

PAST TIMES



EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is reprinted from the May-June 1970 issue of INFANTRY (pages 6-12). Charles Black was, at the time, associate editor and military reporter for the Columbus (Georgia) Enquirer.

As a noncommissioned officer with the 1st and 2d Marine

Divisions in World War II and Korea, he had earned the Silver Star, Bronze Star for Valor, and Air Medal. Up to 1970 he had made five trips to Vietnam, participating in more than 100 combat missions. Now deceased, he was known (in the Fort Benning area, at least) as the Ernie Pyle of the Vietnam War.

14 PROVERBS

Gleaned from a Damp Foxhole

CHARLES BLACK

My proudest contributions to military thinking are listed in the following proverbs, rules, and quotations:

1. All military doctrine is intended for level, paved roads on pleasant June days. Other situations demand field expedients.

I define field expedients as the successful use of what is available—properly mixed with good judgment and imagination—to solve a problem. And a sense of humor doesn't hurt, come to think of it, because of the irony that no good field expedient violates doctrine, but simply applies it to the real world situation.

It isn't a good field expedient, by my rules, to dig in an operational tank as a pillbox for a defense perimeter. That violates all the rules—mobility, economy of force, offense, you name them, all of those rules which good field expedients are based on.

But at the Special Forces camp at Duc Co, since at least 1965 when I first saw it, there is a T41 tank dug in on the southwest corner of the perimeter, and I think it is one of the finest field expedients I've ever seen. It had been shot to pieces and left lying around for bird nests and mud daubers during the wild old days in late summer of 1965 when the camp was relieved from 60 days of siege.

Somehow the A Team hauled that junk inside, hammered and banged until they had an operable turret and coaxial gun, and dug it in. They successfully defended against later salvage attempts. These attempts would have simply transferred the unsalvageable item to some military junkyard on the coast. This made it a proper field expedient by my book. It met a better fate at the hands of the scrounging A Team and one any book would approve of if it were read properly.

Field expedients, when imaginatively exploited at all levels, are not necessarily the bane of the higher command, either. A higher command which views them in line with Proverb 12 (don't look ahead, damn it, we'll get to it in proper order) will always find value in the untidy miracles wrought by the

lower echelon's use of baling wire and green tape.

In 1968 in Israel, to illustrate that last pithy bit, I watched a correspondent of my acquaintance stalking a story, and when dealing with the Israelis this is a good bit like sneaking up on a butterfly through a field of briars and snakes and snagging him lefthanded with a pair of chopsticks.

He had a question: "If along the Suez Canal the Egyptians are dropping in 122mm and 130mm artillery on Israeli positions, why are Israeli casualties no higher?"

He asked that question, as correspondents do, in every possible manner and of every possible person except the one who could possibly answer it—the PIO (public information officer) at the Tel Aviv military headquarters.

Finally he was driven even to that, and he did, and he got an answer: "As you know, it would require a meter-and-a-half of reinforced concrete to withstand a direct hit from such heavy artillery. Building such a formidable line in a remote area would be terribly expensive. Our technicians, therefore, found a different material. They were able to solve this problem, in fact, by sending a minimum of supplies not available directly on the scene and by coming up with equipment which can be used by any soldier without prior training. It can even be used for other purposes and simply left in the forward positions when its original purpose is done. This has proved adequate and economical. It performs the same job as expensive concrete or other such materials and we intend to expand its application as feasible and necessary. Due to problems of security, of course, it is impossible to go into detail concerning the equipment or the material itself."

I've never seen a correspondent more delighted. His story was played around the world under headlines saying "Israelis Develop Secret Material for Fortifications," and the like.

The public information officer involved did, in fact, have stringent security requirements to meet. He also had a story which he felt made his Army look very good and which he wanted to get into the world press. So he solved this staff prob-

lem of making the best use of a field expedient by falling back on inspired use of field expedient, or possibly office expedient. He accomplished all of his objectives.

And, in the course of it, he neatly sandbagged a particularly pesky correspondent who had been bothering people about it for weeks. (Oh, yes, you're the slow one, aren't you? Should I have underlined "sandbagged"?)

2. No other military equipment has the perfection of a C-ration can opener.

All right, this article is the very best example I can give to that dictum. It was originally printed in a daily column I write which is limited to about 750 words of the simplest possible category because of what I believe to be short-sighted editorial judgment on the part of my immediate superior.

The extremely gifted and perceptive management here at INFANTRY, on the other hand, requested me "to expand the column somewhat and explore the 13 contributions to military thinking in greater depth."

To illustrate the meaning of Proverb 2, let me expand on the obvious implications already apparent by adding that there are now 14 contributions to military thinking, one of which I stole from Frederick the Great.

3. Men can go anywhere despite anything, except opposition by better men willing to go anywhere despite anything. Terrain, hostile weather, firepower, etc., can punish and delay men determined to pass, but never stop them.

I suppose we could start with Hannibal and the elephants, take it through PFC Awol Jones and the hole in the fence to as far as the lunar landing, and make the point equally well.

But my thoughts on this matter center on Ashau Valley.

In 1966 and 1967 I was told that B-52s were are lighting that particular terrain, interdicting the supply route for the North Vietnamese. Some wild jakanape in a Bird Dog lured me into flying up there in March of 1967 and despite all the streaks on the negatives caused by 12.7mm tracer tracks and the way my sweaty palms leaked through the camera case, it was pretty damned obvious that interdiction by conventional bombing is not a perfected art where primitive terrain is involved.

The NVA had four trucks parked in the middle of the abandoned Special Forces camp, just for openers, and what looked like a 25-mile freeway right down the middle of the valley coming out of Laos.

I made a fascinating study of the effect of 750-pound bombs landing on that dirt road (my mind was deeply engrossed in the subject of holes at the moment) which showed me that:

- A big bomb makes a big deep hole.
- It removes the brush for several meters around the hole.
- It throws up a lot of loose dirt.

This information, valuable as it was, was enhanced by illustration of what is necessary to bypass a 750-pound bomb crater in a dirt road:

- Remove the brush for several meters around the hole.
- Have a lot of loose dirt handy to firm up a new track.

I further found that to get a handy storage place for fuel resupply, spare parts, candy, rice wine, etc., one needs:

- A big deep hole.

Back in the various dens of cooler heads in Da Nang, after my initial gibbering had subsided and a facial tic was anesthetized with a soothing balm, I got the final answer. "Well, if it's so, it's so. But you can't operate in the Ashau Valley. The weather . . . monsoons . . . 30 days flying weather each year . . . terrain . . . proximity to sanctuary . . ."

All of which, in my personal opinion, provided at least one route which the enemy followed to Hue in Tet of 1968.

After Tet, Major General John J. Tolson operated his 1st Air Cavalry Division for 28 days in Ashau. After that the 101st Airborne Division went in and operated in Ashau Valley. And after that, of course, we fell back on interdicting it with B-52 arc lights which made it impossible for the enemy to use it--except to drive trucks full of supplies through. And guess what the next answer will be.

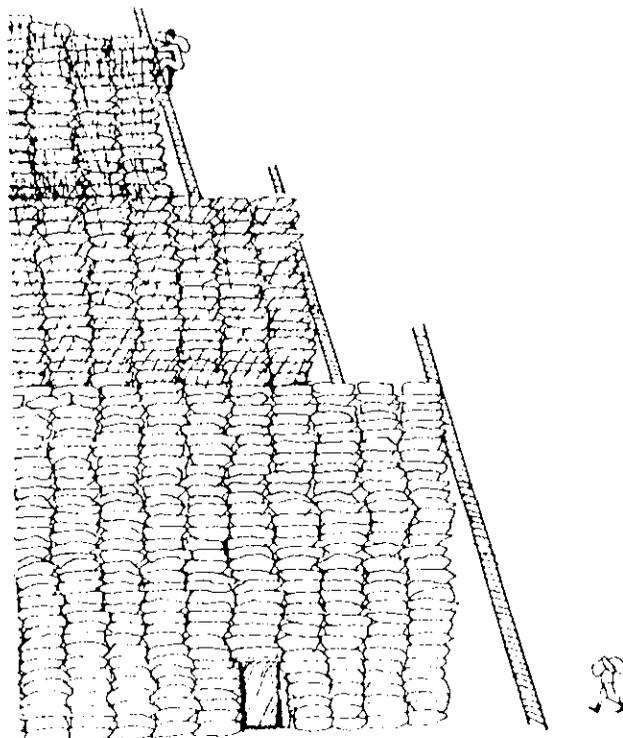
Now, consider the case of PFC Awol Jones and the hole in the fence . . .

4. Night belongs to him who claims it. It is a friend to weak armies because strong armies are usually lazy.

If I felt a demand to expand on that, add depth and scholarship, I would add that strong armies also usually have better clubs and entertainment facilities than weak armies and therefore have better things to do with their nights than crawl around out in the wet brush. This leads directly to:

5. Given a 15-minute break, an Eskimo army will build air conditioned igloos, Indian soldiers a Taj Mahal, Americans field model pentagons. Unchecked, any army prefers building and scrounging for material to any other activity.

Let us be discreet and fly at a polite altitude over the WAC quarters at Long Binh, the swimming pool at Cu Chi, the hockey equipment being slingloaded toward some mysterious



enterprise of the 1st Cavalry, to the spartan surroundings of Vung Tau. Down there one day I saw the classic example of adding the final touch to the final touch as far as building and scrounging are concerned.

Quite proudly, an aviation battalion had at long last achieved a piped-in supply of potable water. There was an immediate critical shortage of sign material, however, so that the sinks, showers, coolers, et al, could be properly labeled.

As I recall, I landed at the headquarters in a Huey filled with ammunition boxes scrounged from an artillery unit at Bear Cat which was in need of a watertight engine crate for showers.

The battalion commander was rightfully wroth at this expenditure of flying time and refused permission to slingload back the return barter material. (He earned my admiration for being a master at proper timing during my stay with him, incidentally.)

Pilots are an honorable lot when it pays, and liaison with a properly situated artillery battalion can pay well in the scrounging game. They therefore noted the regularity of Air Force courier flights to Bear Cat and they simply addressed the engine crate to the unit they owed it to and put it on the Air Force's desk.

Now the Air Force is involved in wars within wars, and one of these wars is the war of impressive statistics. Few statistics slam home with the authority of ton miles of cargo. Few things can mess up a statistical assault of that kind quite so much as a big-volume, low-weight engine case. They turned it down flat.

The Army aviators were not to be deterred by cost effectiveness jockeys, however. They reasoned that if the cannon cockers would be happy with an engine crate, think how much happier they would be with a nicely sanded patio to go with the shower. They filled the crate with a high grade of Vung Tau sand.

Cost effective? That was a big, heavy, cost effective brute. The Air Force statisticians entered competitive bids to fly the thing in their birds.

All was well. Men labored and turned the ammunition crates into signs saying "Potable." They even found a use for the existing signs saying "Non-potable," as I recall, by carefully mounting them over the appropriate plumbing facilities. Nothing was left to chance at Vung Tau.

Scrounging can become a fascinating game unto itself and building it as soldierly an instinct as is outwitting the Air Force, and don't anyone ever forget it. But it can cost a lot if it gets out of hand.

6. Infantrymen can live through many battles with only average luck if they have keen curiosity about what the enemy does and why he does it.

We all know that. Why is it safer to chase a Viet Cong wearing a pack than one all nicely stripped down to basic black and AK-47? Why are you suspicious if the 0430 mist along the Cambodian border is heavy with the scent of charcoal smoke? Why are streams in the highlands such a lure for the NVA? (Answers: A Viet Cong without his home on his back has his home and friends nearby. NVA eat, and to eat they cook, and to cook they make fires. NVA drink water, too.)

See how subtly invigorating the subject is when you delve into it?

If you really take an interest in the enemy, you aren't so surprised when he does things which are perfectly natural for him to do and you will have an edge on him, which is enough.

7. Scouts have an implied warranty that quick and effective use will be made of information. Scouts too often are used simply to satisfy staff curiosity or to fuel operation center debate.

Good scouts are turned into bad scouts by not delivering to them as many tangible, concrete results for their efforts as you can. Once the change occurs, in my own experience, it seems to be a permanent one and the scouts involved never



quite get back into their old stride. Assignments to scouts should always be either truly important or come from a curious staff which needs fuel for debate or which can also come up with an ironclad snow job that convinces the scouts that what they are doing is important.

8. A small unit in violent contact gives a commander with helicopters only two choices, both immediate and with no excuse for delaying the decision. He can pile onto the fight or accept possible sacrifice of the platoon. Extraction by helicopter under fire is not an option; it should be excusable only if it happens by accident or in special operations.

I am adamant on this and must be excused if your remarkably logical objections simply infuriate me. When you have helicopters, any outfit not in contact is a reserve and available when they can get to a pickup zone. You went out there hunting a fight to start with and if you have one which is a real gut buster, you have achieved that much of the objective right there. Sending in empty helicopters to extract implies that one can send in helicopters with troops on board to exploit the contact or to reinforce the situation and help the men in trouble. Waiting around to make up your mind to the perfect solution will guarantee that you'll suddenly notice it is 1700 hours and don't you just love that time of day?

In March of 1966 near Chu Pong Mountain, a Blue platoon from the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry set out to investigate a scout pilot's report of seeing 30 North Vietnamese in the open. (Please see sub-proverb edition of this work which includes this statement: Hear 300 Americans in brush, really 30 Americans in open. See 30 North Vietnamese in open, really 300 in brush.)

All hell broke loose in the elephant grass. Brave helicopter pilots went in to get the Blues out of trouble and two of those birds were shot down immediately and the situation compounded.

All of this took place on the very edge of the AO, with ar-

tillery and the main troop effort way out of all but hollering distance. The brigade commander grabbed Company A, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and put them into the area like a man on a handball court suddenly seeing two balls come at him, but playing with both hands—anyway.

There was still trouble in the operation, but the company recovered the aircraft survivors and backed off into a perimeter. The brigade commander didn't want a contact down there—the Blues involved had just had bad scout luck—but he had done the proper thing quickly and reinforced. With no artillery and his hands full to the north, he tried an extraction of the reinforced unit.

No go. A big Chinook mingled in the operation to suck up the LZ in a hurry, got hit from one end to the other, and fell into the LZ and spoiled it for efficient helicopter operations.

The brigade CO had not assumed that any of this would work, anyway. He had found another LZ, scouted it, and had an artillery battery slingloading into it from its original location. As always, dusk was coming on. There were high stumps in the LZ. The commander of the 227th Assault Helicopter Battalion then went down with his landing lights on. (He dearly loved daring stumps with his helicopter. His crew chief maintained that this hobby was rivaled only by his sportsman's reflex at seeing a flying bird.) Four engineers assaulted with chain saws. A battery of artillery was lifted into place in the dark. ARA was in a solid orbit around the company by now and although nobody was out peddling life insurance at the LZ, things were better.

The whole orchestration was going within less time, really, than I have seen men ponder that original demand to reinforce or take the risk. At dawn, the brigade commander had a triangle of artillery in place, another full battalion on the ground and in pursuit of the enemy, and by that evening had a major and successful operation under way with contact being fully exploited. (He had some luck up north, let me admit, and could get the men and machines loose to do this, but he also had help come from division with reinforcements while he was making this switch to exploit a contact. It has to work all the way up the chain sometimes.)

I deliberately picked that one because on the surface it seemed to violate my maxim of no extraction—but not really. When the Blues first went in it was a special operation and the attempt to pull them out was part of the game. It was costly, but in my experience, almost any extraction which goes wrong is more costly than an assault under similar conditions.

When the special operation by the reconnaissance elements got out of control, the commander didn't just send more helicopters, he sent more men, and only then did he try to get his people out so he could sort out the situation. I've studied an interrogation of an officer captured from the 18th NVA Regiment, the enemy unit involved, and he said the staff had bitterly opposed his commander's orders to try to push in on an American rifle company in an all-around perimeter. In a way, since all indications at the time of the final extraction attempt were that the enemy had broken contact and headed for cover, the hot pickup zone was an accident—including the commander of the NVA going against his staff's advice.

When that one went haywire, the brigade commander had the process under way to do what he wanted to in the beginning, except for not having the resources to do it with. He'd argued himself some more muscle from higher and he was getting ready to send forces over to pick up the new fight. He simply said go when it was obvious that go had to be said.

9. Complicated plans become simple later from necessity. Start them that way.

Take this endeavor right here . . .

10. Every 30 minutes, remember this from Major General designee Hal Moore: ". . . ask yourself what you aren't doing that you should, and what you are doing that you shouldn't."

Hal Moore said that when he was a lieutenant colonel commanding the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, at the foot of Chu Pong Mountain during the battle at LZ X-Ray in November of 1965.

You noticed this is just 1970, did you? That's why I said remember it.

11. The best trick is to help the enemy believe he sees what he wants to see.

You hear so much about old tricks because they work. Don't amaze the enemy, he stampedes and becomes unpredictable and will confuse you. Diversions should always be just like things you've done before for real. Save new tricks for the best possible occasion or they won't be new any more. (They never work that well anyway.) Don't make a diversion so com-



plicated it flabbergasts the enemy, as he might do the last thing you want and use his common sense.

I'm not responsible, really, for this one. I went over to the 2d Infantry Division in Korea to take the Imjin waters in the summer of 1968 and spent some time with the real exponent of those things. Brigadier General William (Ray) Lynch, who can explain any tactics by use of a hammer and an anvil and a pair of ice tongs. He could take the campaign of Archangel Michael and use those three visual education devices to explain exactly how it had been done. Lynch has taught me more about complicated matters with 15 words of common sense explanation than almost any tactician I've ever encountered.

In his pocket or in his quarters, you'll always find a dog-

careed old paperback Western story in which an old Indian fighter explains to a young Indian fighter about why old Indian fighting tricks are still useful. He let me take it up to a bunker and read it one night instead of contemplating the *miracles of diplomacy*. But the fellow who wrote that book had to have had a little of old Cactus Pete Clausewitz in his makeup.

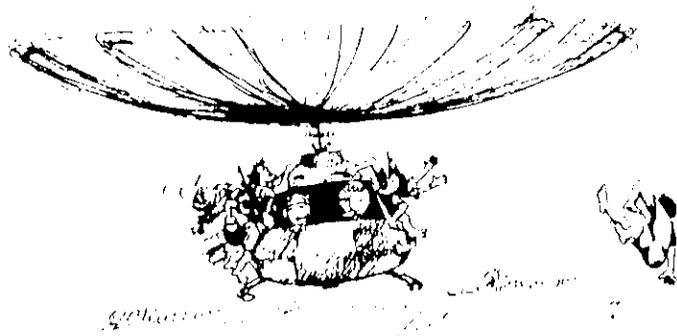
Just take that number 11 as it is and make up something of your own to add to it. That's straight talk on how to be crooked, pardner.

12. Adversities are simply a new, normal situation. See them in this light and find an advantage.

One time at Ban Me Thuot in 1965 I agreed to go out for a little sport with some irregulars who took their irregularity seriously. This particular collection of Montagnards had all the efficient organization of a Gypsy argument when we lined up to get on the Hueys. It was a typical day in that it got hotter while we waited and eddied, and the lift factor went down.

Then came the long-awaited word from higher and This Was It. We rushed up to those helicopters, chickens, ducks, iron kettles, and me carrying a two-suiter suitcase.

Crew chiefs stood in the door and in concise, easily understood English explained to men who spoke concise, easily understood Rhade that one man would have to get off. At each helicopter there seemed to be one individual who wanted to

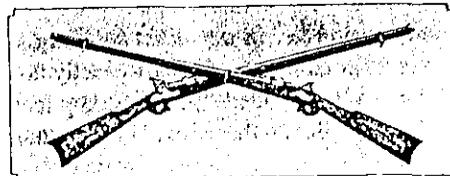


give the crew chief a bad time. There was a lot of arm waving and fluent exchange of diverse languages.

What would you do if you were a crew chief and you had to pick one guy to get off the helicopter? The wise guy, right? Right.

Have you ever landed with a Montagnard company in which every platoon leader and every squad leader had been kicked off the helicopters for arguing with the crew chiefs? You haven't? Deep in the jungle and a guaranteed six days of patrolling before you can even get on a log bird and extract? Carrying a two-suiter suitcase?

The fellows in the green berets taught me this proverb, first.



They all assured me it was exactly what they'd been waiting for, a chance to try out some talent they'd spotted down in the ranks and possibly to prove what they'd been trying to tell the Dai Ui for six months, that the wrong chiefs were in charge. I listened and I saw then the magic of finding advantage in adversity, for them.

We walked one day and ate strange things that night and then we had mortars for dessert and things that went bump. We walked the next day and "sporadic contact" was the term used, I believe. I'd have cheerfully laid down and lived out of my two-suiter for the rest of the war except for sporadic contact giving me a certain hint about the temper of the neighbors.

We walked most of that night because we were behind schedule on some subtle military mission too complex to divulge to me and the rest of the Rhade back there. The next day it was different, because the enemy substituted sporadic mortar fire for sporadic contact and saved sporadic contact for around what the advisors maintained was a night defense perimeter but which I believed was a Rhade tribal ceremony.

The next day I suffered heat exhaustion, just collapsed, out of my head. They mournfully bade me farewell as they loaded me on a medevac and all the way back to Nha Trang I lay there sick, cramping, trembling, loving that heat exhaustion as if it were really a solid gold cadillac. You take my word for it, you can find an advantage.

13. A plan which works exactly right must be relentlessly investigated.

Either it was planned by men too timid for responsibility or too talented for the job. More likely, somebody is covering up valuable errors and denying others the benefit of experience. Perfect operations are boobytraps. Something HAD to go wrong and if you didn't hear about it then it probably was important. They would tell you about small matters.

That is self-explanatory, even for the purposes of answering to the demands of going into greater depth on a subject where I'd already reached the abyss in 750 words.

But to illustrate, although this is obviously an absolutely perfect article based on a request to write about my 13 proverbs, you will next read:

14. There are only four kinds of officers: The clever and energetic who make admirable staff officers. The clever and lazy who make magnificent generals. The stupid and lazy who can be used to grand effect by staff officers and generals. The stupid and energetic who must be executed at the first possible moment in order to check the breed

I swiped that one from Frederick the Great, but I believe he swiped it from a clever and energetic staff officer. If you will consider . . . well, the last classification. And what do you suppose that implies about somebody laboring away on point 14 in a 13-point assignment?