



9th Infantry Division



The Old Reliable

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Study may cut casualty rate -- Pointman, "thinks like Charlie', finds traps

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DONG TAM – Vietnam being the type of war it is, the biggest heroes are not always those who shoot a lot of enemy soldiers. Often they are people who find things – things like booby traps.

Staff Sergeant Barry L. Wible of Chester, PA., is that kind of hero. In five months as 3rd Platoon pointman with the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, Wible has discovered and safely disposed of, or guided his men around, no less than 45 booby traps.

Wible, who has found 30 of the 45 in the heavily booby trapped area around Vinh Kim, just west of Dong Tam, feels that "a man must be able to think like Charlie" if he expects to uncover his deadly handiwork. "You can't afford to be overly cautious. You've got to be a bit daring," he added.

A bit daring doesn't sufficiently describe Wible. On a recent two-day operation, he found eight of 10 booby traps discovered by his element. On other occasions, he has positioned his men at a safe distance while removing the camouflage from a detonating device and dismantling it or blowing it in place.

On five separate occasions, Wible has tripped a booby trap. Only one exploded, injuring no one because he took advantage of the three-second delay to shout a warning and hit the deck.

Wible is presently involved in a division-wide study project devoted to determining how Old Reliable foot soldiers can safely detect and destroy or avoid booby traps. The project was initiated by division operations in an effort to cut down on alarmingly high numbers of infantrymen put out of action by the cleverly crafted and placed explosive devices.

The operation office reports that 65 per cent of the men injured or wounded in the field are victims of booby traps. Lieutenant Colonel Lorenzo D. Strader, of San Antonio, Tex., commanding officer and chief surgeon of 3rd Surgical Hospital in Dong Tam, pointed out that a good 80 per cent of the infantrymen who require surgery have been wounded by booby traps.

According to Major Thomas Plummer, G-3 reports and evaluations officer from New York City, N.Y., the project is of "ultimate concern to the division" because of the pinch put on manpower strength by booby trap wounds.

Plummer and his staff along with Wible are compiling a comprehensive report on booby traps that is to eventually be released as command information to the troops.

To gather information regarding the types, location and effectiveness of enemy detonating devices, members of the project team have traveled to base camps and hospital wards to interview soldiers who know what a booby trap can do to a man.

Wible's approach to the problem is misleadingly simple. "Where would I place a booby trap if I were a VC?" he matter-of-factly says. "That's what I ask myself when I'm out." His home-spun method works surprisingly well. (continued)



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“Whenever we enter a ‘tu dia’ (warning: booby traps) area,” Wible explained, “the first thing I do is look around the area’s perimeter for 15 to 20 meters in each direction. If it appears heavily trapped, we’ll bypass it.”

“If we move into the area, we try to travel only on paths or dikes that permit clear visibility. In other words, a trail not overgrown with palms and underbrush. In this way if anything that appears conspicuous, such as a pile of drying palm or hay, can usually be counted on to conceal a booby trap.”

Wible’s thinking precludes an about face by those who instruct new arrivals to the division on preventive measures to be taken against being booby trapped. At one time considered a cardinal sin, walking on cleared rice paddy dikes is gaining growing acceptance among riflemen and their commanders. The sergeant pointed out that if a man chooses not to walk on a dike, he should walk at least 15 to 20 meters clear of it to avoid tripping traps which are often set into the side of dikes.

Wible went on to say that from his experience the greatest concentration of booby traps are usually found in grave site areas or locations offering good cache sites. Also, barricades (gates, bamboo fences, barbed wire, etc.) and foot bridges should be suspect. “Often times,” he said, “the VC will try to double-think you and they will purposely not mark a barricade with a ‘tu dia’ sign, hoping you will walk to either side, where they’ve planted their booby traps.”

The question that naturally arises is what can a man possibly do once he has tripped a detonating device? Wible emphasized that the last thing he should do is freeze. According to him, almost nine out of every 10 booby traps he has seen are of the trip wire variety and have a one-to-three second delay – plenty of time for the man to continue his forward progress and hit the ground.

“If the file is maintaining its distance,” he declared, “there’s no reason in the world why more than two men should be injured by one blast. This is as much a responsibility of the point man as anyone.”

Many of the lessons learned by Wible and passed on by others in the field hopefully will be incorporated in the Reliable Academy booby trap indoctrination course. Wible said he and Major Plummer have toured the academy and have made suggestions for updating the course. As Wible put it, “the course structure is more flexible at Reliable and they should be able to adjust far better than training centers in the States.”

In conjunction with updating the academy course, Wible feels the division should institute a “scout or point man school” so that the pointman is not just another rifleman but a well-trained specialist “skilled in detecting booby traps and navigating his element.”

On completion of his work in the project, Wible will be returning to the 6/31st. “I would like the responsibility of being platoon sergeant, but I prefer to continue walking point, which I think carries a far greater responsibility. I’m not so much out there to find booby traps as I am to avoid them and keep the casualty rate down.”