



Captain Paul Van Riper in Vietnam, 1969

Editor's Note: It's an honor to feature this guest post. Below are Lt. Gen Van Riper's reflections on combat after he retired from the Marine Corps in 1997.

By Lieutenant General Paul K. Van Riper, USMC (ret)

1. **Pray before every battle, pray during the battle, and pray after the battle.** I never prayed harder or more earnestly than I did in combat nor did I find anything more comforting.
2. **Fear is the same every time you come under enemy fire.** You may become accustomed to the responses you make, but not the gut-wrenching feeling. You can conquer fear in the sense that you are able to function effectively, however, it will always be with you.
3. **There are two extremes in a unit's first fight—"trigger happiness" and over caution.** If the first fight is at night the problem is even greater. This is something you simply need to be aware of and to educate your Marines about to reduce the negative impact. Generally, the problem is self-correcting in subsequent engagements.
4. **Control the impulse to ask for reports from units under fire.** At the start of every engagement the leaders are simply trying to sort things out and radio calls from higher headquarters only interfere. My rule of thumb as a company commander in Vietnam was to wait for a minimum of five minutes before even considering picking up a handset. The first communication should ask if the unit needs assistance; it should not request information. Well-trained leaders in cohesive units will routinely forward details on what is happening as soon as they are on top of the situation.
5. **Train leaders to move to the sound of gunfire.** They should not advance in a reckless or foolhardy fashion, but in a deliberate and alert manner. The idea is to get close enough to assess accurately the situation while not becoming pinned down.
6. **Maintain awareness of adjacent units especially other service and coalition forces.** These units are most likely to mistake your unit for the enemy and vice versa. There were many narrow escapes during Operation Desert Storm in this type of situation. Officers moving with lead units are particularly important at night (the most likely time for fratricide) because it places them in a position to shut off incoming friendly fire quickly.
7. **Use the "buddy" system.** Most units forget to employ this simple technique when they go to war. It is extremely important after a firefight when you are trying to account for all-hands. In Vietnam, I found that in the tense minutes when the unit was evacuating casualties it was easy to lose track of which Marines we were sending out. Marines can easily misplace weapons and important items of equipment during these times. Set up a procedure to prevent these problems well before the action starts. An

adjunct to the buddy system is the pairing of vehicles—lone vehicles moving about are seldom a good idea in a combat zone.

8. ***Better to have those on watch wide-awake than to insist on the traditional 50 percent alert.*** As a company commander in Vietnam, I varied between a 20 and 25 percent alert status (one out of five or one out of four). A fifty-percent alert night after night will quickly tire out a unit's Marines. Moreover, there is a tendency with so many Marines on watch for some to believe that if they close their eyes for a few minutes it will not make much difference because surely most of the rest are awake. I have checked lines at night under these conditions and found nearly everyone dozing or half-awake.
9. ***Hand-grenades (our own) are the most dangerous weapon in combat outside of enemy fire.*** In every single action that US forces have been involved in since at least as far back as World War II, unintentional detonations of friendly grenades has been a major problem. The most frequent cause is when Marines attach grenades to web gear and the pin catches on something that pulls it out. Often this happens in tight spaces such as a vehicle. It also occurs when Marines are taking off or picking up their gear. Keep grenades in pockets whenever possible. Never bend the ends of pins inward to make them easier to pull out.
10. ***Treat all enemy prisoners and any civilians with basic decency.*** This does not mean lowering your guard, but simply to avoid any unnecessary roughness or demeaning behavior. This is obviously the right thing to do as well as being a legal requirement. More than one nation has regretted allowing or ignoring actions by its soldiers that embittered prisoners or turned a civilian population's outlook from neutral or friendly to hostile.

Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper currently holds the Kim T. Adamson Chair of Insurgency and Terrorism at Marine Corps University. Lieutenant General Van Riper retired from the United States Marine Corps on 1 October 1997 after more than 41 years of commissioned and enlisted service. In the course of seven tours in the Fleet Marine Force, he saw duty in each of the three active divisions, commanding at every level from infantry platoon to division. He experienced combat during five of these tours.

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