

The Saga of “Cold Steel” Gunning

By Dick Culver

It was the summer of 1967, and the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment was sweating out their assignment as *Special Landing Force Bravo*. The Bravo Group of the SLF along with *SLF Alpha*, (the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Regiment), was assigned to bore small holes in the ocean environment off the China Station and as such was seeing more action per square inch than any Marine Battalion in either the 1st or 3rd Marine Division. The job of the SLF(s) was to act as a sort of super *Sparrow Hawk* to be landed as necessary if things went to hell in a handbasket. As a result, we spent a lot more time ashore than aboard ship. Out of a total of 9 months while assigned to the SLF, we spent a total of 12 days aboard our assigned shipping... It was a thrilling assignment, to say the least. Casualties were high, but troop morale was equal to the challenge. We were professional soldiers with a job to do, and we went after it with a vengeance.



From left to right: Lt. “Cold Steel Gunning” Col. William Dick, C.O. of the 4th Marine Regiment, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace M. Green Jr. Photo taken at Camp Evans, slightly southwest of Quang Tri in the Summer of 1967.

The 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment was temporarily attached to the 4th Regiment for operations while assigned to the Special Landing Force.

Since we had more than our fair share of casualties, we were constantly getting in uninitiated replacements, both officer and enlisted. This was not a particularly healthy assignment in terms of life expectancy, but individual and group morale remained high. If you were looking for a fight, the two SLFs represented an outstanding opportunity to fulfill your fondest dreams. At this point in time, a most unlikely 2nd Lieutenant appeared on the scene. 2nd Lieutenant Gunning was the epitome of the unlikely replacement. He almost immediately became known as “Gunny” (a most unkind take-off of his family name). The term “Gunny” within the Corps usually evokes an image of a knuckle-dragging grizzled NCO of many years service and an intimate knowledge of combat. This was NOT an apt description of 2nd Lt. Gunning. Gunning, if given the benefit of the doubt, looked like anything but a combat Marine. He was an inch or two shorter than 5’8”, and weighed in (with a pocket full of rocks) at about 140 lbs. He wore the issue black framed glasses, and looked for all the world like the small cartoon character that played with the intelligent dog in the Saturday Kids Programs on TV. At first glance, Gunning looked like the popular conception of a “computer geek” – all he needed was a piece of white tape around his glasses, and the obligatory plastic pocket protector. Poor Lieutenant Gunning became something of an affectionate mascot.

Unknown to all of us, was that Gunning's slight frame and outward appearance masked a fighting man of awesome proportions. It turned out that Gunning was a warrior in geek's clothing. We were destined to be treated to an object lesson in the old adage of "don't judge a book by its cover"! It turned out that young Gunning was anything but a geek. Gunning was about to make SLA Marshall's evaluation of the use of the bayonet in modern combat invalid, at least within the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment. Enter, "*Cold Steel Gunning*," Marine extraordinaire...

Almost as soon as Gunning reported to the Battalion, he was bugging the Adjutant and the S-1 (admin officer) for assignment to an Infantry Platoon. Young Gunning was good natured and had a sense of humor, but he did NOT come to Vietnam to be a desk ornament. He had watched all the John Wayne movies and was an extremely motivated Infantry Lieutenant. Lieutenant Gunning had come to Southeast Asia to make the world safe for Democracy. The entire battalion had considered him to be a "gungy characterization" of a cartoon character, and were determined to keep him from getting himself hurt – more to the point, they also were determined to protect the troops from the machinations of an extremely wet behind the ears shavetail...

Gunning was assigned as a "Zulu" staff officer in the Battalion Headquarters, to protect both himself and the troops from being a part of Gunning's learning curve. Gunning began chewing on his upper lip in frustration, and working his bolt on a daily basis to get assigned as a Rifle Platoon Leader. The Battalion Staff smiled indulgently, and said nice things about his motivation, but no one was about to turn him loose with a gen-u-wine rifle platoon, both for Gunning's own protection and to save the troops from becoming training aids.

Gunning's persistence in his quest for a platoon soon took on the proportions of a major campaign. He lost no opportunity to regale the staff officers with requests for assignment to a *real* combat outfit, and most of us would hide behind rocks to avoid hearing the lament of the extremely frustrated lieutenant. Gunning was rapidly making himself a major pain in the fanny. Finally, in desperation, the Battalion Commander hatched a plan to give Gunning a taste of combat and still protect any enlisted personnel assigned to the platoon. A consensus was taken from all of the companies for the most hardened, savvy, combat-wise, and competent platoon sergeant in the battalion. The young staff sergeant was taken aside and briefed on the plan. The staff sergeant was told in no uncertain terms NOT to allow Lieutenant Gunning to hurt himself or the troops. In short, the Platoon Sergeant was to be the de-facto Platoon Commander, although he was not to destroy Lieutenant Gunning's feelings of self worth. In other words, he was to save Gunning (and the troops) from himself.

Gunning, now a platoon commander, set about squaring his new platoon away and preparing them for the crucible of combat. He went about it with a will. The rest of the Battalion looked on with benevolent amusement and Gunning's platoon sergeant rolled his eyes in frustration. Lieutenant Gunning was an extremely likeable kid who had been thrown into a real world situation for which he seemed ill suited – or so we thought –

Finally the day came when Gunning was to sally forth on his first patrol in bandit country. The platoon sergeant got several clandestine lectures on what to do if things went to hell in a handbasket. As Gunning left the base camp, everyone held their

collective breaths. We were sure that this had the makings of a disaster. Thank goodness Gunning's platoon sergeant was a combat savvy old NCO.

As luck would have it, Gunning's first foray into bandit country was anything but uneventful. He was a bit over a click and a half from friendly lines when the platoon ran into what was adjudged to be an NVA Platoon. The NVA were not about to be run out of Dodge by a mere platoon, and immediately engaged Gunning's outfit with automatic weapons fire. Like any intelligent unit, everyone hit the deck behind a convenient rice paddy dike until they could evaluate the situation. Gunning took a look around, considered the alternatives and yelled to the platoon to "*fix bayonets!*" He had seen all the John Wayne movies, and fixing bayonets seemed to be the obvious solution. A dead silence only punctuated by rounds cracking over their heads seemed to prevail for a second or two. Instead of looking at Gunning, every eye was on the Platoon Sergeant. The dumbfounded Platoon Sergeant looked up and down the line, scratched his head and said;

"You heard the Lieutenant, *fix bayonets!*"

The troops looked at one another, looked back at the platoon sergeant, and fixed bayonets! Gunning, in best John Wayne fashion, yelled "Charge" and climbed out from behind the cover of the rice paddy dike. Gunning took the lead, firing his .45 at the dumbfounded enemy, followed by an equally dumfounded Marine Rifle Platoon. The NVA looked unbelievably at 40 seeming madmen charging at them with knives affixed to their rifles and filling the air with loud and obscene language. A bayonet charge was something entirely new to the minions of Ho Chi Minh, and it must have been extremely demoralizing to a unit not attuned to the mystique of the blade! The Marines continued screaming like banshees and headed for the NVA position hell bent for leather. Having never faced anything like this before, the bad guys did the only honorable thing, threw down their weapons and ran like hell. Lieutenant Gunning stood in the former NVA position reloading his .45, no doubt thinking that this stuff really DOES work. The Platoon Sergeant was still shaking his head in amazement, and the troops began to look at the meek, mild, brown bar with an entirely new perspective. *HERE* was a real fighting man. The kids couldn't wait to get back to the base camp to make their brags and tell stories of their midget John Wayne platoon leader!

As luck would have it, within the coming week the scenario was repeated, only this time with Gunning's platoon coming under fire from an NVA Company. Since it had worked so well before, young Gunning again gave the order to fix bayonets. The troops and the platoon sergeant, now getting into the spirit of the thing, fixed bayonets without question and waited for the order to charge – and charge they did, giving another appropriate Rebel Yell, running hell bent for leather, rather obviously intent on reaping destruction on the enemy. It has often been said that success breeds success, and certainly if Gunning was any example, the old saying was proven in spades. The NVA again threw down their weapons and fled the field. Needless to say, it was a somewhat "swaggering" platoon that came back into the lines that evening.

It didn't take long for Lieutenant Gunning to become the toast of the battalion, often in a kindly fashion referred to as "*Cold Steel Gunning!*" Gunning had become something of a legend in his own time.

Gunning finished out his time in the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines and went home sporting a chest full of medals and an untarnished reputation. None of us who had known "*Cold Steel*" ever again made the mistake of judging a book by its cover.

I only saw young Gunning one more time. He had elected to make a career out of the Corps and was a Captain stationed on Okinawa in early 1973. He had apparently become enamored of a young lady and was mentally planning his future with the intended Mrs. Gunning. He took a couple of weeks leave and met his intended in Hawaii. Upon returning to the Rock, he was posted as the Battalion Officer of the Day one weekend, and was found dead by his own hand in the OD's office the next morning. The details were murky, but scuttlebutt said that his young lady had dumped him for another and broken his heart. Gunning didn't know how to be anything but sincere and dedicated to the task at hand. Obviously he (like so many other warriors) could not fathom the mind or intentions of a woman. It would seem that the fickle affections of a lady had done for a soldier who knew no fear of the enemy...

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