



2022

Agressors

John Price

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/155

This 1961-1980 Army is brought to you for free and open access by the Mighty Pen Project at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Aggressors John Price

Toward the end of Military Police Advanced Individual Training, in January 1971, my class was notified we would participate in a week-long field exercise to practice techniques learned over the past several weeks. We packed our field gear, drew M-14s and boxes of blank ammo, and boarded buses for a week in the piney woods of Fort Gordon, GA.

Two companies of trainees, 160 men total, exited the buses and formed up by platoon in the training area gravel parking lot. The first sergeant called out four names, including mine, told us to grab our gear and meet with one of the cadre standing alongside a nearby jeep. My initial thought was that we were in some sort of trouble, but I was wrong. We had been selected to be the “aggressors” for the training exercise. Our job was to make our fellow MPs as miserable as possible for the next week. Rather than sleeping in two-man tents like the rest of the MPs, we were based in a plywood mock-up of a helicopter fuselage. Painted OD with black camo highlights, the structure was twenty-five feet long, open at one end with two unglazed window openings, one on each side. One corner of the helo was piled high with C-rations, water cans, 7.62-mm blank ammo, smoke grenades and hand grenade simulators. This week was shaping up to be the most fun I had in the army and I was anxious to get started.

Our DI, an E-7 combat vet, had two tours under his belt. An expert on guerilla tactics, he outlined the operations we would mount against the numerically superior force of MPs we would engage. He emphasized that we got to pick the place and time we would attack. The enemy had no vote in the matter.

Our first exercise was to rig booby-trapped roadblocks, which quickly became my specialty. I concealed smoke grenades and hand grenade simulators under tree branches, rocks, and blown-down timber we used to construct the roadblocks. At first, it was easy to “blow up” the MPs who were forced to clear the debris to enable their convoys to continue along the rutted

Aggressors John Price

orange clay roads. Later, they became more cautious as they dismantled our roadblocks. I had to become increasingly sophisticated in placing the smoke and explosives. One trick I employed was to use a decoy grenade which was relatively easy to find, creating a false sense of security in the MPs who assumed they had disarmed the roadblock. Then, the second or perhaps even the third grenade would detonate as they hastily removed the remainder of the debris. Of the dozens of roadblocks we constructed and booby-trapped, not one was successfully disarmed. I had mixed emotions about my success. If I could do this as effectively during training, what chance would these guys have to survive a real booby trap in 'Nam?

The bitch about a roadblock is there is always the possibility of ambush when you roll up on one, so you must be quick in clearing it. At the same time, you need to be methodical in case it's booby trapped. SOP is to exit transport vehicles and provide perimeter security for the EOD team. It took our MPs some time to learn that lesson.

From concealed positions on high ground overlooking the roads, we typically just observed the MPs dismantling the roadblocks, grinning and shaking our heads as they were blown up time after time. However, on two occasions, we did mount ambushes. I learned a hard lesson during the first ambush. Our M-14s had rock-and-roll selector switches for full auto fire. With a blank adaptor fitted into place at the muzzle, there was adequate gas back pressure to reliably cycle the action of the M-14 in semi-auto mode. However, the weapon had a tendency to fail to eject a spent round while firing in full-auto mode. You then had to cycle the action by hand to eject the spent round and chamber the next live round. During that first ambush, we were spaced five meters apart across the top of the hill. On point, I was the farthest from our DI. SOP for the ambush was to each fire a couple of magazines into the stalled convoy and beat feet before they dismounted the deuce-and-a-half trucks in force and returned fire. I had a jam, was

Aggressors John Price

clearing my weapon, and did not hear the command to retreat. When I looked up, I was all alone and taking heavy fire from the convoy. Sprinting toward our jeep, I leaped in just as the DI was putting it into gear. He laid into me, stressing how I'd endangered the other aggressors. In a combat situation, he would have abandoned me to save the rest of the team. Embarrassed for having been called out, I knew the DI was right. I would never make that mistake again. Situational awareness keeps you alive.

We alternated between daytime and nocturnal operations to keep the MPs off balance. Some days we slept at our helo hotel for most of the day, harassing the MPs at night. We ambushed their foot patrols and conducted brief raids on the main force encampment to wake everyone and keep them on edge the remainder of the night. They were already on 50% watch, but after our raids, no one slept.

Our means of transport was an M-151 A1 Jeep with no canvas top or side curtains. The vehicle was a tight fit for four soldiers, but including our Sergeant, who was our driver, we were a five-man team. Last man in was forced to sit on the radio box behind the rear seat on the passenger side. The spring mounted eight-foot fiberglass whip antenna was the only thing to hold onto. Careening down a narrow sandy fire trail at 35mph at midnight, headlights off, having your ass bounced six inches up off the radio box at every pothole, was a terrifying ride. Left hand securing your weapon, your right hand slid up and down the antenna with every bump, embedding fiberglass needles into your palm each time. After one ride on the radio box, it became a Chinese fire drill to mount up into the jeep to avoid a second.

One cold, moonlit night, we four were concealed in a dense stand of scrub pine at a crossroads, waiting to ambush a squad-sized patrol. When the aggressor next to me attempted to lob a hand grenade simulator into the middle of the patrol, it hit a branch in the tree directly

Aggressors John Price

above me. The simulator struck a couple more branches on the way down before it bounced off my steel pot and exploded inches from my right ear. Instantly blinded and deafened by the blast, there was a question as to whether I would be medically able to complete the mission. Although scared shitless, unsure about how badly I had been injured, I didn't want to miss the opportunity to finish this exercise. I was enjoying it too much. Although my vision slowly came back over the next hours, my hearing never fully recovered. Had it been a live grenade, my head would have been blown completely off. Another lesson learned. I had a few unkind words for the fellow who made the errant throw. My displeasure was nothing compared to the ass chewing the DI gave him, pointing out that he had not only "killed" me, but took himself out as well with his bullshit grenade toss.

The final night in the woods was the best. Our DI had planned an assault on the MP command post. One of our aggressors, a former track man from Notre Dame, was to low crawl toward the CP while the other three of us conducted a diversionary attack designed to lure the security detail guarding the CP in our direction. The track man would enter the CP unseen, seize the unit colors and use his speed to escape before being captured.

We hammered the encampment with smoke grenades and hand grenade simulators, moving from point to point to avoid detection. Utter pandemonium ruled as explosion after explosion rocked the camp and clouds of smoke obscured the command post. Panicked MPs struggled out of their sleeping bags, looked for their boots. The CP security detail abandoned their posts in a vain attempt to end our sapper attack.

The plan worked perfectly, although the MPs were adamant that they had shot our man before he cleared the perimeter with their battle flag. Our DI overruled them, confirming that the

Aggressors John Price

aggressors had won the final exercise. We were proud as hell to have had our little band of four guerillas outmaneuver 150 MPs.

On the way back to our barracks the following afternoon I had a chance to speak one of my platoon buddies. He went on about how much our small group of aggressors had been able to disrupt the much larger force. Their inability to disarm my booby traps tanked morale, and our nightly “visits” had everyone sleep-deprived and short-tempered by the end of the week. The clear lesson was that a highly motivated, tactically savvy small force, could negatively influence a much larger element. This is the cornerstone of guerilla warfare, and we had a chance to practice it first-hand.

My week as an aggressor taught me much more than I would have learned had I been one of the poor saps riding around in the convoys we harassed. I was never told who had selected me for the role, but sure was grateful for the experience. Imagine, getting paid to be a pain in the ass.