

## **C'est la Guerre...a sad postscript fiasco:**

In an earlier story with this title, I promised a very personal note on the utility, the efficacy in battle, of the US Army Patrol Boat River, the little river craft which featured in that story and which, as a class, did great service in the riverine jungle war in Viet Nam. Now there may be a minor technical dimension to my comment, despite my lack of expertise in the field, but it is the human story intertwined that, I trust, will interest, and sadden the general reader. Any technical "improvement" suggested would now be decades out of date anyway...but see later...

This aside is dedicated, in admiration and in sadness, to those brave young men, the Gunners, who manned the twin Browning machine guns on the bows of the PBR's. I met some of these men, mere "youngsters" to me then from my elevated age of 27 years, along with their young officers and fellow crew-members when I had occasion to deliver their boats, newly overhauled in Saigon by my Company.

Every one of the Gunners I talked to voiced their greatest complaint about their boat, their consuming fear, I inferred. This was that there was no protective armour for them, apart from their flak jackets, in their very exposed position up on the bow, with their heads and torsos high in the breeze of passing AK 47 rounds and B-40 rockets. On TV today you will see the same weapons mounted on personnel carriers, on Humvees or on tanks...all have protective shields of armour plate on either side of the guns. The PBR's in the narrow, winding rivers, were often engaged by Victor Charlie at close range from behind a jungle tree, while the Americans stood horribly visible, and vulnerable, perched high on their plastic toy boats. In my foolhardy plan to fight our way out of our earlier Heart of Darkness, Samantha with her 5 feet 1 inches would have had to stand on an ammunition box just to be able to see over the gun barrels. ("C'est la Guerre")

The reason for the lack of armour was simple: a fast boat must be very light to get up and plane on its own bow wave, and armour is, by definition, heavy.

I described the plight of the Gunners to the other Three Friends, and together we hatched a brilliant Idea. We had received a manufacturer's sample of a new material, "Lexan", a polycarbonate plastic of sorts, transparent, and with amazing inherent strength....our ½ inch thick sample was deemed "bullet-proof" by the supplier. Our sample weighed just 22% of a similar plate of armour steel. Its clear transparency would also mean that the Gunners could see more of their targets than from behind a steel shield.

We contacted the supplier of this miraculous material...yes, he could send suitably-sized panels of Lexan through the APO, the Army Post office.

I discussed the Idea with Captain Kraut, of the Army Procurement Agency one night at the Pink Pussy Cat, with the Sample adhering damply to the bar in beer. He instantly saw all the plus factors: genuine protection for the brave young Gunners, possible promotion for himself, and deserved profits for my Company.

Two nights later, to my astonishment, he brought his superior, Colonel Kleinkofpt (not his real name) to the Pink Cat to meet me. Colonel K., in his uniform, was of sterner stuff than his civvies-clad subordinate. In disapproval of our meeting place he growled: "This looks like a whorehouse!"...a libellous and degrading depiction of the classiest joint in town. I looked around fearfully. Fortunately Mama was at the other end of the Bar, out of earshot. I feared another of her vengeful expulsions of the Uncouth, the likes of Kleinkofpt, usually enforced by a sharpened umbrella she kept behind the Bar.

The Colonel compounded insult with injury when Josephine, the prettiest of all the pretty Girls, placed a delicate pair of fingers on his hairy wrist...he brushed exquisite femininity aside as if she were a leper! And the man had got in the door only because he was invited by a respected patron!

Kraut and I rolled our eyes at each other, and I began to doubt the Captain's wisdom in bringing this misfit to a place where he was obviously sadly out of his depth. As the head of US Army Procurement, Viet Nam, however, his approval was a vital part of putting our Idea into practice.

Kleinkofpt grudgingly admitted that he had heard of the problem of high casualties, and consequent low morale, amongst the Gunners of the PBR's. There had been a rival idea floated...that of firing the guns by remote control, as it were, through a periscope, while the Gunner crouched down in the merely psychological cover of the thin fibreglass hull. Captain Kraut and I were quick to point out that our Lexan offered much more genuine shelter than an eighth inch of fibreglass.

The Colonel looked in distaste at our dripping Sample, and expressed his utmost scepticism that "mere plastic" could stop bullets. We were not getting very far. After four more beers, however, this stern man actually smiled at Josephine, who had remained seated distractingly between me and the Colonel, and after two more drinks he was sitting with his arm around her creamy bare shoulders. Captain Kraut offered the thought that a proper ballistics test, under controlled conditions, would go a long way towards proving the Colonel's wise scepticism, but the Colonel now was wholly enchanted by Vietnamese femininity...he was human after all! The Captain and I wordlessly agreed to refrain from any more talk of armour and bullets that night.

The next day I typed up the sort of draft document that a mere Contractor to a giant Bureaucracy quickly learns is the only way to get things done. Such a letter purports to come directly from the OIC USAPAV, the Head Honcho, our Colonel Kleinkofpt. It offered a succinct summary of the plight of the Gunners, with data about casualties. It mentioned in passing the valuable work of one Captain Kraut in researching the Colonel's idea, and hinted that a Saigon-based, US-approved contractor had been approached, and had acknowledged, after some initial ignorance about such things, that it could procure the necessary materials, and install the protective shields, once a proper test had been carried out. This is the way that junior Colonel's get their coveted Bird collar insignia, if the brilliant idea gets higher approval!

As I was drafting the letter, replete with proper Army jargon, one of my Partners insisted, "The specs! Write in our own specifications!"...reflecting another essential trick of contracting with a giant, inarticulate bureaucracy.

The Captain managed to persuade the Colonel to recognize, and sign his own brilliance, and to send the letter on. Two weeks later USAPAV invited us to bring our plastic to a rifle range near Bien Hoa Airbase to test the Colonel's brilliant idea.

I turned up early hugging my Sample, to be met by a sceptical Sergeant Armourer with an impressive array of light weapons, including Victor Charlie's AK 47.

Disconcertingly, there were also two Medics present, in red-crossed helmets and flak-jackets, with a stretcher, and with an ambulance parked outside.

The Sergeant, obviously suspicious of an ill-groomed civilian foreigner, checked my letter from OIC USAPAV, with minute attention. He was reassured that I spoke a form of English, indeed it seemed that an Anglo Saxon "cousin" was nearly always accepted,

without suspicion, by the Americans of Saigon. The Sergeant then outfitted me in helmet and flak-jacket (both several sizes too big) ear muffs and flash-proof goggles. During this period of togetherness, I noted that his name-tag read "Bowman". "Bowman, call me Curly, Curley Bowman!" he offered. I wondered whether a distant ancestor had earned the family name on the fields of Agincourt, and then perhaps that the trade had stayed in the family, man and boy? When Curly took off his helmet to scratch, I understood his nickname...there was not a hair on his shiny pate.

We stood in the sun, waiting and sweating in our bulky gear...I had to wonder how the GI's fought in the jungle with much more clobber on them. I remembered that the Australian infantry in Viet Nam often chose to fight in tennis shoes and floppy hat, with no flak jacket, preferring the coolness and agility that lightness offered in the jungle. During our brief wait for the USAPAV officers, barely more than five minutes, I was astonished to learn that the Sergeant Archer was famous for a reason other than his illustrious military heritage: "Curly Bowman, that's me, the man with a 12 inch pecker and a slop-jar full of balls!" I made a mental note not to invite Curly to the Pink Cat...on the other hand, though, the Girls might have some interesting comments... The Captain and the Colonel arrived, the latter in dress uniform with medal badges, outlandish amongst the sweat stained, plain khaki of the others. Even more incongruous, the Colonel had an officer's Colt 45 strapped to his waist. An embarrassed Kraut whispered in my ear "First time I ever saw a Procurement Officer armed!...I'll bet he has never fired it!"

The Sergeant Armourer bristled immediately at Col. K's armament: "Sorry, Sir, no unauthorised weapons in this area!"

The Colonel bristled back: "Damnit!...this is an authorised weapon! Do you know who I am, Sergeant? I am OIC of US Army Procurement, Viet Nam!...Let's get this nonsense over!...this stupid plastic won't stop a peashooter!" The Sergeant backed down in ill grace. Thus were Army Rules and our Idea already dismissed.

Curly Bowman set up the target, heavily braced, at 100 foot range, and at an angle of 20 degrees to the vertical, to mimic that I had seen on other 50 calibre guns. He then gruffly ordered "All Personnel", Colonels, Captains, Medics, Scruffy Civilians, into a deep trench behind his assembled weapons, "for your own protection!". I saw Col K. swelling big to assert his full authority, and then backing down, possibly thinking there might indeed be some actual danger involved.

We sweated in the trench, exposed to the noonday tropical sun and protected from the light breeze, while Curly adjusted his weaponry, and then fired numerous single shots and several automatic bursts. Col K was crouching with his back to me, and I saw his shirt rapidly turn dark and dank. He started to smell bad too. I found that I was sweating even inside my goggles, and the syrupy liquid dammed in puddles around my nose, while the glass fogged up completely.

Finally the cacophony abated, and Curly announced "All right, Gentlemen, out of the trench, but stay behind the firing line!" We eagerly scrambled out into fresh air.

Through my foggy eyepieces I watched an out-of-focus Colonel go striding off in the wrong direction, apparently even more befogged than I.

"Sir! Sir! Goddamnit Colonel!" shouted Sergeant Bowman hoarsely, chasing after him. Captain K also started to run after his errant superior, with similar expressions of concern. I tore off my goggles for a better view of this unexpected drama.

The Colonel arrived in long strides at the target a little before the Sergeant, who was heavily encumbered in sweat-stained armored padding. Capt. K. followed in the rear. Col K. had already unbuttoned, and unholstered, his Colt by the time he had reached our little square of battered plastic. Sergeant B. lunged in a clumsy football tackle, in a blatant, and futile attempt to restrain and disarm his superior.

The loud report of the Colonel's pistol triggered a perfectly synchronous pas de trois among the military...a ballistics ballet, you might say. The Colonel fell down abruptly on his back as the Captain and the Sergeant both flinched heavily into the dirt. They all lay motionless for a long moment while I flung off my heavy helmet, which would not have stayed in place during even a sedate perambulation, and ran towards the fallen warriors. The Captain and the Sergeant both scrambled to their feet, apparently unscathed. The Colonel lay flat, whimpering, his eyes glazed in the vertical sun, the impeccably pressed, sweat- and blood-stained trouser leg of his right thigh slightly elevated.

The red-crosses arrived running, still fully armoured, with their stretcher, and carried the inanimate officer away. I had the irreverent feeling that someone should have asked the Medics for a receipt for the bloody Colonel. In writing this decades later I see how Francis Ford Coppola, present at a different fiasco, might have first conceived his ideas for the magnificently nutty Colonel Kilgore so wonderfully portrayed in "Apocalypse Now".

The survivors all looked at each other, at the target, and shrugged their shoulders. Quite apparently, as Curly pointed out succinctly, "The stupid asshole fired downwards at the target at the right f'ing angle to rikkochett back into his leg!" I expressed my admiration that Captain Kraut, an Admin Officer, had the quick reflexes to duck a bouncing bullet, just like the long-experienced Sergeant.

"I just knew that as soon as the Colonel pulled his gun out that there would be bullets flying!" he observed.

Sergeant B then bent down and picked up the Colonels dusty pistol, disdainfully by the muzzle, as if it were infected. "I am hereby confiscating this unauthorised f'ing weapon, as the Civilian Expert will attest to the appropriateness!"...looking straight at me. I looked around behind me, expecting to see some Expert miraculously arrived, but saw only myself, now elevated to Civilian Expert! In admiration for the natural, legalistic rhetoric of this seasoned son of Agincourt, and in a certain sense of Elevated Status, I could only nod in sober affirmation.

Our attention wavered to our plastic target. It was near unrecognizable, all opaquely puckered and cratered and streaked a strange, sulphurous yellow. The Sergeant unscrewed the wing-nuts securing it to a heavy iron frame. He turned the plate over. The back-side was blistered outwards by the impacts, but not one of the bullets had penetrated.

"Well, f' me!" cried Curly, "This f'ing stuff works!..the bullets bounce...damn me if I ain't Curly Bowman!" I half expected him to swear his oath upon his exalted manhood. The Sergeant offered several more comments about how his Army was run, all too robust to be printed here.

Ray Kraut and I rode silently, dehydrated, into Saigon in the back of the Colonel's car. We dared not look each other in the eye for fear of schoolgirl hysterics. I contemplated inviting my friend to cool off in the depths of the Pink Pussy Cat with liquid lunch, but

reflected that our drama in the noonday sun probably required him to turn in a timely Report, or some other formality. I wonder with what words he described the bizarre event.

Nothing came of our Idea. I imagine that whatever the Captain wrote in his report never got past the Colonel's desk. The Sergeant Archer probably waxed often in profuse, profane praise of our marvellous material, but I am sure that Nobody Important heard...or listened.

In very recent (2007), and felicitous approbation, TV news reports show British Warrior armoured vehicles in Southern Iraq with their machine gunner on top protected by slabs of a transparent material..."The f'ing stuff works...the bullets bounce!" indeed. But why did it take forty f'ing years for a good Idea to provide protection for young Gunners? War is a sad business, the Bureaucracy of War even sadder.

In considerable guilt still I often wonder whether there would be a few extra aging Gunners around now with Grandchildren on their knees if only Kleinkopft had left Curly to his work....or if only I had done something further about it. It is a sobering thought. I have never trusted Big Bureaucracies since.

Naturally we never invited the Colonel back to the Cat...in fact I never saw him again in Saigon. I hope he was transferred, with his self-inflicted Purple Heart, to some desperate jungle outpost on the Cambodian border.

Ray Kraut and I agreed that Curly Bowman, as a completely honest man, and one of parts, deserved the honour of being introduced to the Pink Cat.

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