

CHAPTER THREE

Vietnam: A Hard-Learned Lesson on Caching

With the fall of the French at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954, and the subsequent partitioning of Vietnam in Geneva on July 21, caching underwent its most thorough test as a modern combat strategy.

The U.S. government sent its best man, Edward Lansdale, to Vietnam with careful instructions to duplicate his recent success against the Huks in the Philippines. Lansdale implemented a caching strategy using planted "stay-behind groups" whose stated goal was to impede the Communist war machine in the northern sector as much as possible.

Ho Chi Minh implemented a similar strategy in the south. Perhaps because he sent ten thousand people south as compared to the three thousand the Americans sent north, and perhaps because the Communists were more brutal in terms of eliminating dissidents, Ho was more successful. Communist "stay-behinds" in the south, honed by twenty years of guerrilla warfare against the French, Japanese, and Chinese, and perhaps more studied in the lessons of the French Resistance,

did a better job of implementing their strategy. After years of conflict, the North Vietnamese had become conditioned to cache weapons. At the first sign of trouble, their weapons went underground or underwater.

The French, and later the Americans, had a great advantage in terms of weapons, technology, and finance, while the Vietnamese had little more than cached weapons and a thoroughly indoctrinated, well-trained cadre of ground pounders. Prior to Vietnam, conventional wisdom held that one could not win a war without air superiority, including superior firepower. When it was all over, that wisdom, of course, had to be reexamined.

Steve Mattoon was one of the few Americans on the ground in Vietnam in the early days in 1962, just after a caching strategy had been implemented by both sides.

His six-man patrol moved as silently as smoke on the slippery yellow mud and low creeping vines in the gently rolling, forested northern area they were assigned to patrol. It was a classic example of mountainous Vietnam—not jungle, as many people expected, but an area populated with wrist-thick, oaklike bush and small grass. A heavy canopy of broadleaf teak and other upland oriental forest species towered over them. The canopy was a mixed blessing at best. To some extent, the leaves—some as large as a bucket lid—kept the sun off the men. It also trapped the stenchlike heat that rose in an ugly cloud from the forest floor.

Smoke from a lone hut or perhaps a village drifted up a little draw. It was barely perceptible except to those with keen noses. No wind or breeze was evident to transport the only sign of humans the men had come across for the last three hours. The smoke added to their discomfort, mostly because it warned them that the enemy was near.

They had been following a worn ridge line for an



Vietnam's forbidding-but-beautiful, densely forested hills. The view here shows the kind of area Mattoon and his men were assigned to patrol.

hour or more. Mattoon waved the men on his left up the ridge and expertly placed them out to his right on either side of the draw. Mattoon knew that if they were not all careful, the high men on the sides of the finger drainage would soon find themselves dangerously out of contact as they headed downhill toward the smoke. He signaled again when they got down to a small trickle of water that fed a tangle of vegetation in the draw. Hopefully, training, his signals, and the natural survival instinct of the men would keep them out of trouble.

Thankfully, the mind blots out memories of the horrors of war that one can no longer bear to carry. Steve does not remember the name of his point man that day, although at the time they were reasonably close. From down the draw he heard the metallic clang of an automatic weapon. It sounded a bit odd, perhaps like a British Bren or maybe almost like the M14s his people carried. Steve didn't know immediately if it was hostile fire, but he was taking no chances. He could not see his point man below and had not seen him for five minutes or more.

Mattoon froze behind a large teak tree. From his left he heard an almost immediate string of aimed fire. It slapped and echoed up the draw. Three of his six-man patrol were visible. They were in a firefight, but so far it was very sporadic. A man high on the right signaled to move on down a bit.

Ever so cautiously, they moved down a bit until one of the men on the side hollered that the point man was down. Exercising as much caution as possible, the team moved quickly to their fallen comrade. It was only one of many that Mattoon would see. His first reaction was shock at how much blood was spilled from a single human container. Their point man was dead, hit at least twice in the body cavity.

In the draw to the left lay a crumpled Oriental dressed in short black pants and a tattered camouflage

jacket. In this case, Mattoon was shocked again. The body lay twisted and broken. It seemed very small and childlike. "Perhaps the bad guys are using children as soldiers," he speculated.

Steve left three of his men up on the side of the draw while he examined his former point man. Flies were already starting to congregate. (Later in the war, he would understand that the appearance of flies so quickly was an indication of nearby civilization.)

They rolled the dead VC over and searched him for papers and weapons. The papers they found were unintelligible, due as much to the blood as the foreign language. The automatic weapon was an odd one. It looked much like a BAR except for the strange curved clip on top, a diminutive dog-leg wooden stock behind, and a strange barrel covered with cooling fins out ahead of the chamber area.

"A Type 99 Jap Nambu," one of the grunts grumbled. It was not a weapon Mattoon had seen before or had even expected to see. The weary GIs quickly broke two poles supporting a bean plant out of the ground for use as supports for their burden and dumped their load in the shelter half uncaringly. They placed the gun alongside their dead point man and continued down the hill.

Very shortly, the patrol came to a small clearing containing a cluster of thatched houses surrounding a tiny rice paddy. The paddy, created by a high dike built across the little stream, created a field of an acre and a half at the most. Apparently the two crops of rice plus soybeans and squash that the little delta produced was enough for the four families in the area. They had no idea whether the hostile fire they had encountered originated from people in this village or if the people would all be friendly.

An old, bent white-bearded man approached in a kind of crouching, groveling posture, jabbering unintel-



Mattoon and his men had no way of knowing if the people of the small village they had stumbled upon were the enemy or not . . . until they uncovered a number of weapons caches staked with Chinese C-4, a Chinese-made cannon, and other French, American, and Japanese weapons.

ligibly and seeming almost to laugh. The narrow, weed-lined path had never seen a vehicle other than some bicycles and perhaps a motor scooter or two. As the old man came, a few children's faces appeared at the far end of the path. Villagers and soldiers were equally suspicious. Perhaps the Vietnamese did not know what the shooting was all about, and perhaps they did.

Mattoon had finally established pretty good radio contact with headquarters. There was some confusion regarding their exact location. The village in which they found themselves was not on their map. "Check the village for weapons," ordered some distant voice.

More villagers appeared. Young men mixed with the old men and women gave Mattoon some cause for con-

cern. Except for a machete or two stuck in their belts, no one seemed to be armed.

Cautiously at first, the five men started to check around the village. They estimated that it would be twenty minutes or more until the choppers arrived. Two of the thatched huts contained huge, wickerlike baskets full of raw, freshly harvested rice. The baskets were woven so tightly that Mattoon had to poke and prod to determine that they contained rice.

In another hootch, a fire on the floor smoldered and glowed on a section of blackened sheet steel. In an almost desultory fashion, Mattoon started probing in the thatch walls. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on the point of view—he happened to hit a small, three-pound cardboard box. The cardboard was heavily waxed. The entire packet was somewhat resilient, with a feel much like cheese.

Mattoon pulled out his belt knife and cut into the box. The material within looked somewhat like dirty American C-4. Unintelligible Chinese characters covered the sides of the container. He cut a small chunk off the rubbery block and threw it in the fire. It burned brightly for a brief time, giving off noticeable additional heat and light.

Excitedly, Mattoon raised his captain again on the radio. "We found some Chinese C-4," he shouted, "but the village is mostly a storage depot for rice. We are looking for additional weapons or explosives now."

"Tear those rice bins down and check inside," his captain ordered. "Check under the fires to see if there is any sign of tunneling. We'll send support in the choppers."

Just as Mattoon shut the radio down, one of the GIs came up with a worn old MAS 49 French submachine gun. "Got it out of the roof of that third house," he bragged. "It was woven into the thatch so it was really tough to find."

That did it. A thoroughly pissed off and concerned Mattoon got back on the radio requesting a full platoon of reinforcements, including interpreters to assist with the search. They obviously had stumbled across a Vietcong village from an unexpected direction.

In the granary, Mattoon took out his Gerber again, cutting the entire side out of one of the basketlike granaries. Rice spilled out all over the room and out of the sides of the building. From deep within the pile of rice he dug out a deep, orange wooden box. It was battered and beaten, still with the carry poles attached. The box held four brand new Czechoslovakian AK-47s, still in the grease. Excellent trading stock, Mattoon thought.

The second granary held four American M1 carbines. All showed signs of extensive use but had been carefully greased and wrapped with rags before being placed in the rice. Coated as they were, placed among a mountain of hygroscopic rice, the weapons were probably quite safe from the effects of the intense humidity and heat.

Ammunition was stored loose in hollow bamboo tubes leaning against the granary. All the villagers needed to do if they wanted to move their ammo was balance the pole on their shoulders and take off down the trail.

Mattoon believed that the poor villagers obeyed whoever was amongst them in the greatest force. At the time, the Americans were the most powerful force. (That night it might be the returned Vietcong.) They acted very humbly around the great white giants. For this reason, he recalls being somewhat dismayed and embarrassed by the vigor and enthusiasm of the newly arrived GIs and their Vietnamese interpreter as they tore into the houses with a great lack of care for the people's property.

Virtually every wall was stripped of its thatch. Mine detectors deployed around the village indicated that

other buried caches existed. The closer the men looked, the more weapons caches they found. By the time the choppers started arriving, they had a respectable pile of hardware and explosives stacked in the clearing.

The greatest find occurred when Mattoon pulled up the steel plate on which one of the cook fires smoldered. Below it, a shaft dropped down about eight feet. He ran to the chopper for a flashlight. From the shaft he could see a tunnel running parallel to the ground about six feet deep. He called for the tunnel rat who came in with the choppers. The plan was for him to slide down the shaft and throw a gas grenade into the side tunnel.

Carefully, the man eased into the hole, but he did not have far to go. The tunnel dead-ended right about at the edge of the hut. But it was a bingo, nevertheless. Stored at the back was a brand new Chinese-made twin-barrel 23mm cannon.

Had the villagers had time to set all of their hardware up, the choppers never would have gotten in, and Mattoon would have lost most of his patrol. As it was, the patrol had apparently stumbled across a group of VC who were not yet ready for combat.

As a result of heated orders from the Vietnamese interpreter, all the village men were lined up for a bare-chested search. Some had obvious strap marks on their shoulders, indicating they had recently packed heavy loads for considerable distances. These men were bound with raw sisal and taken out by chopper. (Later in the war, such men were not so easily detained, but in 1962 everyone was still figuring out how to go about their business.)

Ammo for the big gun was stored in an identical cache under the second house. Like the machine gun captured earlier, many of the smaller weapons were of Japanese origin. After partition in 1954, North Vietnamese divers salvaged tons of supplies from

coastal freighters sunk while resupplying the Japanese forces during World War II. Divers went down on free dives to sixty feet and, using weights and a simple air hose, brought up weapons, including explosives, from as far down as ninety feet.

Ton after ton of materiel was slowly and carefully salvaged by the Communists for use in the war against the French. At Dien Bien Phu, the Vietnamese acquired significant additional amounts of French and American weapons.

From 1954 until 1962, when they began to make their move, the Vietcong transported huge amounts of weapons and explosives to caches in the south. Locations of the caches were known by three-man cells, only one of whom knew the contact of the cell in the next village.

North Vietnamese regulars knew that aligned twigs, tied grass, or broken branches were signs that indicated a cache was near. Knowing basically how the caches were made, they would search around the area until the weapons they required were uncovered.

Eventually, thousands of tons of arms were moved south and cached. Americans had sophisticated radio communication nets, night vision devices, heavy artillery, and air support, but the Vietcong had weapons they hauled in on their backs either from the north or from the beaches, caching skills, dedication, and vast experience waging irregular warfare.

Along the coast and in the southern delta, weapons came in by small boat and sometimes freighters. Caches were placed inland a short distance, depending on local conditions. In the southern delta, caches were simply holes dug into high mounds and dikes where the corrosive coastal waters were unlikely to reach. As originally packed in China and Czechoslovakia, the weapons could be cached for six to eight months as long as they were not covered with water. Heavy grease and solid

wooden crates provided reasonably good protection for the short and intermediate run.

At times, the Vietcong scrounged shelter halves, plastic sheeting, nylon tarps, or corrugated tin to protect their caches. Mostly, however, they used woven mats and grass thatch to line their cache holes. Because of the incessant rain in some areas, it was as important to place a cover over the top of the boxes and cases as it was to place one under them, even though the weapons were buried several feet below the ground.

Ammunition was either cached in its original container or, for small arms, taken from the boxes and stored loose in wax-coated or shellacked bamboo tubes. Some of these tubes were four inches in diameter and could hide a considerable quantity of ammo or explosives. At times, full tubes were dropped in creeks or canals, but seldom was the ammo stored with the weapons.

Flooded rice paddies were a favorite caching place for the Vietcong. As the Americans became more sophisticated, they would run metal detectors around the dike of every paddy they came to. In numerous cases, they uncovered individual weapons coated with grease and wrapped in cloth under eighteen inches of water. The Vietcong responded by booby-trapping their caches and using the weapons as bait.

Steve Mattoon recalls the afternoon he fished a 120mm Russian motor tube out of a rice paddy. An American-style hand grenade placed as a booby trap threw its spoon next to him with a pop. Instantaneously, he threw himself over the dike, avoiding the explosion that was muffled to some extent by the mud and water.

When the Vietcong intended to cache weapons or ammo for the long term, they placed them in tied-off rubber inner tubes. Truck tubes could even protect larger crew-served weapons. In all likelihood, some caches

in Vietnam today are probably still in good shape inside original rubber tubes.

GIs that were in Vietnam remember that it was impossible to keep an old inner tube around for any length of time. They always seemed to walk off (ending up, of course, in a hole in the ground, rice paddy, or stream, protecting a gun).

The Vietcong maintained both large regional caches and small personal hides. Both were frequently uncovered by GIs. Perhaps because there were so many, virtually every GI who went on patrol in Vietnam eventually found weapons of some sort.

In addition to rice paddies, cemeteries were good places for the Vietcong to cache weapons. At the time of Tet in 1968, ground observers believed that most of the weapons brought into the inner cities were transported in coffins. Some GIs who fought their way through that one believed that as many as five hundred bogus funerals were organized in Saigon alone.

Burial grounds were high and dry, and the exact place where each coffin full of arms was interred could be recorded on a visible grave marker. Both GIs and Saigon government soldiers tried to uncover weapons caches in cemeteries, but they usually came up short because there was so much other metal buried with the average Vietnamese corpse. Mine detectors gave enough readings to keep an entire brigade busy digging for years.

Toward the end of the war, almost all large caches were placed in the extensive Vietcong tunnel network. Some of these tunnels were so elaborate that they not only contained crew-served weapons, but also entire weapons factories, as well as hospitals, prisons, and large food storage areas.

In these instances, weapons, RPGs, and mortar rounds were going out of the caches as fast as they were coming in. More and more individual Vietnamese

decided to take up arms as it became increasingly obvious who was going to win the war. In that regard, their strategy evolved from caching to hiding. Increasingly, ground actions were supported by mortar fire. Mortar rounds that came down through Cambodia were kept briefly—only until enough were accumulated for an engagement—and then sent out for use.

Toward the end, finding caches was no longer a high priority for GIs. They picked up what they found, but often the weapons were not even taken back to camp. Many grunts reported digging a small hole, piling in the weapons and ammo, and then firing a block of C-4 to destroy them.

Edward Lansdale's plan to spread havoc in the north by using caches and "stay-behinds" came to naught. Apparently, too few stay-behinds became active, and the general population in the north did not support them.

In the south, however, caching really worked. After things got rolling in 1962, anyone who wanted a weapon could get one—many times in the exact make and model and from the country of choice.