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***"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."***

*A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker*

**May 9, 2001**



**Taking the Point Position...**

**T**here is a lot of concern about the actions taken by Bob Kerrey in Vietnam, some 30+ years ago.

I am shocked, shocked to hear that civilians were killed in Vietnam or indeed in any war. Thousands of civilians are killed in every war. It is only in modern times that most nations TRY to keep military people, pumped with adrenalin and scared to death, from killing any more civilians than necessary.

It is against the rules of engagement for any American to knowingly kill any non-combat civilians. This obviously does not mean a hill of beans to pilots who are dropping bombs from 30,000 feet or to an artillery officer who is firing from 12 miles away. Navy gunners firing from 10 miles off the coast have little knowledge of the occupants of the buildings being destroyed.

Because Vietnam was a very different kind of war from the massed armies of the past, the rules were different. Military people are SUPPOSED to be identifiable by uniform, but that simply was never the case in Vietnam. The Viet Cong routinely used women and children to kill the easily-identifiable and uniformed Americans.

**Correction: The previous newsletter should have noted that the mongoose was imported to most Hawaiian islands to fight rats , but NOT to Kauai.**



**Commentary**

Under the rules in Vietnam, certain geographic areas were “Free Fire Zones” – which is to say that anyone in that geographic area was presumed to be enemy and was to be killed.

In World War II, American naval forces attacked and sunk several U.S. Navy submarines because it was presumed that ANY submarine was an immediate danger. Submariners knew that it was incumbent upon them to get away from an allied ship because any ship, American or otherwise, was going to shoot first and ask questions later. Underwater was a “Free Fire Zone.”

Similarly, the VC knew that just being in the area where a Seal Team was active was courting death. Before an area was called “Free Fire” all people who were friendly were evacuated, and the area was spread thick with warnings. Those civilians who remained were part of the support system for the VC.

Let me posit a story. You are a Seal Team leader, 25 years old, and are sent with a team of six to kill the civilians in a village because they are part of the political infrastructure of the VC. (This was called the Phoenix program in VN.)

As you swim near the village, you take a small periscope (the modern, waterproof version of the thing you played with as a child) and look around a moored fishing boat next to the pier. Twenty feet behind the pier is the six-hooch village in which there is a scheduled meeting of the VC infrastructure you are to destroy.

Members of your team, wearing recirculating SCUBA gear to show no tell-tale bubbles, remain submerged — but you see on the pier a 10 year old girl, fishing. The girl will sound the signal if she sees you.

Do you:

1) Kill her quietly and quickly, and proceed with the mission?

or

2) Abandon the mission?

War IS an atrocity – but in the end you are better off winning wars than losing them.

Many years ago, I published a column in the San Diego Union, the then Escondido Times-Advocate, and the Bernardo News titled “Boy Scouts Don’t Win Wars.” I may send it along soon as Part II of this discussion.