

SEPTEMBER 2019

MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES

Leatherneck

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DRILL INSTRUCTORS:
Molding Recruits
Into Marines

A Publication of the Marine Corps Association & Foundation



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On March 24, 1969, while heading to help tanks hit by mines, SSgt Harold Riensche, Co B, 3rd Tank Bn, and his tank recovery team were ambushed by NVA. As two crew members lay dead and two more wounded, SSgt Riensche became the sole defender of the team and its retriever.

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COVER: Sgt Zachary Dally, senior drill instructor with Plt 3053, "India" Co, gives commands to his Marines during Final Drill at MCRD Parris Island, S.C., July 10. To read more about the importance of drill instructors see "DI Jones" on page 32. Photo by WO Bobby Yarbrough, USMC. Copies of the cover may be obtained by sending \$2 (for mailing costs) to *Leatherneck* Magazine, P.O. Box 1775, Quantico, VA 22134-0775.

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One-Man Stand

By
Kyle Watts

The tank retriever ground to a halt on the beach. A gaggle of amtracs and tanks collected on the scene, awaiting its arrival. Harold Riensche climbed down from the cab and dropped into the soft sand. Waves off the Gulf of Tonkin lapped against the shore in the distance. Anywhere else, he might have relaxed and enjoyed the view.

Instead, he absorbed the mess that was now his responsibility. A tank turret protruded above a pit full of mud. The main gun seemed impotent without the tank visible beneath it. Quicksand nearly swallowed the vehicle whole. A tow pintle lay 3 feet below the surface. They would have to dig it out. Even then, how would they break the suction? The winch would have to work. Riensche thought through the grueling task ahead. A lieutenant with the amtracs interrupted his planning.

"Well, Staff Sergeant, what do you think? Better hold your retriever right there, or someone will have to come get YOU out!"

"Thanks, Sir. We'll take it from here."

Riensche understood why his company commander "suggested" he should come along on this recovery. As the maintenance chief for "Bravo" Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, Riensche typically oversaw maintenance back at the company headquarters (HQ). Sergeant Craig Ammon, the retriever's commander, was competent and capable. The extravagant nature of this tank's predicament, however, brought many "take charge types" to provide opinions on the operation. The commanding officer (CO) wanted Riensche's extra stripe to manage any interference. The five-man recovery crew went to work.

Lance Corporal Robert Walkley and Private First Class Jimmy Dorsett stripped off their blouses and grabbed shovels. They struggled to move in the mud digging out the tow pintle. The rest of the Marines found their duties equally difficult. Everything was heavy in their



MGySgt Harold Riensche

line of work. Corporal Mike Foster maneuvered the retriever behind the tank. Riensche and Ammon removed equipment to lower the front spade, covering the width of the vehicle. Foster drove the spade forward into the ground to lock the retriever in position. They trekked back and forth through the mud, arranging snatch blocks and the winch cable. By the time they were ready to make their first attempt, all five Marines were spent.

Foster started the winch. The cable tightened. The 60-ton retriever slid forward, plowing up sand. The tank did not move an inch.

Riensche flagged down two of the tanks that were providing security and moved them behind the retriever. He ran tow cables from the retriever out to each

tank. He hoped the additional 96 tons would provide an anchor. Foster spun up the winch once more. The retriever screamed at maximum horsepower. The winch sparked and spewed smoke. Riensche gave the signal to cut it off. The tank still would not budge.

Riensche devised a less conventional plan. He sent the crew to cut long reeds out of a nearby marsh. Meanwhile, he crafted balls of C4 and fused them with blasting caps. He taped the explosives to each reed, jabbed them into the muck around the tank and wired everything together.

Foster started the winch a final time. When the retriever reached maximum horsepower, Riensche touched off the C4. Mud churned and flew up the sides of the tank. The suction broke, and the

tank emerged slowly onto solid sand. All five crewmembers dropped beside the retriever, too exhausted to celebrate their victory. By the time they stowed their gear and hooked up the tank on a tow bar, the sun was setting. They backed the tank into the waves to wash off the mud. They joined their vehicles in the water, fully clothed, praying it might cleanse their stench. With tank in tow, the retriever followed the amtracs 6 miles back to their base at Cua Viet. Riensche told the crew to rest and prepare for the trip home in the morning.

Dawn of March 24, 1969, arrived too soon. The recovery crew had filled a gap in the perimeter, rotating turns on watch all night so no one felt rested. They refueled, connected a tow bar back to the tank, and departed. Afternoon arrived before they reached the Route One bridge into Dong Ha.

Riensche radioed their progress back to HQ while they waited for their turn to cross. Another transmission came over the net as he tuned in.

“Bravo 6, this is Bravo 3. Be advised, I’ve got two tanks hit by mines. We are buttoning up now.”

Lieutenant Pete Ritch and his three tanks had swept west from Gio Linh with a company of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers. They moved 5 miles out and were on their way back when the first tank hit a mine. Ritch radioed for the ARVN to stop and set up security.

When Riensche heard the lieutenant’s call to company HQ, he checked his watch. It was already 4 p.m. Riensche jumped into the conversation. “Bravo 3, this is Bravo 9. What’s your location? We can come help get you out.”

As his Marines repaired the track, Ritch watched the ARVN continue marching as if nothing happened. One of his operable tanks stopped to provide security, while the third continued onward. Two hundred meters ahead, that tank also hit a mine. Ritch contacted the officer in charge of the ARVN soldiers to make them stop, but again, they continued marching with no regard for the Americans’ predicament.

When Riensche heard the lieutenant’s call to company HQ, he checked his watch. It was already 4 p.m. Riensche jumped into the conversation.

“Bravo 3, this is Bravo 9. What’s your location? We can come help get you out.”

“Bravo 9, we are five clicks west of A2, heading east. We are buttoning up now and should be moving shortly. I think we can limp it back to Gio Linh.”

It did not feel right. The damage sounded light but would take time to short-track the tanks. Once the repairs were complete, they would move no more than 5 miles per hour. Ritch had to get his tanks back to base before dark. They were in the heart of Leatherneck Square, an ironic name for the enemy-infested area just south of

the Demilitarized Zone. It was no place to spend the night in disabled tanks. The retriever currently sat less than 15 miles away. Riensche decided the previous day’s recovery, now extended over 24 hours, could wait.

“Roger that Bravo 3. Heading your way. Get buttoned up, and we’ll meet you back at Gio Linh. We’ll put both tanks behind the retriever and get you to Dong Ha before dark.”

Riensche informed the recovery crew of the change in plans. They unhooked the tank and headed north. By the time they reached Gio Linh, Lt Ritch was nowhere in sight.

“Bravo 3, this is Bravo 9. What’s your status?”

“Same location. First tank buttoned up, the second is giving us a hard time, over.”

Ritch could never make it back to Gio Linh before dark now on his own.

“Roger that Bravo 3. Sit tight. We’re coming out to get you.”

The retriever rolled through the wire down the same road Ritch had taken. As they moved, Ritch informed Riensche of the ARVN company heading the



Lt Pete Ritch and his crew with their tanks at Khe Sanh, Vietnam, in 1969.

retriever's way. For a third time, Ritch requested that the ARVN company stop and provide security for the retriever. Less than a mile down the road, the column of soldiers came into view. Riensche told Foster to halt. He stood on top of the cab, waiting for someone to stop. Some of the soldiers bowed as they walked, while some waved. Most passed without a word. The entire company, over 200 strong, marched past the retriever toward their home at Gio Linh.

"So much for our security."

With or without the ARVN, Riensche

"Alright, Mike, let's go get them. Follow those tank tracks."

Foster accelerated. The retriever lurched backward with the sudden forward motion. It shifted weight just enough to trigger a pressure plate beneath them.

The mine heaved the retriever's rear end off the ground. The Marines rocked from their seats into the steel surrounding them. When things settled, Ammon, Walkley, and Dorsett exited their hatches to inspect the damage. Riensche dropped to the ground behind them. The right side track lay broken in multiple places. Two sets of

blankly down between his legs into the vehicle. Riensche studied Foster while he finished with the radio. He looked tired. Riensche had seen him worse. This was their second time together in Vietnam. On their first deployment, Riensche and Foster carried an M-60 together on ambush patrols. They never expected to see each other in country a second time. When Riensche arrived, Foster extended his tour to stay with him. Foster was not even supposed to be there.

"Hey Mike, you want to stand watch first, and I'll go down and help? One of us has to stay up here."

Foster straightened and eased up from his hatch.

"Naw, Chief. We'll take care of it. You stay here."

He disappeared over the side of the retriever to join the others. Riensche returned to the headset to contact Lt Ritch.

"Bravo 3, this is ..."

An AK-47 bullet smacked into the .50-cal. ammo can inches from Riensche's face. Another ricocheted off the receiver and zipped past his head. Round after round followed, striking steel all around the hatch. Riensche's legs went limp, and he fell inside the retriever. As he checked himself for holes, the volume of automatic fire swelled outside. He peered into the periscope, looking over the right side of the retriever. It was shot out. He turned to the left side periscope. It was shot out

They were surrounded. Riensche grabbed the headset.

"Bravo 6, this is Bravo 9, we are under attack!"

Heavy small arms fire all around. We need help now!"

knew they could not abandon Ritch. The retriever set off once more alone.

After a few more miles, Riensche decided they had to be getting close. They crossed a large, dried up rice paddy and came over the far berm in a set of old tank tracks. Riensche ordered Foster to halt again. Waist-high elephant grass surrounded the retriever. A small, grassy mound stuck out of the earth 300 meters off, but the terrain was otherwise flat. From Ritch's directions, Riensche figured the tanks were less than 1,000 meters away.

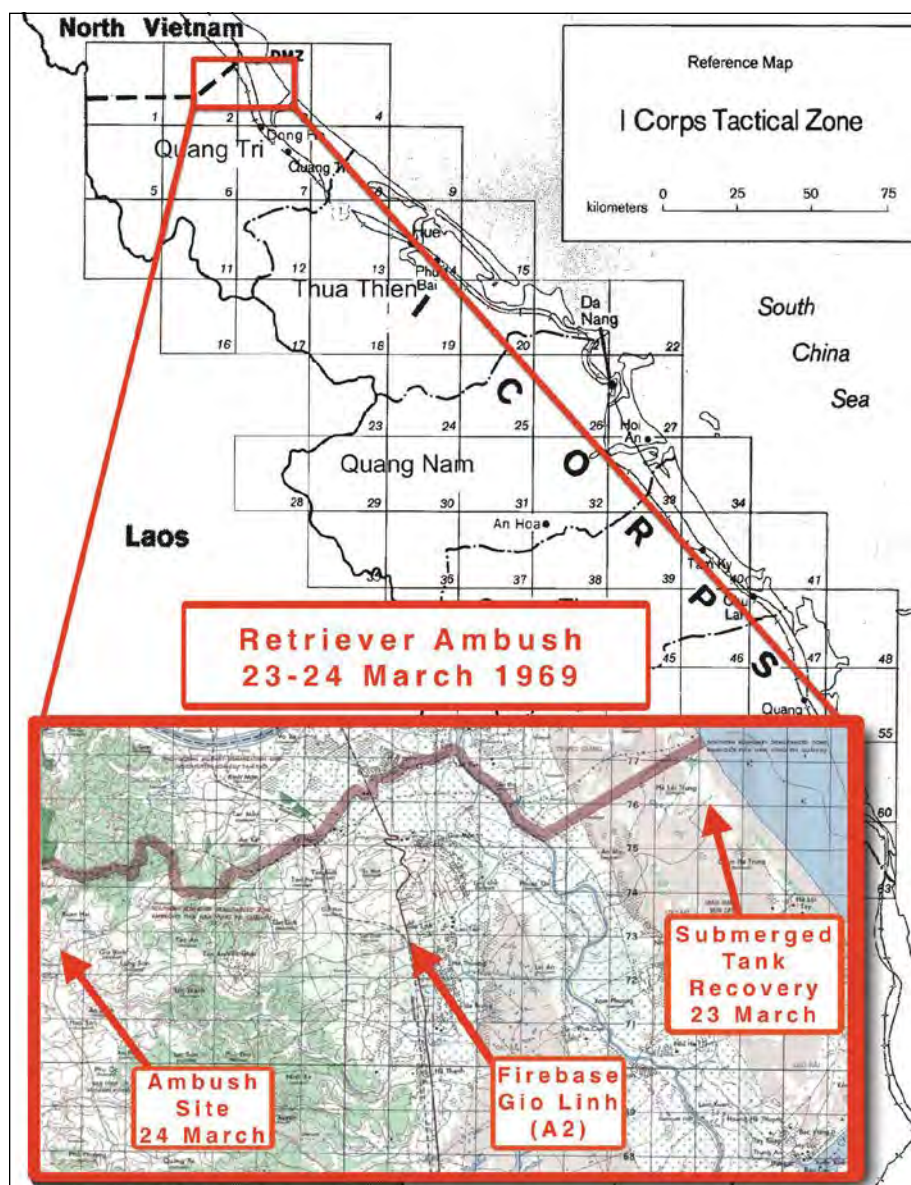
rear road wheels sheared off completely. The Marines hung their heads, knowing hours of strenuous work were required to button it up. Riensche climbed on top of the vehicle and crossed over to the tank commander (TC) hatch while the other three got to work. Standing behind the mounted .50-caliber machine gun, he grabbed the headset to call in their situation.

Foster climbed out of the driver's hatch and sat on the rear of the opening. He put his feet up on the front edge, resting his elbows on his bent knees. He stared



This tank is being towed by a retriever. The helmet of the driver, left, is visible in the driver's hatch. The tank commander, center, stands behind the 50-cal. with his back to the camera. The crane operator, right, stands half exposed in the crane operator's hatch. The last crewman, the rigger, sits in full view. No hatch existed above the rigger's seat.

COURTESY OF USMC VIETNAM TANKER'S ASSOCIATION



as well. They were surrounded. Riensche grabbed the headset.

“Bravo 6, this is Bravo 9, we are under attack! Heavy small arms fire all around. We need help now!”

He dropped the radio and grabbed an M16 inside the cab. He popped up, half exposed in the TC hatch. A North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldier flashed through the grass. Riensche fired three rounds before shifting his aim at more movement to his left. He adjusted aim again and again. They were everywhere. The first magazine drained quickly. He fumbled with a second. Bullets fragmented off the side of the retriever and cracked through the air. The concentration of fire adjusted onto him. Halfway through the next magazine, the rifle stopped. He dropped into the cab and tried to eject the round. His sweaty hands struggled to grasp the charging handle. He jammed his fingers inside the ejection port, trying to get at the stuck round. He gave up and threw the rifle aside.

Riensche’s eyes darted around the inside of the cab. What should he do next? His hands shook uncontrollably. His blouse bounced on his chest with each heartbeat. A vision of his wife, Laura, and their three boys overtook his mind. She huddled the older two close while the baby, only six weeks old when Harold left, screamed in her arms. Riensche recognized the scene around his forlorn family. He witnessed it far too many times while on Inspector-Instructor duty in San Francisco. They were in a cemetery. It was a military funeral. The meaning was clear. He was going to die.

“Oh, God, help me!”

He closed his eyes and tried to focus. His hands began to settle. His breathing slowed. The verbal recognition of his terror diminished its power. The resignation to his fate gave him clarity. He opened his eyes. The .50-cal. above him looked ready. He stood again to unleash hell.

A bullet destroyed the ammo belt leading into the big gun. Riensche broke it off and fed it back through. He reached down and scooped up the radio onto his head. If Co B was listening, he wanted to hear their reply. An NVA soldier appeared out of the grass 30 meters away. Riensche pivoted the gun and fired. The huge bullets shredded the soldier’s body before he fell. Riensche swung the gun toward the rear of the retriever, chasing another sprinting enemy. A three-round burst sent him tumbling out of sight, blocked from view by the boom of the crane. Bullets struck the front of the cab behind Riensche. He turned the gun back toward the front and fired at the unseen enemy. Suddenly, three enemy soldiers appeared above the



Harold Riensche’s M51 Heavy Recovery Vehicle, or as the Marines called it, “the retriever,” in Vietnam.

A retriever had three methods of recovery: a tow bar, a winch and a crane. In this photo, the crane is extended for use.

grass 50 meters away, heading toward the mound in the distance. Riensche fired a long burst in front of them. The soldiers ran into his fire and dropped. The grass where they fell shook violently as they writhed beneath it.

Despite the damage Riensche inflicted, the NVA maintained the intensity of the ambush. Enemy bullets passed over his head and under his arms, impacting the retriever all around. He waited for the round that would get him. A voice came through the headset.

“Bravo 9, Bravo 6, what’s your status?”

“We are under attack! Near ambush, all around! I’m returning fire, I don’t know where my crew is! We need a reaction force out here now!”

“Roger that Bravo 9. Hold tight.”

Riensche swept fires toward the rear of the retriever again. The crane blocked his ability to cover this avenue of approach. Over the crane operator’s hatch, an M60 sat in a mount welded to the top of the cab. The maintenance chief two tours ahead of Riensche added the extra firepower for his retriever crew. It only further blocked Riensche’s view, but he knew the second machine gun would soon come into play.

“Bravo 9, Bravo 6. Be advised, I’ve been instructed it’s getting dark, and we can’t

send out a reaction force at night. Someone will be out to assist in the morning.”

Riensche’s heart sank. How could this be happening? They were leaving him out there to die.

“You be advised, there won’t be anyone left in the morning!!”

He dumped the headset. No one was coming so there was no point in talking to them. Riensche returned a rage of fire. Enemy rounds struck the ammo can again. The .50-cal. immediately stopped. Riensche tried to unjam the belt of ammo,

but it would not budge. Without more ammo cans, his heaviest weapon was knocked out of action.

Riensche jumped out of the hatch in full view of the enemy. He ran across the cab and removed the M60 from the mount. He peeked over the side of the retriever. A bloody hand reached out from under the fender. Riensche leaned further. The bloody hand became an arm, connected to a bloody body. Foster lay draped over a road wheel. He struggled desperately for a breath. His body had absorbed so



COURTESY OF HAROLD RIENSCHÉ



COURTESY OF HAROLD RIENSCHÉ

Riensche’s retriever back at headquarters for repairs after the ambush.

many rounds that Riensche dared not try to count.

“Mike!”

Foster strained his head upward. He connected his gaze with Riensche’s. The breath he fought for exhaled.

“Get some for me!”

Foster’s head slumped down, and his arm dropped limp. Riensche screamed and stood on top of the cab to resume his war.

With the M60 blazing in his hands, Riensche’s mind transported through time to his boyhood home in Nebraska. Standing on the front porch, Riensche watched the wheat fields flow in unison with the wind. Any sort of unnatural disturbance to the harmony stood out like a sore thumb. At 18, he left the farm and enlisted in the Marines. He spent two and a half years in the infantry before training as a mechanic. Now, standing atop the retriever, it seemed his entire life prepared him for this moment. The elephant grass swayed in the breeze, just like wheat. The NVA hiding beneath it gave themselves away with each movement. The M60 fit perfectly in Riensche’s hands, just as it had so many times before. His training took over and kept him in the fight.

He blew through a belt of ammo and started on a second. More NVA appeared from the grass heading toward the mound in the distance. Riensche cut them down and swiveled back to the opposite side of the retriever. The movement in the grass appeared closer each time he turned. AK-47 fire smacked the retriever and whizzed by him. He marveled that no rocket-propelled grenades came his way yet. Could that be why soldiers were sprinting for the mound?

Riensche finished a second belt and fed in a third. He resumed firing until the gun abruptly stopped. He looked down in time to see the barrel release and fall forward out of the receiver. Without thinking, Riensche snatched the smoking barrel out of the air. Adrenaline negated any pain, as the scorching metal seared his hand. He dropped the rest of the gun to reinsert the barrel.

A flash of movement caught his eye. An NVA soldier sprinted from the grass behind the retriever and disappeared under the rear spade. Riensche heard an entire magazine of AK-47 fire erupt beneath the vehicle.

The third ammo belt ended and Riensche put in a fourth. He grabbed the radio once more. He called out to Lt Ritch, less than a click away, for any help he could send.

“I’m the only one left and I’m running out of ammo!”

Riensche fired all around but eyed the

rear of the retriever. After a series of five-round bursts, the M60 stopped again. He opened the cover and found two rounds hopelessly jammed in the barrel. The M60 was done. Riensche reached down into the crane operator hatch and grabbed two grenades. He tossed one over both rear corners of the retriever, hoping to take out the enemy soldier who disappeared under the spade. He threw a few more into the grass for good measure.

Riensche located an M79 grenade launcher stashed in the cab with a bag of 30 high explosive rounds. One by one, he fired the grenades at anything that moved. The growing darkness played tricks on his eyes. Everything seemed to move. The bag depleted quickly. He dropped the M79 back into the cab and grabbed a case of unopened grenades. As he struggled to unwind the tape from the packaging, another NVA soldier appeared. He stopped 20 yards away and leveled his AK. Riensche drew his pistol from its shoulder holster and fired. The .45-cal. bullet smashed through the soldier’s face,

tumbling him backward. Riensche followed him into the grass with several more rounds.

With the immediate threat neutralized, Riensche returned to the box of grenades. They were his only hope. The .50-cal. was useless. The M60 and M16 were done. The M79 was out. He had less than 20 rounds left for his pistol. All that remained were the grenades and his Ka-Bar. He found unexpected difficulty unwrapping the grenades. His nerves rose to the extreme once more. The past 20 minutes were the most brutal and eternal of his life. He felt it about to end.

He slipped a grenade out of its sleeve and tossed it into the grass. As he worked on a second, he realized the incoming fire had ceased. He paused and studied the area around him. A cacophony of ring tones and racing heartbeats filled his ears, but nothing more. Silence diffused through the grass. Harmony reasserted itself over the sway. Could it really be over?

He ran around the top of the retriever,

**He called out to Lt Ritch, less than a click away,
for any help he could send.
“I’m the only one left and I’m running out of ammo!”**



In less than 30 minutes of nonstop firing, Harold Riensche used virtually all available ammunition for each of the pictured weapons as he fought for his life and the lives of his crew.



Sgt Al Soto in the commander's cupola of his M48A3 tank.

checking each side for the enemy. What happened to his crew? Riensche dismounted and looked under the retriever. Walkley lay across the undercarriage. His bullet-riddled body was motionless.

"Is anyone alive under there?"

Craig Ammon responded immediately. "We're under here, Chief! Walkley's dead! I'm hit bad, and Dorsett is too!"

"Can you crawl out the front?"

"No, can't move!"

"Alright, I'll back it off you. Hold on!"

Riensche rolled Foster's body off the road wheel and dragged him away from the retriever. He tried to grab Foster's belt,

from, but it was friendly. He immediately recognized Sgt Al Soto standing in the commander's cupola.

"Bravo 9, I have you in sight! Where do you want me?"

"That mound to your right! Light it up!"

The turret rotated. A long, beautiful rod of flame spewed out and set the mound a blaze. The inferno brought Riensche a sense of peace. Something about napalm always shut Charlie up.

He backed the retriever off the crew. A second tank appeared. Both must have come from Lt Ritch's position. In the quickly fading dusk, Riensche and the

Riensche could not believe what he was hearing.

First, no one would send a reaction force to help when he needed it most. Now, this pilot was going to leave without taking Ammon and Dorsett.

but could not close his hand. He stopped and turned his palms upward. Huge blisters had formed on all five fingers and palm of his left hand. Now that he noticed the burns, pain set in. No time for that now. Riensche unsheathed his Ka-Bar. He sliced gashes down each finger, and across his palm. He squeezed out the fluid and pus, allowing him to close the hand again. He dragged Foster away, then climbed back inside the retriever.

He called for an emergency medevac of his wounded, then slid into the driver's seat. Movement around the mound 300 meters off captured his attention. A tank appeared—a flame tank. Riensche did not know who it belonged to, or where it came

from, but it was friendly. He immediately recognized Sgt Al Soto standing in the commander's cupola.

A medevac chopper finally arrived, circling low over the scene. Riensche climbed back in the TC hatch and put on the headset. The pilot's voice came through.

"Bravo 9, we've got you in sight. Is it a secure LZ? Over."

"Well, it's as secure as it's going to get right now!"

"Roger Bravo 9. I can't land unless it's a secure LZ."

Riensche could not believe what he was hearing. First, no one would send a reaction force to help when he needed it

most. Now, this pilot was going to leave without taking Ammon and Dorsett.

"I've got two WIA in critical condition! You have to land! They have to go NOW!"

"Bravo 9, I can't land unless it's a secure LZ."

Riensche grabbed the .50-cal., and made a show of racking the bolt. He swiveled in the chopper's direction and angled the barrel skyward.

"You land it, or I will!"

A long pause followed the ultimatum.

"Roger, Bravo 9. Pop smoke in the LZ, over."

Riensche heaved a smoke grenade into the grass. The Marines quickly loaded Ammon and Dorsett into the chopper. Riensche and the dead would have to wait for evacuation in the morning.

Darkness overwhelmed the area before the chopper lifted off. Lt Ritch's two mined tanks limped into the position shortly after. They arranged security and settled in for the night. An AC-47 Spooky gunship circled overhead, lighting the darkness with flares. Riensche waited on high alert, scanning the grass. It flowed as softly as the wheat.

At first light, the tank crews set to work short-tracking the retriever. Another medevac chopper arrived for Walkley and Foster. Despite his burns, Riensche refused evacuation. A platoon of Marine infantry provided security as the tankers finished buttoning everything up. They connected tow bars from Al Soto's flame tank and the retriever to Lt Ritch's two limping tanks. Despite its own wounds, the retriever would still get one back to Dong Ha. Riensche climbed in the driver seat a final time to lead the procession. As they passed through Gio Linh and headed south on Route One, he could not help but notice the retriever had never run so well.

Following the ambush, life in the company quickly returned to normal. The pace of operations never slowed. No formal after action was ever conducted. Lt Ritch and any other Marine involved that day proceeded directly to the next operation, without time to dwell on what happened. Riensche wished he could move on so easily. Two of his Marines were dead. All of them should have been. His unit had decided he was not worth the effort of saving. He went through Walkley and Foster's personal belongings, separating out the things to send home to their families. Each item set aside reminded him of their absence. Each item reminded him how expendable they had been—how expendable he had been.

He finished the remaining five months of his tour. Before leaving, Riensche received orders to the drill field at Parris

COURTESY OF BOB SKEELS



COURTESY OF HAROLD RIENSCHÉ

Gen Leonard Chapman, 24th Commandant of the Marine Corps, awards Harold Riensche the Navy Cross at the Marines Memorial Club in San Francisco in 1970.

Island. He had heard the rumors about this duty. Married Marines going to the drill field came back divorced Marines. The thought of moving Laura and the boys from one coast to the other felt like a nightmare. After two tours in Vietnam, they had endured enough. They needed a father and husband more than the Corps needed another staff sergeant. Riensche took his discharge and left active duty. He moved his family to Petaluma, Calif., north of San Francisco, and joined the reserve unit at Treasure Island. The city of Oakland brought him on as a heavy equipment mechanic. He tried to fit in and keep his mouth shut. He provided for his family, and that was all that mattered now. The past was the past. It haunted him still.

A year later, Riensche learned he was awarded the Navy Cross for defending the retriever. He stood at attention while General Leonard Chapman, the 24th Commandant of the Marine Corps, pinned the medal on his chest at the Marines Memorial Club in San Francisco. A large

crowd of Marines, civilians and press looked on. Riensche looked through them.

“Get some for me.”

Foster. Walkley.

“Under here, Chief!”

Ammon. Dorsett. What was the point of their sacrifice?

Oh God, please, help me.

Riensche ended the night with a bottle of Jack Daniels. It eased the pain. It clouded the memory. Many bottles followed, helping blot out the past.

How powerful is time against wounds from within? A veteran’s fight to come home from war can only begin once they return. Time becomes an ally, promising relief. Vietnam had stolen a piece of Harold Riensche. Part of him died with his Marines in March of 1969. Could time revitalize the missing pieces and make him whole once more?

Five years passed. Riensche persevered down the road supporting his family. The U.S. government scrapped the war and pulled out of Vietnam. He watched

on TV as Saigon fell to the NVA and helicopters evacuated refugees from the American embassy. What was the point of his service? The news drove him further inside himself and away from what he lost.

Sixteen years passed. Riensche retired as a master gunnery sergeant from the reserve unit on Treasure Island. Young Marines noticed the Navy Cross on his chest and immediately stood taller in his presence. For Riensche, the medal dragged him back to the worst chapter of his life, killing more of him inside.

Thirty years passed. Vietnam began to fade. The future looked bright. Riensche finally neared retirement from the city of Oakland. He and Laura purchased land in Montana near their middle son, Ken. The new location promised new beginnings. While they built their future home, Ken was diagnosed with liver cancer. He passed away just one month later. In the midst of their grief, Riensche received a phone call from an old Marine. The USMC Vietnam Tankers Association (VTA) planned a reunion in Minneapolis. They wanted him to attend. Riensche turned them down. He could not think about discussing Vietnam after losing his son.

Forty-two years passed. The VTA invited Riensche again to their 7th reunion in San Diego. Laura convinced him to combine the trip with a visit to their youngest son, who was living in southern California. They spent most of the time with their son but occasionally dropped by the reunion. Riensche did not make it past the check-in table before fellow tankers recognized him and approached. He felt surprised by his interest at reconnecting with familiar faces.

In 2013, 44 years after the ambush, Riensche attended the next VTA reunion in San Antonio. Knowledge of his Navy Cross had much the same effect on the other attendees as it had years earlier on the young Marines at Treasure Island. On the first day, former Lt Bob Skeels approached the Rienschés at their table.

“Hell of a thing you did that day, Harold. I’m just sorry we didn’t make it all the way out to you that night.”

Riensche furrowed his brow.

“What do you mean, make it out to me?”

“With the reaction force. We tried to get to you, but hit two mines on the way.”

Skeels explained how three of his tanks sat in the maintenance shop at Co B HQ that afternoon. The company commander, Captain Jay Miller, received Riensche’s distress call and immediately ordered Skeels to get his tanks rolling. Al Soto, one of Skeels’ tank commanders, burst through the door of his hootch, red-eyed and ready to take the lead. They scrounged



COURTESY OF HAROLD RIENSCHÉ

Riensche, left, sits next to Bravo Co CO, Capt Jay Miller, in country.

up whatever tanks they could get—two gun tanks and the company flame tank. Soto shot out of the gate in the flame tank, with Skeels trailing close behind at top speed. They were less than 10 miles away from Riensche's position.

The reaction force got within 500 meters of the ambush. Skeels could hear the explosions and gunfire in the distance. He could not make radio contact with Riensche to let him know they were on the way. Suddenly, two of his tanks hit mines, blowing apart the track. Skeels yelled out to Soto in the lead to continue and make it to Riensche on his own. Darkness enveloped the damaged tanks before the Marines could get them buttoned up. Skeels arranged his two tanks and six Marines in the best security posture he could to wait out the night. In the distance, flares lit up the sky over the ambush site. The gunfire had ceased. He prayed the retriever crew was OK.

At first light, they repaired the damage and drove the rest of the distance to the ambush site. Everyone was already gone. Skeels exited his tank and surveyed the scene. He saw the hole in the ground where the mine stopped the retriever. An NVA soldier lay dead in the grass not far off. Riensche's huge .50-cal. bullets left the body in a grotesque state. Skeels walked a large circle around the hole. Mangled dead lay around the entire 360 degrees. He counted 13 bodies, with blood trails and drag marks revealing a higher number.

Riensche silently listened to Skeels' story. Larry Parshall, the driver of Skeels' tank, corroborated the narrative. How could this have happened, yet Riensche never knew? What about the message over

the radio that no one was coming? They tried to work out the details. Everything about that day seemed so chaotic, and the distance in time left memories hazy. Riensche knew now, though, without question, they had not abandoned him.

Following the San Antonio reunion, Laura pressured Riensche to write down his story of the ambush. She saw in his eyes a spark of something that had been missing. Could Harold be whole again? He tried to put pen to paper. Words came slowly. He spent nearly half a century erasing the day. Recovering it now seemed more impossible than a tank submerged in quicksand. Memories came and went. Flashbacks woke him at night as his brain divulged details of the day. He rose from bed each time and recorded the memories. He wanted to face them.

Two more years passed. Riensche once again attended a VTA reunion, this time in Washington, D.C. He brought with him 2,500 words on paper representing 2,500 battles won. Each brought him closer to what he had lost. He shared his story with the other tankers. They received it better than he could have imagined. They validated his facts and memories of the day. He sat for a video interview, recounting the details of the ambush. Several years earlier, this would have been unthinkable. Now, he was at peace. He understood the role of time in his breakthrough, affording him the distance



Lt Bob Skeels with members of his platoon. Sgt Al Soto stands on the far right. (Photo courtesy of Bob Skeels)

needed to heal. The true power came not from time itself, however, but through facing each memory unearthed from the past. March 24, 1969, meant so many different things to the Marines involved. Riensche saw the power of prayer and the hand of God over him. Knowing about the reaction force restored his faith in the Marine Corps and the meaning of "Semper Fidelis." Pete Ritch understood that Riensche saved more Marines than just Craig Ammon and Jim Dorsett. The ambush was waiting for him and his tanks. If Riensche had not done what he did, Ritch and his Marines might not have survived. Bob Skeels caught a glimpse of the epic one-man stand Riensche made defending the retriever. My God, what must he have endured? To all those who arrived that day and witnessed the scene, the Navy Cross could never adequately recognize his heroism.

Riensche left the reunion and returned to the house in Montana. He dropped his bags and walked onto the back deck. The sun dipped low over pine-covered hills in the distance. A gentle harmony held sway over the boughs. He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath of fresh mountain air. The quiet mirrored that in his soul. Finally, he was home.

Riensche saw the power of prayer and the hand of God over him. Knowing about the reaction force restored his faith in the Marine Corps and the meaning of "Semper Fidelis."

EPILOGUE

On March 14, 2019, just 10 days prior to the 50th anniversary of the retriever ambush, the first Master Gunnery Sergeant Harold A. Riensche Award was presented to the honor graduate of M1A1 Tank System Mechanic class 2-19. The commander of Marine Detachment, Fort Benning, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Campbell, named the award in honor of Riensche following an initiative to develop his entry-level Marines' understanding of Marine armor history.

"Riensche's story could not be a better example of what a true tank mechanic does, is expected to do, and without any glory that goes with it," Campbell explained. "Going out behind enemy lines and being a Marine first, fighting the enemy while doing his actual job of recovering a vehicle. He is the true expectation of what every Marine tanker has of a mechanic, and there is no better example of what they do."

Lance Corporal Matt Eidson became the first recipient of this prestigious recognition. Eidson learned about Harold Riensche at the same time he discovered he would graduate at the top of his class.

"To me, it sounded like a Medal of Honor Citation," Eidson reflected on Riensche's story. "It's just heroic. You read stories or citations of Marines and other

servicemembers like that in the past and realize those are some big shoes to fill."

New mechanics coming to the school-house now receive a class on the namesake of their honor graduate award. The detachment is currently creating a memorial to Riensche, displaying his photo, citation and the names of all future recipients of the award. Fifty years later, the story of Riensche's one-man stand continues to inspire and impact Marines. LtCol Campbell and his staff ensure every new mechanic knows his name and his place in the history of Marine tankers. For those joining the armor community, these are big shoes to fill, indeed.

Author's note: Thank you to Harold and Laura Riensche for your commitment to each other and our Corps. Your service and example have inspired generations of Marines, including this author.

Author's bio: Kyle Watts is a former Marine communications officer, and an award-winning contributing author for Leatherneck. He lives in Richmond, Va., with his wife and three children. He is the founder of Battlesight Zero, an online publication with the mission of honoring military veterans by telling their stories. For more information, visit www.bzo.history.com.



LCpl Matt Eidson received the first MGySgt Harold A. Riensche award as the honor graduate of his class at the M1A1 Tank System Mechanic class at Fort Benning in March 2019.

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Harold and Laura Riensche at the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association Reunion in Washington, D.C., in 2015.