be hit that night. The patrol's anxiety spread to those along the company perimeter. The bleak mood may have contributed to what happened later, because nervous men have itchy trigger fingers.

DELAY

Another contributing factor was that the patrol did not go out on schedule. The men had already formed up when they were told to disband and relax. No reason was given for the long delay. But the men were thankful for the reprieve and took advantage of the opportunity to relax and visit.

An hour later the patrol was reformed and passed through the concertina wire into the night. Not far from the exit point, the patrol leader made a turn onto a predetermined azimuth heading into the woods. A short distance from that point, someone in the patrol's center stepped on a trip flare, sending it into a hissing yellow flame that silhouetted us against the dark horizon. The men fell prone on the ground to present as small a target as possible for the enemy.

Seconds later a .50 caliber machinegun began firing from its perch atop an armored personnel carrier inside the wire. It was soon joined by a barrage of small arms and grenade launcher fire.

Stunned, we lay helpless under the heavy volume of fire spewing out from the company perimeter. The shooting lasted perhaps less than a minute, but it seemed like an eternity. During that time the point man had his hand smashed by an M79 grenade round, a soldier in the patrol's center suffered shrapnel wounds, and I was shot through the left shoulder with a .223 caliber round from an M16.

We were evacuated for medical attention. Fortunately, I recovered in four weeks and was able to return to the field. The fellow whose hand was smashed wasn't so fortunate. His hand had to be amputated, and he eventually received a disability discharge.

All the men involved in the accident, however, were affected in one way or another for the remainder of their tours. This may have contributed to their becoming overcautious, resulting in a conscious fear of shooting at a target that might turn out to be friendly. Nobody wanted to make that mistake again.

In reality, there were several mistakes made that night:

First, an overlooked area in combat is rumor control. An alert non-

commissioned officer might have countered the soldiers' anxiety with logic and reason. While this may not have prevented the accident, some kind of action may have reduced its severity.

Second, no one had assumed responsibility for notifying the perimeter units that the patrol was going out an hour later than scheduled. The soldiers along the perimeter had assumed that the patrol was already gone and that the tripped flare meant an enemy probe.

Another error on the part of the perimeter squads was firing with heavy weapons. In situations like this in which there is no hostile fire, the only shooting that should be allowed is intermittent small arms fire and grenades to probe the enemy force outside the wire.

The failsafe system that was subsequently instituted in the company was designed to reduce the probability of such errors. The system had the most important ingredient for success—simplicity—and rules that everyone could remember and follow.

Under the system, a patrol leader assumed the responsibility for notifying the headquarters radio telephone operator (RTO), who then became responsible for notifying each squad within the company perimeter. The patrol could not move outside the wire until every squad had acknowledged the signal.

This is the way it worked. When he was ready to go, the patrol leader radioed a "red light" to company headquarters. Headquarters, in turn, radioed an answering "code red" to let the patrol leader know the transmission had been copied. The headquarters then systematically radioed "condition red" to all squads. The patrol was given a go-ahead when all had acknowledged the transmission.

CODE RED

During "code red" conditions, no one could fire unless directed by the company commander and then only as directed. "Code red" signified that a patrol was leaving and would be in the vulnerable area outside the perimeter for a period of time.

Once the patrol had walked a safe distance from the company, the patrol leader radioed back "yellow light." The headquarters RTO then sent a transmission to all squads that the situation was now "condition yellow." With "condition yellow," platoon members had to get the permission of their platoon leader before they could fire at targets outside the perimeter.

Once in position, the patrol leader radioed a "green light" to headquarters. The company was then notified of a "condition green." This meant that any member of a squad could fire at a defined target outside the wire, since it was safe to assume that the target was enemy.

The patrol's return required using the system in reverse. Outside the wire, after giving the "red light" and the proper password, the patrol was instructed to fire a predetermined group of colored flares as a confirmation signal. After this, the patrol could reenter the perimeter.

This fail safe system set my mind at ease and helped me adjust to my return to combat. During the remaining months I spent with the company, there were no other accidental shootings around the company perimeter.

Although it is difficult to prepare for every situation, lessons of the past can be useful in the present, and a failsafe system such as this belongs in every company's rule book. In combat, unnecessary casualties from friendly fire can weaken a command and make it more vulnerable to the enemy. The object is to win battles with the fewest possible casualties, and a failsafe system ensures that valuable manpower will not be lost as a result of preventable accidents.

J. D. Boyle served in Vietnam as a platoon sergeant in the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, 25th Infantry Division. He is a graduate of California State University, Sacramento, and has had numerous articles published on various subjects.