

ACE HIGH

(This card was no Joker)

By: Charles W. Brown, C/2/35, 1966



The Ace of Spades, "a symbol of death to the Vietcong," was reported in the *New York Sunday News*, July 10, 1966. In 1966 and 1967 that headline, and many like it, were published in newspapers and magazines all across the country. Over the years many organizations and individuals in the military have taken credit for initiating the use of the Ace of Spades as a psychological warfare weapon. Many did use it, but only one unit started it. Let me take you back to early 1966 to the beginning of the Ace of Spades story.

In Jan. 1966 the "Tropic Lightning's" 3rd Brigade had established a base camp on a hill just outside the town of Pleiku, South Vietnam. The story begins there in the rear of Co. C, 2/35th's orderly room that served as a BOQ for four lieutenants (Davis, Zais, Brown, and Wissinger). Thinking back to that time, I remember that tent looking very much like the "swamp" from the TV show M*A*S*H. Naturally a card table had its place in the center of the room.

While sitting around that table one of the platoon leaders called our attention to an article in the *Stars and Stripes* about remarks made by Congressman Craig Hosmer of California to the House of Representatives in Washington, D. C. Those remarks, made on Feb. 7th, pertained to the superstitions of the Vietcong. The article stated that two of their bad luck symbols were pictures of women and the ace of spades. Later that evening, someone in the group noticed that the ace of spades from a deck of "Bicycle" playing cards contained a picture of a woman that just happened to be a representation of the Goddess of Freedom or Liberty on the dome of our nation's capitol building. In her right hand she held a sheathed sword; in her left hand an olive branch.

Before long the groundwork was laid for a plan to use the ace of spades as a calling card when Charlie Company went into the field by leaving them at the entrances and exits to villages we cleared of VC, posting them along trails, and leaving them on VC bodies. As the plan began to take shape, the discussion turned to a way of obtaining large quantities of cards since each deck we had contained only the one special ace. It was quickly pointed out that we needed to keep our "decks" intact and couldn't afford to part with that "ace" from every deck we owned. We had to have some complete decks for poker, Tonk, or Hearts, which helped to pass the time. However, in the months that followed, it was discovered that many decks contained only 51 cards because someone had lifted the ace and used it in the field.

Almost jokingly I volunteered to write a letter to the "The U.S. Playing Card Co." in Cincinnati, Ohio to request the aces we wanted. My theory was.... what's the harm in asking? The worst that they could say would be "NO!" In the initial letter I asked for approximately 1,000 cards, not really expecting a reply, and certainly not expecting to create the commotion that it did. Little did we know the letter would find its way to the desk of the president of the company, Mr. Allison F. Stanley. We had no way of knowing that Mr. Stanley had lost a son in WWII and that he would be eager to supply as many aces as were needed. The same day that Mr. Stanley read our letter 1,000 cards were pulled from the production line, packed, and shipped to us at no cost.

Soon after our first shipment of cards arrived, we received a letter from John B. Powers with J. Walter Thompson, Co., an advertising agency in New York City, asking for permission to use the story stateside. Mr. Powers handled the public relations account for the playing card company. So with our permission in hand, Mr. Powers relayed the story to Bob Considine for his nationally syndicated newspaper column and he also made a press release to United Press International. The playing card company then received so many requests for cards (even from mothers who wanted to send them to their sons) they started packaging them in special marked boxes containing 52 aces. They were always shipped "postage paid."

By this time, Lts. Zais and Wissinger had been reassigned to other units within country and Lt. Davis and I were frequently sent on operations in different directions. Since days or even weeks would go by without me seeing Lt. Davis, I continued to correspond with Mr. Stanley, Mr. Powers, and the Congressman.

Soon the story would be carried in newspapers across the states. Reporters started dropping in for interviews. Some just stopped by to take photos. A few even went to the field with us hoping for "live" action shots. One reporter stayed in the field with my 3rd platoon for six days. During that time, the reporter got everything he needed but the action shots. It was not uncommon to have free-lance photographers and writers hanging around the forward base camps looking for additional material. In the months that followed, I received several letters from Congressman Hosmer, the U.S. Playing Card Company, and J. Walter Thompson Co. I always tried to reply as soon as possible and give them an update on our psychological warfare campaign.

Congressman Hosmer, who in Feb. '66 had been criticized for suggesting that psychological warfare be used in Vietnam, spoke to Congress again on June 14, and read the correspondence he and Mr. Stanley had received from the Lieutenants of Company C. This information can be found on pages 12497-12499 of that day's *Congressional Record - House* (Vol. 112, No. 97).

In a letter I received from Mr. Powers dated May 24, 1966, he stated that he was "presently trying to work out story ideas on your ace of spades use with Life, Look, True, Newsweek, NBC-TV News (Huntley-Brinkley Report), This Week, Argosy, True, Sunday Group Editorial Service (photo stories to 18 major metropolitan newspapers, including NY News, Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post-Dispatch)." Once the story of the "Ace" was reported and spread across America, I received many personal letters from people I had never met who saw pictures or read stories about the ACE OF SPADES in their local newspaper. All that most of these people knew was my name and our unit's designation (C/2/35, 25th Division) and they just wanted us to know they believed in and supported what we were doing. I have read those letters from time to time and still have a good feeling about what we were trying to do.

One of my letters to Representative Hosmer was published in a book entitled *Letters From Vietnam*. In that letter I wrote, "I cannot give an account of the effectiveness of our campaign. I will say that once we sweep through an area, leave our cards, and then return some weeks later, there has been little or no V.C. activity there. You can arrive at your own conclusions." Did it work? I'm not sure. Did it help our morale? I definitely think so! In our company and others throughout Vietnam, I think the cards did something to encourage the men that were just trying to survive during a difficult time.

I am writing this account some thirty-five years after the fact so I may have left out parts here and there. For some reason I kept most of the letters and mailed them home with the newspaper articles, clippings, and other material people sent to me concerning our psychological warfare action. I really don't know why I kept them and sent them home. More than likely it was just my way of sharing with my wife what was going on in that crazy mixed-up part of the world. She kept everything I sent and put it all together in a scrapbook. It's from that scrapbook I was able to pull together the information for this article. I hope you enjoyed my account of how using the Ace of Spades began.

Note: Recently I had the opportunity to donate several items from Vietnam to the 2/35th museum at Schofield Barracks. Among those items was one of the original decks of 52 aces I received from Mr. Stanley in 1966. The CO of the Battalion sent me a deck of 52 aces, also produced by the U.S. Playing Card Company, for the gulf war. I don't know if the "jinx" worked in the Middle East, but it is nice to know that the tradition lives on! CACTI FOREVER!