

# The Advisors

Story and photos by Sgt Ray Wolf, USMC

**T**he morning sun had barely peeked over the horizon as the Marines maneuvered into position. They'd already been on the move for nearly three hours. The battalion commander made last-minute checks on everyone's position, then nodded to his radio operator to give him the handset. The message he sent was, "Fire!" In the distance, two batteries of Vietnamese Marine 105 mm howitzers barked their reply.

As volley upon volley whistled overhead and impacted in the tree line, the Vietnamese colonel and his American Marine advisor crouched low and waited. Under the artillery fire's cover, the forward elements began closing on the target with fire team rushes.

As suddenly as it had begun, the artillery stopped and the lead elements assaulted the battered tree line. Surely, no one could still be alive in the tree line yet orange flashes from a machine gun quickly proved that "Charlie" was still there.

The enemy's aim was good; three men fell, others dove for cover.

A corpsman was attending to the wounded as a perfect shot from a Marine's

M-79 grenade launcher silenced the Viet Cong bunker. As smoke began drifting from the machine gun's former position, a trio of Vietnamese Marines left the battalion command post and headed for their casualties.

Leading the way, a Vietnamese Marine sprinted to stay ahead of the others while the last man struggled with a field radio, trying to keep up with the group and still not lose any of his equipment. In the middle, standing a head taller than the two Vietnamese, the USMC advisor presented a possible target for any would-be snipers as he slogged through knee-deep, rice-paddy mud. The Vietnamese were obviously losing their battle to keep up with his strides.

A quick look at the wounded told the advisor an emergency medevac would be needed.

A landing zone was established as the advisor radioed his request. Suddenly, firing broke out at the other end of the tree line. The enemy had become aware of the futility of retreat—the battalion had them surrounded.

Sporadic fighting continued as a U.S. Army helicopter arrived overhead. The



**Col W.M. Van Zuyen, left, senior Marine advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps, conferred with members of his staff in the field.**

firing intensified as the Vietnamese Marines attempted to keep "Charlie's" head down when the bird landed.

The advisor threw a smoke grenade and stood up as the helicopter made its landing approach, then directed the pilot's landing with arm signals.

As the helicopter touched down, casualties were loaded aboard and the advisor directed it to take off. As the bird lifted, the Vietnamese Marine dove for cover from small arms fire whistling overhead.

The remainder of the day was spent routing the enemy force. As the battle ebbed, the advisor found time to jot down notes of the day's action, pointing out his





Advisors played crucial roles in Vietnam, especially in the latter years of the war when they served as liaisons to U.S. ground units.

suggestion to the commander to move out under cover of darkness, adding an element of surprise.

He had directed five U.S. artillery missions, coordinated four flights of fixed-wing aircraft and three additional medevac missions. Now it was time to get some chow and a little rest before radioing in the night artillery coordinates.

There are some who might have been tempted to pass up the meal after hearing the menu: rice, pork, chicken, bamboo sprouts, squash, cucumbers, and boiled greens, seasoned with extremely hot peppers smothered with a putrid smelling sauce made of fermented fish, called

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“nuoc mam.” It would be prepared by the headquarters squad in their cooking pot.

For the advisor, eating the Vietnamese food was merely one more facet in the wide pattern of “strange” things to which he’d become accustomed.

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The major reason for the changes is the fact that the Vietnamese people are very proud and set in their ways. The quicker a Westerner shows a willingness





to learn new customs, the quicker he'll be accepted.

An advisor couldn't exist if he weren't accepted by the South Vietnamese. The degree of acceptance and confidence is directly correlated to the degree of success he'll enjoy in his assignment.

A new advisor will find himself assigned to either a battalion or a brigade. To help him through his tour, he's assigned Vietnamese Marines: a driver, a radio operator and a versatile individual known as his "cowboy."

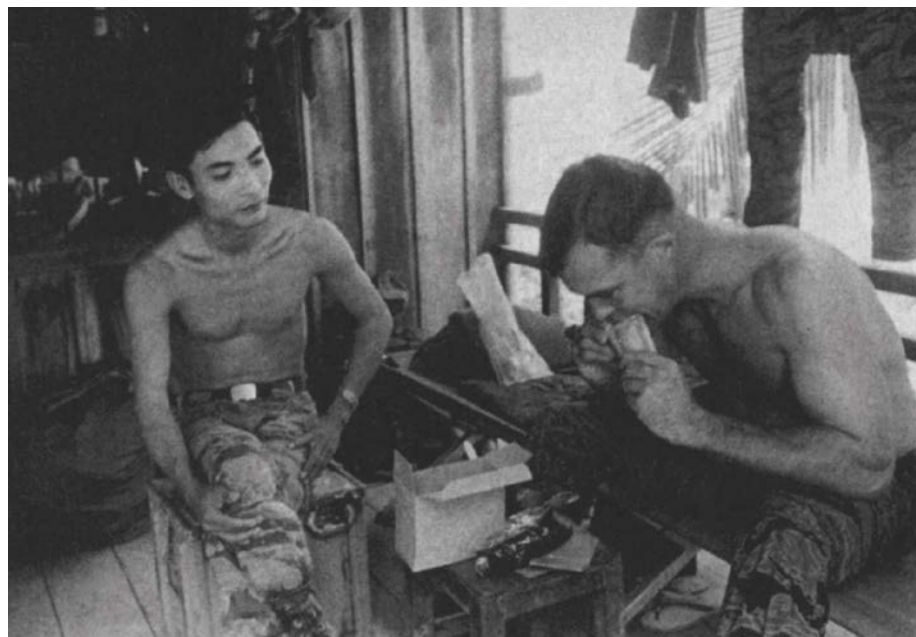
A cowboy is much the same as a business executive's "girl Friday." He'll do laundry, cook meals, carry equipment, clean weapons, and in general, be a bodyguard. Acts of bravery by cowboys under fire have made the position one of envy and prestige, usually assigned to combat-proved veterans.

The job of advising is viewed differently by various advisors, but they all agree on one point: It's a very rewarding job—one that calls for not only military knowledge, but also tact and persuasiveness.

Major E.G. Rivers spent his first tour

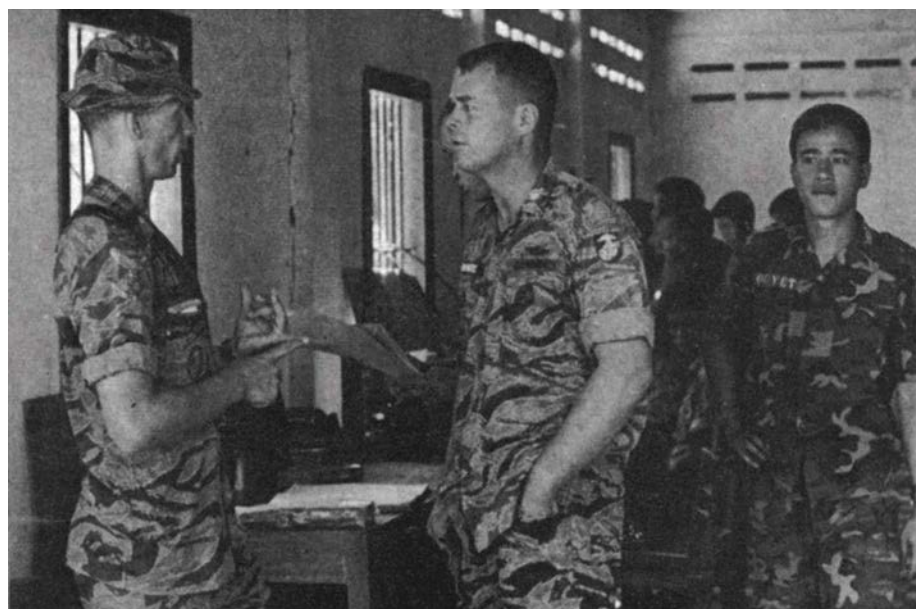
**Above: An informal meeting between American advisors and their Vietnamese allies was held in an old French fort.**

**Below: Capt L.P. Woodburn enjoyed a submarine sandwich, Vietnamese style, prepared by his Vietnamese aide.**





**Below: Maj G.A. Adams, left, advisor to a Vietnamese battalion, briefed Maj E.G. Rivers, brigade advisor, on some of the problems his Vietnamese unit was encountering regarding logistics support and medevacs.**



In 1964, American Marines were filling billets with Vietnamese Army units in addition to their Marine Corps.

The large build-up of American forces in the mid-1960s brought the advisors another realm of responsibility—liaison with U.S. ground units. During Operation Blue Marlin, Vietnamese and U.S. Marines landed on adjacent beaches after being quartered and fed aboard U.S. ships.

The cooperation enjoyed by the two units brought these words of praise from Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent Peter Arnette: “The U.S. and Vietnamese Marines are working together in an ideal arrangement—one not enjoyed elsewhere in the country.”

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Arnette’s observations stemmed from the successful technique of winning your counterpart’s respect and admiration through hard work. To visualize the obstacles that had to be overcome by the advisors, consider the following situation.

The advisor had no command authority whatsoever. His counterpart usually was

senior in rank, older and had more combat experience. The advisor had to brave the same degree of risk, and sometimes more, because his physical size and the task of assisting helicopters made him a primary target.

During the early years, many advisors knew little or no Vietnamese and their counterparts’ command of the English language was limited. Many times, an advisor would use pidgin English or sign language to get information so he could direct jet aircraft on bombing runs.

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The Marines tackled this situation with the equation, “The success of the advisor’s efforts to win the respect and cooperation of his Vietnamese counterpart is the direct equation of professional competence and knowledge multiplied by the amount of time that the advisor and counterpart spend together.”

It proved to be the needed formula. The Marines achieved their goals by getting to know their Vietnamese commander, his personal traits, the men of his unit and most of all, customs of the country.

For the Vietnamese commander, it was no longer a case of just another American showing up full of well-intended, if not always practical, suggestions. Now, it was an American who took an interest in the commander’s country and showed a real desire to be helpful while still being respectful.

A plaque on the wall of the advisors’ headquarters in Saigon sums it up with

as an advisor to the 2nd ARVN Division and was then assigned to the Vietnamese Marines.

Formed in October 1954, with a strength of 1,437 men, the Vietnamese Marine Corps was tasked with surveillance of waterways and amphibious operations on the coast and rivers. Because of its success in combat operations throughout the Mekong Delta, the Corps was upped in strength to three battalions in 1959.

The first USMC advisors in Vietnam arrived in the late 1950s in the form of an assistant naval attaché and a single advisor to the fledgling Vietnamese Marine Corps. By 1962, the Vietnamese had five battalions of Marines with one American Marine advisor assigned to each. During a one-year tour at this time, an advisor could count on spending more than 30 percent of his time in the field and the rest on training problems.

As the tempo of the war increased, so did the number of advisors and their responsibilities. With the introduction of U.S. helicopters as a supporting element, the advisor thus became an air controller.





**Maj E.G. Rivers, center, introduced his replacement, Maj C.A. Gatchel, right, to a Vietnamese member of the brigade headquarters unit.**

these words: “The patient but persistent advisor who hears his counterpart ask, ‘What do you think?’ has just been informed that he is a success.”

Throughout his tour the advisor has one goal in mind: “To work himself out of a job.” Meaning that when the Vietnamese Marines are good enough to do the job without the assistance of an advisor, ex-

cept for liaison and translation duties, they’ve achieved their mission.

As Maj Rivers was preparing to rotate to the States, he had the chance to see his unit operate on their own. “When the Vietnamese moved into Cambodia along the Mekong River [May-June 1970], advisors were only allowed to go about 20 miles into Cambodia, but the Viet-

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namese kept going,” he recalled. “And keep going they did, through some of the roughest fighting they’d ever been in!”

The situation was a little hard to swallow at first. The advisors had been with these outfits for nearly a year, and now that they were really in a fight, the advisors couldn’t be there with them. After thinking it over, Maj Rivers realized this was the goal they’d been working for.

Pridefully, he commented, “They’re proving what a job the advisors have done; they’re fighting the war on their own and doing a damn fine job of it! 🇺🇸



**When time and the situation permit, Marine advisors hold informal meetings at brigade headquarters to discuss the progress of the Vietnamese units.**