

Mutiny Polarization Erosion and Poker in the Shade

Tom Tiede

1970

CU CHI, South Vietnam—Some time ago, Capt. Frank Smith (Bravo Company, Second Battalion, 27th Infantry) passed the word down to his First Platoon that he needed a patrol near the Cambodian border.

The platoon, however, declined to go.

Smith, faced in fact with mutiny, said immediately that he was not asking for volunteers. He was ordering the platoon into activity and he expected instant compliance.

The answer was still no.

What followed then was, according to Capt. Smith, “the damnedest thing I ever dealt with” and one of the most blatant illustrations of this war’s deteriorating discipline.

A group of 21 GIs, all with extensive combat experience, told the company commander that they didn’t think it was fair for them to go on another patrol for action.

They claimed they each had less than 30 days to serve in Vietnam—and the captain was violating an unwritten but time-honored unit rule against sending “short timers” into hazardous action. (The Army says there is no such rule, unwritten or otherwise.)

With that, the 21 men refused again to obey the patrol order—and their officer was forced to use another platoon.

This example of troop rebellion, of course, is not without precedent in these late days of the Vietnam war.

Not long ago, a company of U.S. soldiers received world-wide news notoriety when some of its members balked during battle action.

But the hitherto-unreported case of Capt. Smith’s platoon may be the most serious of all. It involved greater numbers of men than the others. The GIs went to greater lengths of disobedience than most others.

Says Capt. Smith: “At the time, I never did get those men to obey me. I tried. Because if they had changed their minds then, and gone on patrol, I probably wouldn’t have had to take any further action. But they just wouldn’t go. So I had to bring charges against all of them for military violations.”

Therein, says Smith, was the real rub of the affair. He says the men were given little more than slaps on the wrists:

“They were dead guilty. That’s all there was to it. No subordinate in war has a right to tell his commanding officer when he will and when he won’t go on patrol...

“But even so, the men were just found guilty and reprimanded. That’s all—reprimanded. Even the ringleaders, the guys I felt should be really penalized, were just reprimanded.

“Hell, they weren’t even sent to other companies. Some of them have gone home, after normal tours expired. But the rest of them are still right here in my unit.”

Smith, a 17-year Army veteran, and many other career soldiers in Vietnam, complain that the disposition of this particular example of mass disobedience hardly assures the prevention of such things in the future.

Troop discipline, the topsoil of military organization, is steadily eroding here. Just look around.

A troop on guard duty is playing poker in the shade. A newly promoted sergeant sews his stripes on upside down. A major hands out an antiwar poem during an honor ceremony.

An underground (anti-military) newspaper circulates. The polarization of officers and enlisted men grows greater.

“You never know any more,” says one concerned NCO. “If you tell a man to do something, you just never know if he will.”

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