

A Soldier Talks - Thirteen Months And A Wake Up

By Pete Ritch C 2006

Memories from Peter J. Ritch, USMC 1967- 1970. Viet Nam, 1968-1969 and a member of the USMCVTA.



*"Old Tankers Never Die...
They Just Lose Track"*

USMC Vietnam Tankers Historical Foundation

In 1967, two days after graduating from college and having just received my draft notice in the mail, I beat the draft and joined the Marines. And just as my Marine Recruiter had promised, seven months later I was headed for "my thirteen months and a wake-up" in Vietnam.

The flight into Da Nang was fairly routine but the C-130 "touch and go" landing in Dong Ha, was a shock. We rolled out of the cargo door, hit the tarmac and were told get off the air strip as fast as possible as we were within rocket range of the DMZ.

As with all Marine 2nd Lieutenants, arriving in country, regardless of MOS, my first assignment was as an infantry platoon leader. You had to be a grunt to understand the value that a Marine infantryman provided on a daily basis. Man, did serving with an infantry platoon make being a tanker look good.

On my first operation, our platoon was assigned to secure an "arty" fire support base near the border of Laos. The only day during the entire operation that it did not rain was the day we were choppered onto the mountain top.

We'd run foot patrols by day and provide perimeter security by night.

One night during the operation I received a radio message to report to the LZ, at day break, with all my gear. My mother had passed away. The next morning I went to the LZ and with three other Marines waited for a chopper. It was so foggy that we could hardly see each other. I think we sat on the LZ for about 10 hours, when all of sudden the clouds broke and a chopper dropped in. We took off just as the clouds socked the mountain back in.

I noticed series of band aids on the ceiling of the chopper. The Machine Gunner saw me staring and said, "Shrapnel holes".

We landed at Stud and I was taken by another chopper to the Dong Ha airstrip where I boarded a C-130 to Da Nang; where I boarded a C-5 for Okinawa, where I showered and shaved. Dressed in "Greens", I left for the U.S. via Hawaii, San Francisco and New York. Twenty-six hours after I was choppered off a mountain top near Laos, I was back in the World, on emergency leave, standing on my front porch in Syracuse, New York. The Marine Corps efficiency and professionalism was amazing.

A week or so later, I returned to Quang Tri Province, where I was assigned to Bravo Company, Third Tank Battalion, Third Marine Division. Bravo Company was headquartered, at a small base camp on Rt. 9 between Quang Tri and Khe Shan.

As Bravo 3, Third Platoon Tank Commander, I learned that my "new twenty best friends" had just finished running road security for supplies in support of the Marine Base at Khe Sahn during the siege. These Marines were battle tested, salty and that was just what I needed. I learned really quickly to listen to them. If they survived Khe Sahn, they were not about to let a green 2nd Lieutenant get them killed.



Lt. Pete Ritch- pistol practice and base camp near DMZ- 1969.

My first operation as a Tanker was a road sweep from Rt. 9 just east of Stud, southward up a small mountain range, ending at a village of roughly 300 Viet Nameese farmers. Next to the village was a dirt airstrip, a Special Forces base camp, with Montayard trainees and a Marine base with my three tanks, a platoon of Marine grunts and a "coordinator". The "coordinator" was dressed in camouflage unlike any I'd seen since I arrived in country. He appeared to sleep all day and show up around sunset to ask what we had run into action on the road sweep or day light patrols. Then he would head out of our base camp and be gone all night. He carried a Thompson sub-machine gun and several knives that were not standard issue.

We'd sweep the road first thing in the morning, to the joy of a hundred or so small kids who would ask for food and wave. After our sweep, the road would be open for traffic and we'd run patrols into the surrounding area. Just outside the village was a large banana plantation run by a French Catholic priest and worked by the villagers. It was beautiful country and we witnessed some fantastic sunsets. Too bad there was a war going on.

Our patrols into the surrounding area were boring. We never found any indication of NVA troops or "pajama'd" bad guys moving through the areas that we patrolled. Our patrols were limited to narrow corridors bordered by areas patrolled by the ARVN. Every evening I'd meet with the "coordinator", let him know that we'd found no evidence of the enemy and ask if he could get us permission to widen our patrol area.

Finally, one night he told us that the ARVN would not be patrolling the two clicks to our west and we were free to check it out. The next morning we completed the road sweep and set out with three tanks and a grunt platoon into our expanded patrol zone. We crossed into the grid previously patrolled by the ARVN. The Marine grunts dismounted and moved through a tree line and reported that they spotted smoke across a field, in the next tree line. As they started across the field, they took some small arms fire and hit the deck. I directed the tanks through the near tree line, maneuvered between the infantry platoon and the far tree line and opened fire. We fired around 15 rounds of buck-shot into the tree line. The small arms fire ceased. The grunts than searched the

tree line and found five bodies, dressed in NVA uniforms and a small cooking fire. We had interrupted an NVA lunch break.

The grunt platoon commander reported our encounter to his CO and we were ordered to load the bodies in the tank fenders and return to our base camp. The "coordinator" met us just outside the village and told us to place the bodies along the road side in front of the village. The next morning at daybreak, the entire population of the village inspected the bodies. One old woman broke down screaming and crying. She had found her son.

We never were allowed to patrol outside of our narrow grid again and the ARVN resumed their patrols to our left and right. We never had another encounter with the enemy during that operation.

Two days after our firefight, as we swept the road in front of the village, there were no children along the road asking for food and waving. Fifty meters down the road we found a land mine. We blew it in place and continued the sweep. I should have picked up on the fact that there were no kids on the side of the road. We were taught to notice any changes and do not get in a routine.

Our next operation was to support a land clearing operation from Con Tien to Cam Lo.



Flame Tank clearing brush covering tunnel complex- 1968 near Con Tien.

My five tanks, with three Army APC's, a Marine Infantry Platoon and 25 Navy Seabee bulldozers were to clear all the bushes and trees in a 5 mile by 3 mile stretch from Con Tien east. The cleared land would be open to aerial and ground observation and any NVA movement through that area would be easy to spot.

We set up a base camp just out side of the Wash Out near Con Tien and each day we'd take 6-8 foot high underbrush and tress to dirt level. The dozers would line up in an overlapping column and make small forest look like freshly plowed farm land.

One morning, I was on Bravo 33 watching the dozers clear the brush, when I saw a human hand waving in the freshly cleared strip of dirt. I halted the next dozer before he reached the hand. The hand was moving, so we knew we had a live one beneath the recently tilled soil. We started to dig out the area and eventually got another hand surfaced and determined that there was a good chance that we'd eliminated the chance of a booby-trap and

kept digging.

Eventually, we dug out two NVA officers from a tunnel complex. We found hand drawn maps of several local US bases, including one of Bravo Company, Third Tanks, my company base, complete with security positions including tank locations, machine gun positions and our communications bunker. We did not have an interpreter so we radioed for a chopper to come in and pick up our captives.

Later on during this operation, as we were performing maintenance on the dozers and tanks, Staff Sergeant Jewel asked me to join him for an ice run to Camp Vandergrift. Vandergrift had an ice factory, the only ice factory that I was aware of in I Core. As we came through the gate, we heard the sirens go off signaling a rocket attack and troopers yelling "in coming".. Sergeant Jewel said, "Hang on". We drove up to the ice factory and there were over fifty vehicles lined up to pick up ice. However, all of the drivers were in bunkers or culverts due to the rocket attack. Even the ice factory workers were gone. Jewel accelerated to the front of the line; we filled our 10 insulated chow containers with ice and bolted. As we exited Vandergrift, the all clear signal was sounded. Back at our base camp, we iced down a couple of cases of Black Label beer and shared them with everyone- grunts, Seabee's and tankers. It was the only time we ever have cold beer in the bush.



Corporal Riggs, Lt. Pete Ritch, Staff Sgt. Jim Jewel- Vandergrift 1969.

We continued the land clearing operation. The Marine Infantry Platoon assigned with us was commanded by a 2nd Lieutenant code name Blue and were known as Blue's Bastards. Needless to say they were a very salty group and I was glad to have them working with us. Late one afternoon we had finished clearing several hundred acres of land and escorted the bulldozers back to the base camp near the Wash Out. Our aerial spotter radioed us and said that just behind us over the next ridge there were a bunch of NVA "little people" boogie'n down the trail. He said if we got to the next ridge it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

I took two tanks and two APC's and Blues Bastards and headed back toward the ridge with the spotter plane tracking the bad guys. Before we got to the ridge there was a gully still thick with underbrush that had a narrow cut that we'd have to get in single file to move through. As we stopped to check out the gully, the spotter said that the bad guys were just the other side of the gully below the next ridgeline. We headed into the gully, single file, my tank in the lead, followed by the two ACP's with the other tank bringing up the rear. All four vehicles had grunts riding on the fenders and decks. Lt. Blue was on riding on the back of my tank. Halfway through the

gully we got ambushed by small arms, 50 caliber and RPG fire. The driver of the APC behind me was killed and the APC stopped in the middle of the ambush. I accelerated forward, spun back around and went back into the ambush zone with our 30 caliber and 50 caliber machine guns firing into the brush. Blues grunts dismounted and followed the tank back into the ambush but Blue remained on the tank, radio in hand, directing fire, like John Wayne. I swung the turret around toward some small arms fire and in the process whacked Blue of my fender with the 90MM barrel. We fired buck shot rounds into the brush on both sides of the driverless APC. The attacking fire ceased and we got driver into the APC. We loaded up the grunts and drove out of the ambush sight. Blue was on my fender holding his ribs.

We called in a Medi-Vac chopper for the dead and wounded and as I assisted Lt. Blue on the chopper he said something like "Thanks but my ribs are killing me." I went back to my tank and looked up at the thick glass ring that surrounds the cupola. There were five impact fractures in the 6 inch thick glass where AK-47 rounds had hit the ring. The glass ring was about 5 inches below my exposed torso in the tank commander's seat. I got a little light headed and threw-up..

Lt. Blue, I found out later was Oliver North and our ambush was written up in his first book, entitled Under Fire. We correspond about once or twice a year and he reminds me about batting him into the air like a baseball but also thanks me for saving the day. We both received Bronze Stars for our actions.

Our next assignment was to run supplies to the most northern most Marine outpost in I Core. There was a Marine infantry platoon at a small base at the mouth of the Que Viet river situated on the southern border of the DMZ. Every morning, we'd run our tanks, loaded with supplies and replacement troopers up the coast of the South China Sea. One track would be in the water the other track would be in the hard pack sand near the waters edge. The sand was pure white and the weather was great. We'd actually stop and take turns body surfing when the surf was up, with the tankers and grunts providing security.

On one trip up the coast, a just-arrived in-country 2nd. Lt. named Tomlinson joined us aboard one the tanks from Bravo 1. He made the run up the beach with us just fine but on the return trip he insisted on moving inland just beyond the sand dune line. I told him we'd wait for him on the shore line. His tank disappeared over the sand dunes. We could see his radio antenna's moving south, so we shadowed him remaining in the surf and on the hard pack. Suddenly his antenna's disappeared. He radioed that his tank was in a marsh and sinking quickly. By the time we reached him, Tomlinson and his tank crew were standing next to the marsh (quicksand) and the only visible sign of a U.S. Marine Corp. M-48A3 Tank was the two antennas sticking out of the mud. Last I heard Tomlinson was still paying off the tank.

Later on that mission we were running up the beach with infantry troops riding on our fenders. We hit a land mine and the trooper who was sitting right below me on the fender was knocked out but still seated on the fender. Half of his left leg was gone. Using my web belt I tied a tourniquet around his upper leg near his crotch and kept him awake until the MediVac Chopper arrived. We buttoned up the track and limped back to Dong Ha. I heard later that he made it, but lost the lower half of his leg.

After a week refurbishing our equipment at Bravo Company, Third Tanks, Headquarters on Rt. 9, my platoon was assigned to an U. S. Army unit along the DMZ. Our mission was to assist the Army with the transition of Leather Neck Square to the ARVN. The base camp was just south of the DMZ and included my Marine Tank platoon, an ARVN infantry Company and approximately 20 U. S. Army advisors.

After dark we monitored activity in the DMZ and on clear nights we could see and hear the USS New Jersey lobbing shells into North Viet Nam. I sounded like small cars passing overhead. During the day, we'd provide armor support for the ARVN foot patrols along the southern border of the DMZ. One day we stopped for lunch, yes the ARVN treated this like an 8 am to 5 pm job, and in sky overhead we saw vapor trails going north. When the vapor trails made a u-turn and headed south again, we would wait for the rumble of thunder and ground shaking that accompanied an Arc-Light Strike. Awesome.

After one patrol, as we headed back to our base camp, my two tanks, Bravo 31 and Bravo 33, were flanked by ARVN infantry troops who walked a lot faster on the way back to the Army Base Camp than they did on way out to our objective.

My tank, Bravo 33, hit a land mine. We radioed the Army Major in charge of the operation and told him that I needed the ARVN to set up a security perimeter until we got the tread repaired. Bravo 31, our other tank also provided security. As we worked on the tread, the ARVN ground troops kept moving past us and did not set up a security perimeter. I radioed the Army Advisor and told him that the ARVN column did not set up security and kept moving past our disabled tank. He said he'd get the security perimeter set up.

Suddenly the ARVN column was gone. No security and no more troops moving past my tanks. I radioed the Army Advisor again and told him of our situation. He said he'd send them back. They never showed.



Bravo Co. Third Platoon replacing track at Camp Vandergrift- 1968.

We got my tread repaired and started toward the base camp and hit another land mine. I radioed my status and asked for ground troops and a tank retriever. Now we had one tank damaged and the second tank providing security. We figured that we could fix the tread but that we'd be unable to move the tank at a speed above 10 miles per hour. The Army Advisor responded that he would send ARVN ground troops.

Bravo 6, our Company Tank Retriever Commander, Staff Sergeant Harold Reinche, radioed me that he was headed my way, less that a click away but that the ARVN column troops were all heading in the opposite direction. A minute or so later he advised me that there were no ARVN ground troops to be seen and that he was almost to my position. Then he hit a land mine. We heard the explosion and saw black smoke in the air just over the next rise. Bravo 6 radioed that they were going to button up the damage and try to get to us. I told him we were able to start his direction at a very low rate of speed. Then I heard small arms fire in the background and he said that they had been ambushed. I sent my other tank to his location.

Sgt. Reinche radioed that his troopers were down and he was still taking fire. He stated that he had fired all of

his weapons, 50 caliber machine gun, grenade launcher and was now down to his 45 caliber pistol.

Bravo 31 arrived at the ambush site and supplied suppressing fire. My tank limped to the ambush site as darkness set in. We still had no ground troops from the ARVN. I directed all three vehicles to stay buttoned up and shoot anything that moved around us. We had Fat Albert above us all night dropping flares that kept the surrounding area lit up until the sun came up. Sgt. Reinche, me and the Tank Commander of Bravo 31, stayed on the radio with the flare ships and each other throughout the night.

At about the time it got daylight, a Marine infantry platoon from Cam Lo arrived and set up perimeter security. These guys had humped all night to get to us. We found 8 dead NVA troops on and around the Tank Retriever. One of the dead NVA was on the top of the retrieve within a foot of Sergeant Reinche's hatch. Sgt Reinche's hand was severely burned from grabbing the barrel of his 50 caliber machine gun when he had to jam it into place so he could fire more rounds.

We medivac'd two Marines from the tank retriever who were killed instantly when the ambush commenced. And then we repaired Bravo 6's tread. We drove out to the main road and Bravo 6 headed south to our Company headquarters and Bravo 31 and 33 headed to the Army Base near the DMZ.

I found the Army Major who was supposed to provide us with ARVN security and chewed him out. I think he was so surprised that a Marine 2nd Lt. would "chew him a new one" that he never said a word. I left his command bunker and blew lunch. I wished I had blasted on him.

Staff Sergeant Reinche was awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism and calmness under fire. He was the epitome of a fighting Marine.

We continued the transition of responsibility to the ARVN and after one of our patrols, I received word to bring my platoon back to Bravo Company headquarters on Rt. 9 in Quang Tri. When we returned to the Company headquarters, we were told that several of us were going home and that we would be the first contingent of the 3rd Marine Division to be returning to the World. There was going to be a parade when we landed in California, and the political message was that the ARVN were ready to defend their homeland.

The trip back to the World was a blur- a C-130 to Da Nang. Showers, haircuts and fresh uniforms. Then on to Okinawa for 10 hours- confined to the base- not much fun; and then on to El Toro, in California.

We landed to a marching band and about 100 well-wishers and no members of the press. Whatever political statement we were making about bringing Marines home wasn't well attended.

We were given 30 days leave and Lt. Hefferan (also a Tanker) and I booked a flight to New York and headed for the O Club. We took a cab to LAX and split a case of beer on the ride. We were poured onto the non-stop American Airlines flight to JFK airport and slept all the way home.

Almost thirteen months to the day, I finally had my wake up.