

# POINT & "SHOOT"

## Stars and Stripes Photographer Grabs A Gun in Bitter Viet Cong Battle



Gary Cooper / Stars and Stripes ©  
Near Pleiku, South Vietnam, July 1966:

A radioman for a 25th Infantry Division squad under Viet Cong fire calls for help from another unit. Stripes photographer Gary Cooper recalled that "things were touch and go for minutes and I thought it best to shoot an M-16 rather than my Nikomat (camera)."

By Gary Cooper

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3rd brigade, 25TH Inf. div., Vietnam -

Dawn, less than half a mile from the Cambodian border.

A 12-man squad is winding its way to home base through thick, dark jungle after spending a long restless night at Outpost Cord No. 4 watching for Viet Cong. Fifteen minutes from now, five of the 12 men will be wounded. Two will be near death.

Moving along creek bed, the men try to stay quiet as possible. The squad leader, Sgt. John Smith, throws one hand up over his head. Everyone freezes. One, two, then three breathless seconds pass as Smith searches the mass of jungle to his left. Slowly, he raises three fingers, one by one and whispers, "I've spotted three of them over there." The tense silence erupts as the Viet Cong open up with automatic weapons.

We dive for the sand and scramble madly for a tree trunk near the creek. A soldier at the end of the trunk cries out as a slug tears into his chest. It doesn't take long to realize there are more than three. Many more. "You, you and you," Smith says. "Get across the creek before we're surrounded." By twos and threes the men splash across the creek, staying so low their chins nearly hit the water.

The radio operator has made a frantic call to company base camp, telling them of our situation. The company is 2,000 meters from us across the same rugged, nearly impenetrable terrain. They're roughly 30 miles southwest of Pleiku. Running, stumbling, firing to the left and right, carrying the wounded man. Gasping for breath, we look around us for any kind of cover. There is none, only elephant grass four feet high. Two men in front of me drop, partially hidden in the grass. I do the same. Fifty thoughts race through my mind as I hug the ground. If only I had a rifle, a pistol, a grenade. Anything but my camera!

It's not quiet now. I can't distinguish the sound of one bullet, or even a burst from a machine gun. It's all one terrible nightmare, sounding like a million rounds going off at once. "Hey you. Help me." I look around. Where is

he? "Stars and Stripes. I'm hit. Help me." It's Smith. He's about five feet away.

I start crawling to him. I don't really want to, but I do anyway. What I really want to do is bury myself as deeply as I can into the ground.

"Smitty, where are you hit?" His eyes stare skyward, looking at something I hope never to see. His hand falls from his chest. Blood spurts into the air. I find a bandage and tie it around him, telling him every thing is going to be okay, hoping that it will be.

Ahead of Smith, PFC Milton Vaughan is slumped against a tree. He has that same stare in his eyes as Smitty. Gray matter is oozing out of the wound in his head. I find another bandage and cover the hole as he mumbles, "My God. My God. My God."

All around me men seem to be shouting, yet trying to keep their voices at a muffled whisper. The Viet Cong, now maybe 50 or 60, have us surrounded. They're screaming and yelling, hoping to panic the squad. It sounds like a Western movie with Indians whooping. But this is real. The air is filled with the smell of cordite, leaving a dense haze, engulfing the seven men still able to fire.

PFC Gabriel Diaz keeps firing his M-60 machine gun into the grass and yells: "They're right there. I can see the bastards. They're right there, ten meters away." The M-16 I found by Smith's side is ripping into the grass in front of me. There's nothing to see but grass and smoke. But they're there, ten meters away. The rifle stops firing. I find another clip and slam it into the gun.

Viet Cong are screaming all around us. Suddenly it hits me. I'm fighting for my life. The rifle jams. The jungle turns dead quiet. Everything I've ever heard about an M-16 rifle races through my mind. It won't fire. No matter what I do it still won't fire. Another M-16 is laying close by. I grab it and shove a fresh clip in and wait.

The jungle explodes in another wild burst of fire, cries and smoke. I level the rifle and squeeze the trigger. Again nothing happens! I drop the useless weapon and squirm closer to the ground. One question races very clearly through my mind: "What in the hell am I doing here!"

"The map, I've got to have the map." It's Sgt. Richard C. Austin, who has taken command of the squad. "Where is it?" I ask. Austin says that Smith has it. I reach Smith again. "The map Smitty. We've gotta have the map." He's deep in shock so he says nothing. Without the map we haven't got a chance. The company, now on its way to us, has to know exactly where we are. I reach down Smith's bloodied chest and find the map. It's warm and sticky, covered with blood. I crawl back to Austin and give him the map. He talks into the radio, telling the company where we are.

The area off to the right is wide open. I grab another rifle and make my way to that spot. A deafening blast sends my face deeper into the ground. A grenade or mortar has landed where I had been only seconds before. It's white phosphorous. Little holes start smoldering on my back and legs from flesh-burns. I slap at the holes quickly, then turn and look back down the barrel of the M-16.

The 30 minutes that seems to have taken a lifetime to pass, is finally over.

C Co., 1st Bn., 35th Inf., has spotted the squad. I can hear them talking and shouting orders.

One of the first people to reach us is SP5 Glenn R. Brown, senior medic for Charlie Company. He bandages the wounded, tries to calm them, and calls for make shift stretchers to be made from tree branches and ponchos.

Forty five minutes after Smith spotted the first three Viet Cong, he and the other four wounded are in a chopper, on their way to the field hospital in Pleiku.

Capt. Alvino Cortez, C Co. Commander, says his company has found four VC bodies, plus some ammo and automatic weapons. But there has to be more than that dead. I know there are. Later that night, Austin, Diaz and the other five who survived the fight unwounded were back at Outpost Cord No. 4. 