



220th Aviation Company

(Surveillance Airplane Light)

(Reconnaissance Airplane)

(Utility Airplane)



"Catkillers" and Family, and all Friends and brothers in Arms, in memory of those who have served.

A TRILOGY OF MARINE COMBAT STORIES

A Reflection on Recovery

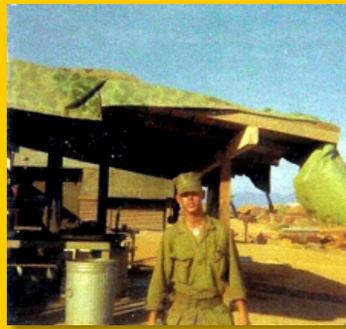
By Dennis D. Currie, Assistant Editor, Catkillers.org

The spring of 1967 was a pivotal period in I-Corps, as NVA Forces based and supplied within the DMZ, in direct conflict with international agreements established after the French withdrawal from Indochina, began to execute significant incursions into the South. Many of our strategic marine combat bases, including Khe Sahn, Dong Ha, Gio Linh, Camp Carroll and Cam Lo, came under withering artillery, mortar and ground attacks as the days unfolded. Many operations were initiated to counter the NVA advances into Quang Nam and Quang Tri Provinces—among them, Operations Foster, Citrus, Shawnee, Hickory and Prairie IV.

Life on the ground was not only a daily battle against the enemy, who were masters in the art of concealment, but also a battle of the elements, including the oppressive heat and humidity which could sap ones strength no matter which side of the battlefield you were on. Home was where you made it and often required the creative use of whatever materials were on hand, as Clyde Marshall and Ralph Mussehl effectively demonstrate. However, James Casper also used his poncho to cover enemy tunnel openings as smoke grenades were deployed to help identify other nearby openings for escape.



Clyde rain-proofing his cot



Ralph's teams used tarps for shade



Jim finding alternative uses for ponchos

The 220th Aviation Company flew many missions in support of our Marine Brothers on the ground and as one Marine commented, "The sight of a Birdog overhead meant that help was on the way." The following trilogy is an accounting of what our Marine Brothers faced on the ground and who relied on our support in order to come home. It also depicts their courageous journey of survival—not only from a physical perspective, but also from an emotional one as they made their way home to find peace.



The Ambush

**by James "Jim" Casper,
Third Squad Leader, Second Platoon, Lima Company,
3rd. Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division**

Since September and October 1967, there was a marked increase in the presence of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in Quang Nam Province. The firefights in which we'd engage were no longer as sporadic, and they were growing in much more intensity. In retrospect, it's easy now to say that the build-up was in preparation for the TET Offensive of 1968. During November and December 1967, I participated in two operations, Foster and Citrus, respectively, and the fighting was fiercely intense on both operations. During Foster, only 11 men in my platoon came out of the operation unscathed, and I lost every man in my squad.

By the end of December 1967, we were told that intelligence reports indicated that our hill, Hill 65 was to be or had been targeted by the enemy. For a week at a time and before rotating to the next responsibility, rifle squads operating from Hill 65 had one of three primary responsibilities when we weren't on an operation: morning road sweeps providing security for engineers, (whose job it was to clear the roads of mines each morning before opening the roads to general traffic), day-light patrol or the night-time ambush. My job as squad leader and combat linguist was to interview local villagers so as to assess potential threats as we cleared areas assigned to us during our operations.



RSG 100101.....NEW YORK BUREAU
QUESTIONS VIETMANESESE WOMAN
DA NANG, SOUTH VIETNAM: A U. S. Marine of the Third
Battalion, Seventh Marines, questions a Vietnamese woman
with two children during a sweep through a village about
10 miles south of here Sept. 30. The sweep was part of
Operation Zippo, presently in progress in the area.
Credit (UPI RADIOPHOTO BY STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
FRANK JOHNSTON) 10/1/67 rp/tfs

The engineers on road sweeps were not detecting as many mines, as box mines were not being assembled any longer with nails; rather, they were being assembled with glue and dowels. Tanks accompanying road sweeps found the box mines, as treads and bogie wheels could fly as far as two hundred yards into the surrounding rice paddies. Daylight patrols were then cut back significantly in terms of distance traveled from the hill. Nighttime ambushes required that a fire team be left at the base of the hill, as an early warning mechanism, should the hill come under attack.

Such continued to be the case in January 1968. For about three consecutive nights there were very brief firefights at the Popular Forces (PF) Compound at the southern end of the next village north of the village surrounding Hill 65. PF compounds were comprised of elderly or handicapped men who lived in the village and defended it at night from some foxholes or bunkers surrounded by barbed wire. It seemed as though it was little more than harassment fire. We didn't know if the attackers were coming from the east, from across the river, or whether they were coming from the tree line to the west of the village. It seemed very apparent to us that for the sake of cover and concealment, one of those routes was the most probable.

It was my squad's week for night-time ambush, so my orders were to leave a fire team at the western base of the hill and to proceed to a position mid-way between the PF compound and

the tree line to its west. Since we were a fire team short of full squad strength, I elected to take two claymore mines with us. A fire team by definition consists of two or more members of a squad of twelve men.

I left the hill to the western edge and dropped the fire team off at the most northern edge of the village, surrounding Hill 65, at a place where they had good cover and concealment and proceeded with the rest of my squad—all nine of us—to an intersection of rice paddy dikes due west of the PF Compound. At the intersection was a dry, square section of paddy, on which were three grave mounds. I assigned three of us to each grave mound, and I was at the grave mound closest to the intersection. I placed our two claymore mines on the lesser rice paddy dike—one facing east toward the PF compound and one facing west toward the tree line to our rear. They were placed sufficiently far apart that the back blast of one would have no effect on the other. The only direction that I gave my squad was that they were to keep their heads on a swivel between the compound to our front and the tree line to our rear, and I would detonate a claymore to initiate an ambush.

I was concerned about our ambush site. It was the only time in Vietnam that I was on an ambush without adequate concealment. The grave mounds gave us a minimum degree of cover but we were completely in the open and exposed. The only good thing was that it was an extremely dark night. There was some natural illumination from stars but there was no moonlight, and the firefights with the compound the previous three nights were very quick and sporadic, indicating to my thinking that there were very few attackers.

We were set in our positions for very little time—perhaps 20 minutes to a half-hour—when I noticed movement to my left. I couldn't see very well, so I laid my head down on top of the grave mound to try to see the movement against the sky. As far as I could see to the north, there were heads bobbing up and down. A million thoughts raced through my mind. A major force coming toward us, completely in the open—unheard of! That many men could not possibly walk past us, within six feet of us, and not see us. We'd be captured, tortured and killed. If I initiate the ambush, we'd be killed. The front of their column was only 30 feet to my left. There was no time and they were too close to us for me to try to get the attention of my men. How did I want to die? The last thought that I had before squeezing the trigger of the claymore mine was that I hoped my men were seeing what I was seeing, and they'd open fire with the detonation of the claymore. I let about five of their soldiers pass my position. I saw what appeared to be an M-60 American machine gun carried on the shoulder of a soldier directly in front of me. He even carried it as we did, with one hand holding one leg of the bipod. I couldn't have that used against us and detonated the claymore. The soldier disappeared, as did several men on either side of him.

I needn't have worried about my men. Everyone opened fire with the detonation on full automatic fire, raking the column from north to south. At the same time, illumination rounds began to explode overhead from the artillery on Hill 65. The illumination was a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing because it was overhead, slightly to our southeast, and it afforded us

the opportunity to use our rifle sights, instead of firing blindly. It was a curse because it exposed us as well. We received return fire from their column from among their wounded. Their fire wasn't concentrated, nor was it well aimed. We also received incoming enemy fire from an M-79 grenade launcher, but those rounds exploded well to our rear.

We switched to semi-automatic fire, concentrated on muzzle flashes, and threw hand grenades to the other side of the rice paddy dike. Around this time I saw two large groups escaping to our two o'clock (front right) and our seven o'clock (left rear) positions. This was the first time I realized that we had hit a large force of NVA, as they were all wearing kaki-colored uniforms. It was a particularly eerie scene. The images appeared ghost-like in the yellow light of the illumination rounds. Both groups were running and I could see water splashing as they ran through the rice paddies, but I never heard a sound from them since we had sprung the ambush. There were no orders being barked, nor did I hear any moaning or cries of pain from the wounded and dying. I did not call in artillery on the two escaping groups, as we were still retuning fire at those caught in the kill zone, and the radio was at the grave mound to my right.

The firing from the kill zone had diminished to almost nothing. I led my men into the kill zone, ordering them to fire a round into each body before searching for documents, and to count the bodies. One wounded NVA soldier held up his arm, his palm facing me, either asking for mercy or to ward off the bullet. I shot him knowing that had our roles been reversed, I would not have been spared. Also, adrenalin was running extremely high. We gathered a number of documents, which I put into a satchel I had found, and then I called the hill to let them know that I was bringing my men back to the hill. The company radio operator put the company commander on the radio, and he ordered my men and me to stay in place until first light. I argued with him, telling him that we had hit a large unit of NVA and that many had escaped. There was no doubt in my mind that they would regroup and come back for their bodies and weapons. They also knew by now that we were a very small force; not only from the volume of fire, but also because we were exposed by the illumination flares and we also had entered the kill zone, fully exposing us. We were also running low on ammunition. He said that he would end the illumination, but we were to stay in place until first light.

Angrily, I ended the communication and waited for the illumination to end, which it did almost immediately. I gathered my men, who had heard my side of the radio call, and I could see their fear—the same fear that I felt myself. I told them, “Bull shit, we're going back to the hill.”

It took us about an hour and a half to get back to our fire team location. I radioed the fire team to let them know that we were coming, which also alerted the company radio net of my intentions and movement. We were extremely stealthy, lying down in rice paddies at every sound and/or perceived movement until we were sure it was safe to move on. At the base of

our hill, I fired a green cluster flare to announce our arrival, as was customary, in order not to be shot by our own men.

When we got to our platoon area, I was told to report to the company commander's bunker immediately, where I was greeted with a barrage of profanities for having disobeyed his orders. I handed him the satchel of documents; told him that the body count was 62, but I was adding five more as an estimate of the number of NVA disintegrated by the claymore mine. His demeanor didn't change, and he ordered me to take my whole squad out at first light and gather whatever had been left behind.

We went out at first light, as ordered, and there was nothing there except a tremendous amount of blood. Indeed, the NVA had returned to gather their bodies and weapons, which were too numerous for us to have carried the night before.

Before returning to the hill, my squad and I entered the PF compound. The few Vietnamese still there were extremely agitated at our entry. They were so angry that I turned to my men and ordered them to level their rifles with the three or four defenders who were present. As they did, I entered the lone bunker and saw an M-60 machine gun, which I took back to the hill. If it belonged to the PF compound, I was sure it would be returned, but the silhouette of the soldier carrying what appeared to be an M-60 the night before—when I detonated the claymore mine—nagged at me, so I took it. It's also true that American M-60 machine guns were not issued to PF compounds.

We returned to the hill and I went to the CO's bunker. I told him that we found nothing but blood, and I told him about taking the M-60 from the PF compound. I laid the M-60 on the floor of his bunker and left, as he was still so angry with me that he couldn't speak to me, and he told me so.

Approximately two weeks later my platoon commander told me that the documents, which had been sent to Da Nang for processing, indicated that we had ambushed a reinforced company of NVA that numbered 206 men. He further stated that the M-60 machine gun's traced serial number had been issued to a Marine unit up north near the DMZ and concluded by saying that the company commander was sorry that he had doubted my word. The commander never spoke to me privately—nor did he ever apologize to me.

Notes:

- None of my men received a scratch from this encounter.
- The NVA Company progressed that night with hardly an interval or space between men. It was dark, or they were new to the area and afraid of getting lost, or that's how they traveled, but their lack of spacing is what accounted for such a high body count.



MY MARINE CORP TOUR, VIETNAM, 27 JULY 1966- AUGUST 1967

by Clyde Marshall

I was born in Coweta, Oklahoma, the fourth child of Neoma and Robert Marshall and lived there until completing the 1st grade. My family then moved to Oregon where I began 2nd grade, and continued my education until I graduated from Philomath High School Class of 1963. After high school, I worked as an automotive technician until I was drafted in January 1966. With the buildup of forces for Vietnam in full swing, I had the opportunity as a draftee to select the branch of service I wanted, and I chose the Marine Corps.

After completing my basic training at San Diego, California, I was assigned the MOS of 2531, Field Radio Operator, and was sent to Camp Pendleton Marine Corp Base in Southern California to complete my training. At the completion of Radio School, I was assigned to Bravo Battery 1st Battalion 13th Marines, 5th Marine Division. We were under the command of Captain John Palmer who was given the job to form, train and prepare us for assignment as a unit to Vietnam. Bravo Battery then joined 2nd Battalion 26th Marines and went afloat to Vietnam, 27 July 1966.

We arrived in Vietnam in late August of 1966 where we made an amphibious landing at Da Nang, on Red Beach. We were not met with resistance; however, civilians holding signs "YANKEE GO HOME" greeted us as we came ashore. Not at all what we were expecting, since we were led to believe that we were going there to help the South Vietnamese. Our first month in country was spent at Da Nang where I was assigned to the *Fire Support Co-ordination Center* (FSCC) and *Forward Observer Teams*, 1st Battalion 3rd Marines. The first month was simply to familiarize us with our duties, specifically, the location where the FSCC team worked in the 3rd Marine Bunker; and we soon took part in a few operations, mostly training exercises, where we would call and approve fire missions at VC targets.

By the end of September we were reassigned to 1st Battalion 3rd Marines, 3rd Marine Division, and received orders to go to Khe Sanh. We were the first units assigned to Khe Sanh and typically the assignment was for 30 days; however, the 30 days turned into 5 months. Our

mission was to secure the area so that the Sea Bees could update the airstrip and also support the Army Special Forces Camp at Long Vei. The monsoon season began immediately after we arrived, and we received 16 inches of rain in the first 24 hours. Our battery guns started sinking in the mud, resulting in the Sea Bees repositioning our guns with Caterpillars and set them up on runway matting. Khe Sanh had the largest battery in Vietnam, which consisted of 6 each, 105 towed howitzers, two 155 towed howitzers and two 4.2 mortars. Since we were located in such a remote area our CO requested the additional guns to cover closer as well as longer range targets.



The full 5 months were spent living alongside the airfield in the elephant grass, along with the snakes and mud. We worked out of a small sand bag bunker and slept on the ground outside the bunker. While at Khe Sanh, we didn't meet a lot of resistance; however, we did lose a battery ammo dump and a few aircraft, mostly helicopters, including 5 of them in one evening.

By February of 1967, we were relieved both by the 9th Marines and a Battery from the 12th Marines. We were reassigned to Da Nang, with the notion that this was supposed to be a rest and relaxation period for us. Relaxation didn't last long, since we immediately started taking part in several operations, each one getting more and more intense. However, many of the operations we would participate in would result in our being pulled to start or help with an existing operation. There would be times when we would stay in the field for several weeks at a time and move through several operations before we would get a break.

For example, during Operation Canyon, we were three days into it when we were evacuated out by helicopter because things were heating up on the DMZ. 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines was flown from the sight of Operation Canyon to Da Nang airport, and from there motor transported to Dong Ha to join Operation Shawnee. This began a chain of assignments that led us to Operation Prairie IV, then to Operation Hickory, back to finish Prairie IV, and

finally into Operation Cimarron without leaving the field. Prior to beginning Operation Canyon, the 2nd Battalion 26th Marines Infantry unit was issued the M16 rifles. The operation was on the beach and in the sand where the majority of the rifles jammed leaving many of our men unable to defend themselves. As 2nd Battalion 26th Marines was being lifted out, we were being hit with automatic weapons fire and snipers continuously harassed us. We continually called artillery fire support and air support until all the infantry were out, leaving just the FSCC team on the ground. Our extraction helicopter pilot radioed to say he was coming in for landing, hard and fast, and anyone not on board as soon as he touched down would be left behind. I was the last one aboard and became a sprinter with a 70-pound pack, including a radio, while receiving sniper fire at my feet all the way into the chopper. To this day I wish I had gotten the chopper pilots name, because he not only risked his life but the lives of his crew and craft to get us out of a very hot spot.

When we moved north into the DMZ things were changing rapidly, Operation Prairie IV was begun in order to sweep the area around Con Thien. The 2nd Battalion 26th Marines were already involved in Prairie IV because of reported buildup in the southern half of the DMZ, including the areas north of Cam Lo (west of Con Thien) and the western edge of Leather Neck Square. 2/26 found more than anyone bargained for and thus Operation Hickory was formed to help 2/26 to sweep the same areas as Prairie IV—to include the southern half of the DMZ up to the Ben Hai River.

This was the first time the US troops were given orders to enter the DMZ. It had been known for some time that the United States was the only side living by the on-paper agreement that the DMZ was a neutral area that no one was to use. The North used the zone for staging troops and supplies and to fire artillery, mortars and rockets at US installations south of the DMZ.

Operation Hickory turned out to be one of the most costly battles of the Vietnam War, as pointed out by author Mark A. Cauble in his book *Into The DMZ: A Battle History Of Operation Hickory May 1967, Vietnam*. The day of May 15, 1967, began as a staging day in preparation to get involved with Prairie IV. The next day, troops of 2/26 began the march north from Cam Lo as units of the 3rd, 4th, and 9th Marines were sent in to assist early on the morning of the 18th. The battle started when the rear element of Lt. Colonel Figard's 2nd Battalion 26th Marines started taking fire from an estimated two battalion size NVA force. The day of the 17th turned into a nightmare for 2/26, as shortly before noon the church bell rang and all hell broke loose, as Lt. Colonel Figard's Alpha Command Group was hit by 42 rounds of 82mm mortar fire, wounding 19 of the 20 members of the Alpha Command. Lt. Colonel Figard and his two radio operators were badly wounded when a mortar landed between them. One of his operators lost both legs, the other lost one leg and Lt. Col. Figard was severely wounded and almost lost a leg as well. Also present were the Battalion Commandant, S-3 officer, air officer and my artillery officer, Lt. Donald Saxon, plus two dedicated artillery radio operators assigned to the officer staff. Mike Hart and I were the

artillery radio operators and were also wounded—while one of the radio operators assigned to Mortars was the only one not wounded but had suffered shell shock from the mortar rounds.

I was the only person left from the Alpha Command Group who was functional and continued to do my job with the artillery FSCC, as well as co-ordinate the air support and medevac missions, until 1st Lt. Dale Williams and Cpl. Chet Leamer volunteered to come forward from Con Thien and help me on the afternoon of the 18th. Late on the evening of the 17th, Major Landers and his Bravo Command Group took over for Lt. Colonel Figard.

All hell still reigned: we were taking care of the wounded and continued to call in medevacs as 35 more mortars hit us. Sometime after dark we were hit again by an estimated 200 more 82 mm mortars that wounded 14 more of the command. The day of the 18th, Lt. Colonel Masterpool arrived to take over the command of 2/26. I knew he was a strong commander—our FSCC team and FOs had been loaned to his 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines on an earlier operation and he was highly respected by all, including his superiors. The command group was no longer the Alpha and Bravo, as it became just the command group. All battalions taking part in this operation were reporting heavy casualties, but 2/26 was the one caught in the major ambush area. All of its companies were being cut to pieces, especially Echo and Foxtrot. The evening of the 17 of May, due to the number of men wounded or dead in these two companies, Major Landers ordered both Echo and Foxtrot units together to set up a perimeter.

Because the fighting was so intense during Operation Hickory, 2nd Battalion 26th Marines had several changes in command. Lt. Colonel Figard, who started as our CO, was wounded and evacuated on the 17th of May. Maj. Landers took interim command until Lt. Colonel Masterpool took over on the 18th. Lt. Colonel Masterpool was wounded on May 26 when he along with the other company commanders placed Major Landers temporarily back in Command. Finally, Lt. Colonel Duncan D. Chaplin III took command and finished the operations, including Prairie IV.

Heavy enemy activity was just part of 2nd Battalion 26th Marines' problem—resupply was hampering our abilities as a viable fighting force. The infantry was not only running low on ammunition, but also food and critically needed water, where temperatures exceeded 100 degrees. We did manage to get some resupply during the night of the 18th; however, the choppers couldn't land so they just pushed supplies out as they flew overhead.

I finished my Vietnam tour working out of the 3rd Marine bunker in Phu Bai. After my two years tour in the Corp, I worked until college started the fall of 1968. I enrolled in school and majored in education where I earned the equivalent of a Masters Degree, plus 60 hrs. My degree field was in Trade and Industrial Education, and I secured a position as a mechanics instructor with the Corvallis School District, Corvallis, Oregon. During my tenure at the school district, I taught, coached and ended my career as Athletic Director.

Those of us that belonged to Bravo Battery FSCC and FO teams received at least one Purple Heart, plus a Naval Commendation Medal, with Combat V. We were a tight group,

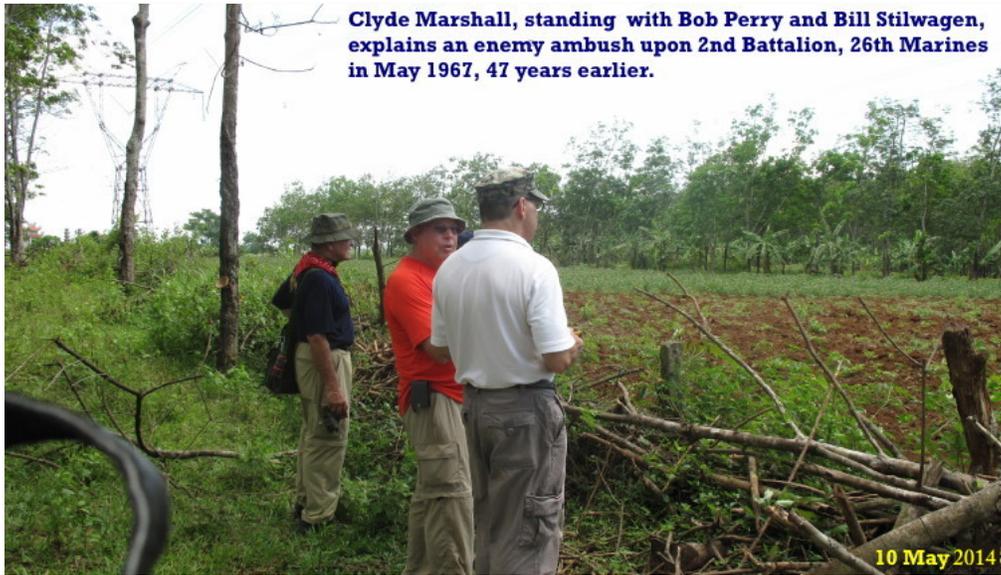
and many of us are still in contact today. We all believed at the time that we were there for the right reasons and all gave the best we had to give.

The Marines I wish to thank very much are Major John Palmer. While serving as a Captain in May of 1966, he was given the task of creating from mostly green recruits, both enlisted and officers, an artillery unit in preparation for combat in Vietnam. The officers all became strong leaders and were respected by all who served with them. I wish to thank 1st Lt. Dale Williams and Cpl. Robert Chester Leamer, who volunteered to walk into hell to assist FSCC/FO teams and what then remained of the command group on Operation Hickory.

Operation Hickory ended on the 28th of May, 10 days after it started. The total marines killed were 340 and 870 wounded—in comparison to the siege of Khe Sanh, where Khe Sanh was under siege for 77 days and had almost the same number of dead and wounded. If you count the number of dead and wounded in Operation Shawnee, Operation Hickory and Prairie IV, which was over the same terrain—by the same units with no break—the dead and wounded would far exceed the siege of Khe Sanh.

I would like to thank all those that supported our units during my tour, especially the chopper pilots, the AO teams and their army pilots. I continue to hope to make contact some day with the helicopter pilot that risked everything to lift us, the last few, out of Operation Canyon. Those pilots that heroically flew into harm's way, over and over again, to bring in replacements for the dead and wounded and resupply for those still in the field will forever be remembered. I would like to find the pilot or pilots and their AOs that we were in contact with and supported us from the sky, directing our artillery and bombers onto the targets that were keeping us under siege during Operations Canyon and Hickory.

In May of 2014, I had the opportunity to return to Vietnam with Vietnam Battlefield Tours. I think for most of us who journeyed on this trip together, our collective thought was, 'Did we make a difference and what was it like now.' For some it was facing the demons that managed to haunt us for these forty some years. My special request was to return to the battlefield near Cam Lo and lay those demons to rest. As I stood there describing the situation I was in, a tremendous weight was shifted from my shoulders as the words and story unfolded. After this last return-to-Vietnam tour I have not had a single nightmare from my 66-67 VN tour.



**Clyde describing Operation Hickory,
10 May 2014**



My Vietnam Journey

By Ralph Mussehl

Vietnam was in full swing by the time I joined the Marine Corps on September 19, 1967 in Detroit Michigan. I chose a three-year enlistment and began my training at Camp Pendleton, in California. Marine boot camp training was an awakening for me, since I had to quickly adjust to operating in a team environment and develop the trust that my leadership was operating in a manner that ensured my safety while giving me the opportunity to perform to my maximum capability in the team. I would realize in the ensuing months, as I shipped out to Vietnam in February of 1968 that this would become an important factor in my survival.

When I arrived in Vietnam, the impact of the TET Offensive had not kicked in for me as yet. I was just a young, confused and scared Marine who was pondering his role in this war on Communism. My first impressions of Vietnam and the Vietnamese were all of these people seemed to be in black pajamas, living in this oppressive heat and humidity, with odors that linger with me even today as I reflect back on that time period.

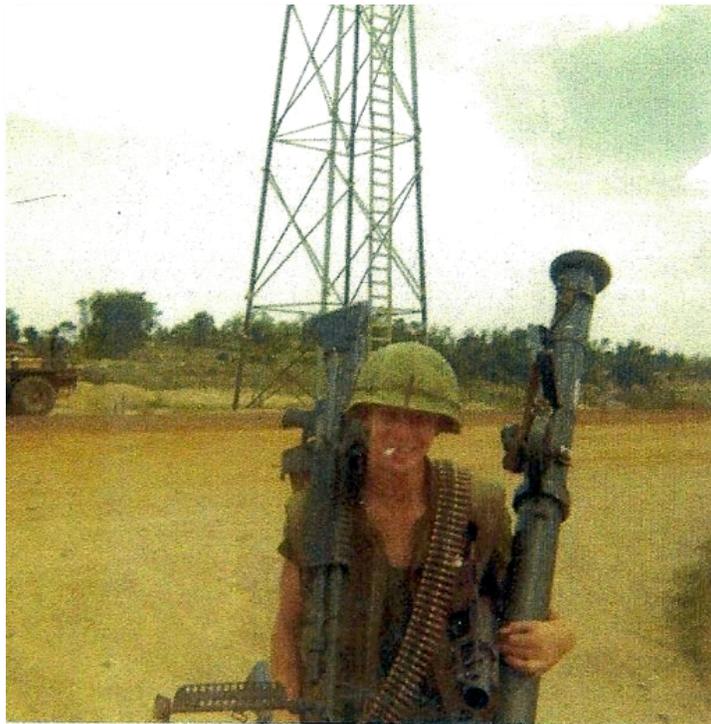
My first assignment was with India Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, stationed on Hill 55 located southwest of Da Nang. Marines are noted for taking care of their own, and on my journey I was to acquire my helmet and flak jacket from another marine heading home. Obtaining these crucial pieces of safety gear provided me a sense of security as we made our way to the Hill. It was on this road that we came under sniper fire and became my baptism to war. On arriving to Hill 55, I was assigned to the 2nd Platoon and began my life as a marine wartime infantryman.

As stated, I was basically a green recruit who had not developed the experience or the reactions needed to successfully survive this war. That would soon change, as one evening I was relaxing with members of the 2nd Platoon when suddenly at dusk we heard noises that sounded like very large firecrackers. To my astonishment and surprise everyone but me scrambled out of our tent, heading towards their assigned bunkers and leaving me to wonder,

“What the hell was going on.” Needless to say, I didn’t linger very long and made my way to the very same bunker, realizing that I was experiencing my very first mortar attack.



Ralph on the right enjoying a quiet time with a friend



Ralph ready to go

Life in the 2nd Platoon was routine—very routine. I was now part of a M60 machine gun team, which made us the heavy weapons force for our platoon. Our job was to provide cover

for crossing rice paddies as we protected the local rice harvest from being confiscated by the enemy. I describe our role as a gun team as being a “hairy” occupation, to say the least, since in a firefight we would be singled out as the primary target. Due to my experience in Vietnam, I have difficulty with my memory during this period. It is as if my experiences play out like a movie; however, parts of the film are cut out and all you have left is a “screwed up movie.”

Other memories, such as 1 April 1968 near Dodge City, located southwest of Da Nang and near Hill 37 and Hill 55, are in “living color.” While on patrol, we were ambushed by the enemy, which began when one of our men on point tripped a 60 “daisy-chain” booby trap. This is a configuration the enemy used where they rigged 60mm mortar rounds in series, so as to go off sequentially when tripped by a camouflaged wire. The subsequent explosions resulted in one man losing his legs and another losing his life, and also putting the fear of God into me.

This was my first major combat experience and upon reflection I realized the value of my training. As it kicked in, I gained control over the situation I found myself in. During the long battle, we fought off the enemy attack, drank chlorination-treated water from the rice paddies and guided in CH-34 helicopters as they evacuated our dead and wounded. While we provided cover for an evacuation chopper lifting off I was nearly clipped by its tail rotor. As the ambush was successfully being suppressed, we were evacuated but left one team behind to mop up two remaining Viet Cong insurgents. When I later thought back over this experience, my team’s original position was supposed to have been the same location where the lead team tripped the fated booby trap. What an *April Fools Day* that turned out to be!

I remained with India Company through July 1968 until certain missions helped reveal that I had a night vision problem. This was discovered in late June when our unit was ambushed and I was continuously losing sight of the man in front of me. The devastating news resulted in a significant duty impact, as I was reassigned to a mortar team for more than a month. Moving me out of my platoon was like moving me away from my family, and I fought like hell to be with my family.





However, life was much different as I returned to the company area and resumed much of the routine experienced at the beginning of my assignment. “Routine” was to take on new meaning during our next mortar attack on the Hill. My duty station that evening was the Battalion Aid Station, (BAS), located on Hill 37. During the attack two marines were delivered there, one had been killed and the other seriously wounded one of my friends. Mortar shrapnel that torn open his shoulder was serious enough to expose his shoulder blade so we quickly delivered him to the medics. The dead marine was placed in one of those all too familiar body bags. My orders for the evening now included watching over the dead marine’s body. I cannot explain how surreal this experience was, since I did not know who this soldier was and sitting there alone with him was “driving me crazy.” A marine is trained to follow orders, which I did, but I was greatly affected by the experience.

The guilt of abandoning my marine family resulted in me extending my tour in Vietnam until November of 1969. The extension was my penance for leaving them, even though it was through no fault of my own—and in my own mind this is what was necessary to achieve forgiveness. I eventually left the Marine Corps with the rank of corporal but had been submitted by my chain of command for promotion to sergeant.

I believe in my heart that I made a difference, helping other young marines perform their jobs in Vietnam. After the service I took a job with the railroad for seven years, while taking college courses for nearly four years. However, the U. S. Postal Service was to be my ultimate career choice, where I retired after 25 years of service.

My Vietnam journey was not over, because in 2013 I made my way back to Hill 37 as a member of a tour group. From the time I departed Vietnam, Hill 37 continued to be an active military base. However, while there were many restrictions on where one could travel that year my tour guide was able to obtain permission for me to visit the old French Bunker located at the top of the hill. Life for the Vietnamese soldiers was significantly more relaxed in 2013 as I observed one of the guards casually relaxing in a hammock near the bunker.

During my visit that day I successfully and secretly planted a note at the bunker to my unknown Marine brother who died in his defense of this hill. I once again travelled to Hill 37 in 2014, only to be shocked that it had been nearly excavated to level ground and where the Vietnamese were building another imposing government building. My purpose was to secretly deposit a 50th Year Vietnam War pin and another letter, which described more completely my feelings towards his sacrifice and loss. So what better place than to bury my thoughts in the foundation of that new building, as well as the grief that overwhelmed me for over 40 years?



Ralph planting two memorial items for a Marine KIA

As a veteran, I'm very proud of my service to my Brothers-In-Arms, my country and ultimately my family. I can only hope that through my experience and process of recovery that some veteran, somewhere, will read this and find hope for his own recovery.

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