

The Fastest Gun South Of Da Nang

by Dick Culver

The time frame was December 1967, and the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment had recently been replaced as the fire fighting detail on the Special Landing Force. Up until that time, 2/3 had been utilized as a sort of "Super Sparrow Hawk" designated to pull any outfit with their fanny in a crack out of a \$++t sandwich. This duty, while arduous and interesting had its definite drawbacks (aside from the obvious, being almost continuously in the line of fire). Our base of operations was literally an LPH (Landing Platform, Helicopter – a small aircraft carrier designed to launch [vertical] amphibious assaults utilizing helicopters). Our particular LPH was the U.S.S. Tripoli, the LPH-10.



Reggie with Smoking Holster

Now living aboard ship might sound like a soft touch, and indeed if we HAD lived aboard the LPH it would have been a genteel existence, however for over nine months, we spent all but about 12 days ashore. Once we were launched to assist some organization that was in "Deep Kimshe", our services (as a unit) were usually offered (compliments of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade – our parent unit stationed on Okinawa) to whatever Marine Division we happened to be attached. Needless to say, no self-respecting Marine Division ever turned down such an offer and we spent almost 9 straight months in the field. Other units *permanently* assigned to the Division(s) were assigned *permanent* areas of operation, and each Battalion had a *semi-permanent* camp. These camps usually had Officer, Staff NCO, NCO and Enlisted Clubs, a battalion mess hall and permanent hooches for the troops. We, as the *Special Landing Force*, on the other hand, lived in holes we had dug, dined primarily on C Rations, and virtually never got beer rations since U.S. Naval ships have been "dry" (devoid of alcoholic beverages) since the turn of the century. This made for a VERY Spartan existence!

Other units were usually stationed close to some existing Vietnamese Village. Here the troops were more or less free to bargain with the villagers for small souvenirs, and other less mentionable amenities. Having been (literally) living out of a fighting hole for 9 months, our troops took advantage of their newfound freedom(s). One of the more salable products produced in our nearest Village were "wild-west" type holsters, produced in the mold of the best Hollywood tradition.

Until that time, most of the old-timers (Officers and S/NCOs) had acquired holsters for their government model M1911s that were somewhat different than the standard issue M1912 leather pistol scabbard for the old war-horse. I personally carried my DCM

M1911 in a Berns-Martin "Raider Holster". "Big Red", as my personal sidearm came to be called by my Hospital Corpsmen, was carried "cocked and locked" with a safety strap between the cocked hammer and the rear of the slide. I was perfectly comfortable with that rig and still have it among my pile of "sacred stuff".

Everything would have gone well, but most of the young troops authorized to carry a .45 Automatic had not brought any non-regulation holsters from home with them. Having seen all the officers (and many S/NCOs) carrying their "hawg legs" in non-reg leather, they lusted after individual leather and the opportunity to display their individuality, much like Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson. The kids felt that this would be the perfect opportunity to acquire a suitable gunfighting rig for themselves. The wild west holsters being purveyed in the nearby ville were too much to resist. Within a week or so of our battalion returning to a permanent "in country" status, virtually every authorized "pistoleer" looked like an extra in a Clint Eastwood Spaghetti Western.

Our new Battalion Commander was a stickler for regulations and since we were no longer tactically widely disbursed as we had often been in the past, it was much easier to keep an eagle eye on our choice of web gear and gun fighting rigs. As long as the variations in leather pistol scabbards were minimal and not terribly noticeable, our former skipper had traditionally turned a blind eye to our eccentricities. With the outbreak of low slung gunfighter leather running rampant throughout the battalion, this had pushed our normally patient CO beyond the limit.

At the morning staff meeting, our new battalion commander made it plain that everyone had until noon that day to dispose of their cowboy (and other) non regulation holsters. By morning colors, anyone caught sporting anything other than a regulation M1912 holster would be summarily "drawn and quartered". With great reluctance we put away our "non-reg" leather. For a few days, everyone went around with long faces and the most regulation of gear, but we still were bitching about the sudden twist of fate that removed some of our individuality.

One of my most stalwart compatriots was a Marine Captain who had followed me around the Marine Corps since we had both been 2nd lieutenants. This gentleman was one Reginald G. Ponsford III, a product of El Paso, Texas. Needless to say Reggie was one tough hombre – anyone who survived childhood with a name like that in El Paso was not likely to be a pansy! Reggie had grown up tough. He stood about 5'10" tall, and had been a wrestler and prizefighter in his youth and was still double tough (he had scars all over the top of his head to prove it). During our days with 2/3 we had had matching Rifle Companies and had seen some rough times together. This coupled with our previous service together had created a rather close bond that exists to this day. Reggie is one of my favorite characters.

When our previous Battalion CO had been rotated back to the States, he had promised all the Captains that they would get a crack at a Rifle Company (considered to be a necessary "ticket-punch" in the climb up the promotional ladder). As a result, when he left, he made all the existing Company Commanders Staff Officers, and all the Staff Officers, Company Commanders... needless to say this did not bode well. The new Battalion Commander was in a position of having to operate with Company Commanders with no field experience, and staff officers who had openly disdained the

previous staff officers (now Company Commanders) that they had replaced. Since I had been an old "Recon Troop" in days gone by, I wound up as the Battalion Intelligence Officer. Reggie Ponsford had gotten a case of malaria, had been evacuated to Cam Ron Bay and wasn't present in the Battalion to defend himself. Reggie thus inherited the (unglamorous) job of Battalion S-4 (Supply and Logistics). Needless to say, my knuckle dragging buddy was not amused! Reggie would have been perfectly at home "doing in" the enemy with battle axes, and saw no humor in having been reduced to issuing "beans, bullets and Band-Aids". I was in total sympathy with Reggie, but could at least rationalize that I was in a position of analyzing the enemy's probable course(s) of action, and capable of causing some hate and discontent among the VC and NVA by pinpointing targets. My ability to do this stemmed from intelligence extracted from prisoners (*most* gently of course), and thus possibly influencing the war effort. Reggie had become a simple "supply puke" and I left no opportunity unturned to remind him of his "reduced status"...

Now that the stage is set, we will get to the meat of our story. Fast forward to a small chunk of terrain immediately behind the Battalion Commander's Hooch. There were several of the various Staff Officers and Company Commanders standing in a small group bemoaning the loss of our favorite pistol pouches. Grumbling was rampant and many foul things were being attributed to the manufacturers of the Wild West leather gear. Some of the lads hailing from the southern climes were contemplating having loved ones send them voodoo dolls for the insertion of appropriate black pins. Most of the lads were in a foul mood.

Sensing that the mood was going to progress from foul to ugly, I decided to take a hand. Remembering a trick an old time MP once showed me for cocking the M1911 in a GI holster one handed, I decided to hold class to demonstrate the advantages of the M1912 Holster.

Taking my pistol out of its regulation holster, I cleared the weapon in the approved manner. For the un-anointed, this consists of removing the magazine and sticking it in your belt. You then pull the slide to the rear, and look into the chamber to insure that the pistol is, in fact, clear. You can then allow the slide to go forward, pull the trigger, reinsert the magazine and re-holster your pistol. Since I was going to demonstrate the "one handed cocking technique", I simply left the magazine in my belt, emptied the chamber and pocketed the round I normally kept in the chamber.

I then demonstrated the "one handed cocking technique" by pushing the pistol into the M1912 holster in such a fashion that the lower portion of the slide was resting on the shelf normally forming the "stop" that the trigger guard rests upon when it is normally placed in the holster. When the lower portion of the slide is pushed smartly down on the "trigger guard shelf", the slide will remain motionless, and the receiver will go downward. The barrel will protrude into the normal "slide channel" in the main portion of the holster normally housing the entire slide of the M1911. The barrel protruding into the slide channel allows the slide to go to the rear in relation to the receiver and forces the slide to its rearmost position. If a loaded magazine is left in the weapon, and the force causing the recoil spring to compress is relaxed, the slide will rapidly go back in battery under spring tension, stripping the top round off the magazine. This action will result in loading the pistol and leave the hammer in a cocked position. If your adversary is in

front of you, you can then level the pistol at the "blighter" and blaze away! Most efficient and a very good trick to know if you are required to carry the M1911 in a GI Holster with an empty chamber. As described, it is a safe practice, but if you get out of "sync", evil things can happen! And thereby hangs a tale...

After demonstrating the technique several times, Reggie says to me, "Culver, you're gonna' blow your foot off screwing around with that thing! Now how was that again?"

I demonstrated one more time and Reggie decided to try it for himself. Now Reggie usually carried his pistol in his holster with the hammer down and with an empty chamber (not a practice I personally favor, but then...). Everything would have gone alright, but for one small fly in the buttermilk.

Reggie had loaned his pistol to his supply sergeant to go shoot rats at the local dump to keep his shooting eye in. The young lad was used to carrying a round in the chamber with the hammer down (another practice I do not personally favor). When the sergeant returned from the dump, he cleaned it thoroughly and gave it back to Reggie in the same condition in which he kept his own sidearm – a round in the chamber, and a loaded magazine, but with the hammer down.

Reggie of course, thinks the lad returned the pistol to him in the same condition in which he found it – empty chamber, slide forward, hammer down, but with a loaded magazine in the magazine well. You can probably see this one coming.

Reggie clears his pistol in the manner HE considers will make it safe. He removes the magazine and puts it in his belt. Since he never carried a round in the chamber inside the wire, he allowed habit and assumption get the best of his good judgment. He simply didn't bother to check the chamber! Exceptionally bad maneuver!

With his (supposedly) unloaded pistol, Reggie copied my demonstration of the one-handed cocking technique. The scheme worked and cocked the pistol, but a loaded round already in the chamber is just long enough for the "holster cocking technique" not to eject it from the ejection port, and the offending round simply re-chambered itself as the slide returned to battery. Ponsford looked at his cocked pistol and said something to the effect of, "Well I'll be damned!"

Reggie then stuffed his pistol back in the holster and pulled the trigger to ready himself for one more go at it! The entire area was rocked by an unexpected concussion and the smell of cordite. The area was absolutely saturated with silence, and upon looking around, I find that Reggie and I are alone behind the Colonel's tent with the door slowly opening.

"Uh oh!" I thought, "this could get ugly!"

A booming voice from the hooch demanded, "what the f++k was THAT!"

Reggie stood up as straight as his tensed muscles and aching ears would allow and said, "Aw Colonel, one of your damned fool captains just shot the end out of his holster!"

"Really?" said the Colonel, "who in the hell was that?"

Reggie sorta' hung his head and said..."Me", with his demeanor fairly dripping with regret.

The immediate silence was even more deafening than the earlier pistol shot. The Colonel was looking at both of us like we were from the Planet Mars, and no doubt plotting his upcoming "drawing and quartering ceremony." I excuse myself on the pretext of preparing the Intelligence Summary for the following day, leaving Reggie to talk his way out of this one!

Reggie was awarded five days "hack" for his indiscretion ("hack" being an administrative confinement to quarters when not performing your normal daily duties). Hack was, of course, a semi-meaningless formality in Vietnam, and by Friday Reggie was his old smiling self, although keeping his hand well away from his issue M1912 holster. A small get together at the Club that afternoon resulted in the presentation of a GI helmet to Reggie that had been shot full of holes (seemingly with an M60 Machine Gun). There was a specially marked dog tag on a chain hung through one of the holes – the inscription read, "To Capt. Reggie Ponsford, From a Nervous Staff".

Only a miracle had kept the inscription from reading, "To Three Toes Ponsford, From a Nervous Staff!" Heh, heh, heh...

I never asked Reggie if he had perfected his one-handed cock and draw technique, Mrs. Culver didn't raise any damn fools.

ROC