



Sponson BOX

*Voice of
the USMC
Vietnam Tankers
Association*

Ensuring Our Legacy Through Reunion, Renewal & Remembrance™



Featured Stories

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NEW VTA CHALLENGE COIN WILL TURN HEADS! ONLY \$20

"Working with the Pentagon's official mint, we created a one of a kind challenge coin that will make its debut at the San Antonio reunion. We only made 150 of these beauties. This is NOT your average dull bronze challenge coin; it is a ¼ inch larger than most (1.75) and has a bright metallic gold and silver-like finish in full 3-D relief. The tank is bright gold on a bright silver back-ground. Only a few colors were added to enhance the appearance. Coins will be offered at the reunion first (one per person to start) and then we will sell the remainder by mail."

Letter from the President

The main reason for this issue of the Sponson Box being dedicated to the combat base at Con Thien is that we seem to have a preponderance of members who have felt compelled to write about their experiences while performing their duty at that remote firebase that was located along the DMZ. I would love to see and publish your stories about "The Arizona," Hill 55, The Rockpile and maybe specific operations that you were on. Sadly we keep losing members who unwittingly take their stories to the grave with them.

I just finished reading Stephen Ambrose's masterpiece Citizen Soldiers. If you have not read this gripping WW II history book, it is full of personal histories of the Allies' hard fought and hard won battle in the European Theater. I cannot recommend it any higher. I want to share a passage that the author uses as the conclusion to this book:

"More than four decades have passed since the terrible months when we endured the mud of Lorraine, the bitter cold of the Ardennes, the dank cellars of Saarlutern... We were miserable and cold and exhausted most of the time, we were all scared to death...But we were young and strong then, possessed of the marvelous resilience of youth, and for all the misery and fear and the hating every moment of it the war was a great, if always terrifying, adventure. Not a man among us would want to go through it again, but we are all proud of having been so severely tested and found adequate. The only regret is for those of our friends who never returned."

This was our fathers' story...and with a few changes in time and geography it is also our story.

I HOPE TO SEE ALL OF YOU IN SAN ANTONIO!!!

Semper Fidelis,

-John

"Too old to fight, too slow to run, but I can still shoot pretty damn good!"

--Author Unknown

CORRECTION:

On the back cover of the last issue of the Sponson Box we inadvertently had the incorrect mailing address to send your annual dues payment.

Please make sure that your dues are current... if not then send your check to:

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New Members

Please note: During the run up to any of our biennial reunions, we normally have anywhere from ten to fifteen new members joining the VTA. We are woefully behind that number and we need for you to redouble your efforts and find more new members... Please!!!

Christopher, Kenneth D

1503 Clay Street
Chillicothe, MO 64601-2028

Phone: 660-752-5509

A Co, 3rd Tanks, '69

MOS: 1811

DOB: 6/7/48

Recruited by: Website

DeMarco, Thomas

1329 Green Elm Drive
Fenton, MO 63026

Phone: 636-343-7773

B Co, 3rd Tanks, '64 – '65

MOS: 1316

DOB: 9/4/44

Wife: Mary

Recruited by: John Wear

Jacobs, William H

305 GA Highway 26 E
Elko, GA 31025

Phone: 585-329-1197

A Co, 3rd Tanks, '65 – '66

B Co, 3rd Tanks, '69 - '70

MOS: 1811

DOB: 2/18/44

Wife: Bernadine

Recruited by: Returning Member

McMillan, Donald J

732 Arledge Street
Azle, TX 76020

Phone: 682-667-6404

Email: donliz@charter.net

C Co, 3rd Tanks, '67 – '68

MOS: 1811

DOB: 8/17/49

Wife: Elizabeth

Recruited by: John Hughes

Morrison, Jon A

1717 Sage Brush Drive
Sheridan, WY 82801

Phone: 307-763-4278

A Co, 3rd Tank, '66

MOS: 1811

DOB: 11/6/43

Recruited by: Returning member

Ray, Jimmy (Jim) M

1540 Rustic Trail
Allen, TX 75002

Phone: 972-396-9755

C Co, 1st Tanks, '66 – '67

MOS: 1802 / 4002

DOB: 9/3/37

Wife: Emma

Recruited by: Rick Lewis

MEMBER INFO CHANGES

Allen Cohen

1505 Seagull Drive South
St. Petersburg, FL 33707

Mobile: 678-778-6963

Daniel C Galusha

1501 Idlewood Court
Leland, NC 28451

Meet Your Board of Directors

A feature that provides some history about one of your Board members

Peter J “Pete” Ritch



1969



Pete Today

I graduated from college on Saturday June 5, 1967 and on Monday, June 7, 1967 received my draft notice. That afternoon, I beat the draft and joined the Marine Corps. Why did I enlist in the Corps? It was simple. If I was going to go to Vietnam, as my recruiter had assured me I would, I wanted to part of the best trained branch of the US military service. My recruiter advised me that there was a 100 percent chance that I'd be going to Vietnam.

After OCS, TBS and Tank school, I left for Vietnam (as promised) In September 1968. After two days in Okinawa, I boarded a C-130 for Da Nang. When we landed In Da Nang, I was informed that all Marine 2nd LTs, regardless of MOS, would spend their first ninety days in-country in a Marine Infantry Unit. I was issued the standard 782 gear and boarded a C-130 for Dong Ha. My first operation was as a platoon commander providing perimeter security for a fire support base on the Laocian border.

One night my CO radioed me and told me to bring all my gear to the LZ and be prepared to board a chopper as soon as the clouds broke. When I got to the LZ my CO told me that I was going on emergency leave due to the death of my mother.

The Marine Corps, in spite of its “hurry up and wait” reputation can be extremely efficient. I left the fire support base, changed choppers at LZ Vandergrift; boarded a C-130 at Dong Ha; landed for a “shit, shower, shave” and new uniform in Okinawa; flew to Untied States and was standing on my front porch in Syracuse, New York, 28 hours after leaving the fire support base in southeast Asia.

I returned to Viet Nam, completed my infantry assignment and on January 1, 1969, I reported to Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion Headquarters, at Vihn Dia (the rock crusher), east of Dong Ha on Rt. 9.

My first tank operation was with the heavy section of tanks, providing road sweep and daytime patrol support for a Marine infantry platoon located in the highlands two clicks (kilometers) south of Cam Lo Village. I can't remember all of my crew members' names...but some of them were tank commanders Sgt Jerry Solano (B-33) & Sgt. Smith “Smitty” (B-32) and Cpl Bob Mendez (the driver of B-33).

During my ten months as the platoon commander of the 3rd Herd, we never operated with a full complement of tanks. We were always divided into heavy sections and light sections. We also never experienced a mechanical breakdown on any of our tanks. We hit several mines and ran over some civilian gear (a couple of bicycles) but never had an engine failure, linkage snap, a broken oil line, an electrical short or any type of mechanical breakdown. Our shit fisters were awesome and always kept us running.

Please note: Most of these new members were recruited through a joint effort. The recruiters called or emailed John Wear or “Robbie” Robinson and the perspective member had a membership packet sent to them. The packet that was mailed included a sample of the Sponson Box news magazine, a membership application and a letter asking them to join. Anyone who knows a perspective member, please alert either Robbie or John.



ON THE COVER:

With F-31 in the lead, Marines from 2/26 ride on two Alpha Company, 3rd Tanks on a patrol near Con Thien during the summer of 1968.
Tom Steffe – driver, Carl Fleischman – gunner and John Wear – Tank Commander.

Maurice C. Ashley, Jr

Home of record: Poughkeepsie, New York



Awards and Citations

Silver Star

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Lieutenant Colonel Maurice C. Ashley, Jr., United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as Commanding Officer of the First Tank Battalion, FIRST Marine Division (Rein.), FMF, in connection with combat operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. On 17 November 1968, a North Vietnamese Army company attacked the hamlet of Phu Hoa, near Da Nang, inflicted numerous casualties upon the civilian populace, and pinned down the few Popular Forces personnel stationed in the village. Informed of

the incident, Lieutenant Colonel Ashley immediately mustered a reaction force and preceding it alone to the beleaguered hamlet, fearlessly traveled over a road not yet cleared of enemy mines. Reaching the hamlet, he reconnoitered the area and carefully prepared a plan of attack which would avoid wounding innocent civilians and inflict maximum casualties upon the North Vietnamese unit. When the reaction force arrived, Lieutenant Colonel Ashley stationed himself with the point man and, although exposed to intense hostile fire, personally led the Marines into the hamlet where he deployed his men into effective fighting positions, indicated lines of fire, then conducted a house-to-house search and destroy operation. Skillfully exercising close control over the combined maneuvering of the reaction unit and the Popular Forces, he enabled his men to clear the hamlet of enemy soldiers, forcing the hostile company into a disorganized retreat. His heroic and timely actions inspired all who observed him and were instrumental in his unit's accounting for two North Vietnamese soldiers confirmed killed, in addition to the capturing of two others. By his courage, aggressive leadership and unwaering devotion to duty at great personal risk, Lieutenant Colonel Ashley contributed significantly to the accomplishment of his unit's mission and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service. Action Date: 17-Nov-68 Service: US Marine Corps Rank: Lieutenant Colonel Company: Commanding Officer Battalion: 1st Tank Battalion Division: 1st Marine Division (Rein.), FMF

Letter to the Editor

From "The Loader"

I love the way you used our group's last (and final) reunion announcement that appeared in our "CENTURION" newsletter to help spur greater attendance at your San Antonio reunion. I did take note of one remark: We were in "Able" Company and not "Alpha" like you young bucks. SEMPER FI

Roger "The Loader" Chaput
Able Co, 1st Tanks, Korea
Lake Havasu City, AZ
Phone: (928) 453-5147



Thanks!

Thank you for publishing my article in the Sponson Box (Operation Deckhouse VI on Page 44). You made me and my family proud and it draws attention to the contributions made by 0353's so long ago. Take care and God speed.

Armando Moreno
Santa Maria, CA
Phone: (805) 937-1912

The Legacy of the "Walking Dead" Continues?

I am sad to report that the 1/9 jinx strikes again. The 1st Bn, 9th Marines in Nam had a reputation of always being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The attitude we tankers had towards them at Con Thien was, "If it could go wrong, it would go wrong if 1/9 was there." I believe they earned the "Walking Dead" nickname at Con Thien in 1967. I just learned from the 1/9 newsletter that the deadly exploding mortar round training incident that killed seven Marines involved Alpha Company, Weapons, and H&S from 1/9.

Jim Coan
Sierra Vista, AZ
Phone: (520) 378-9659

Setting The Record Straight

Editor's Note: For several past issues we published a story of a provisional rifle platoon that was the 1st Tank Bn "reaction force" that unfortunately was caught in the middle of an enemy ambush and several of the Marines were KIA. Dan Wokaty was the tank platoon sergeant of the tanks that ended breaking up the ambush. Here is his reply:

I will tell the story as it actually happened on the day of February 6, 1968. I was the platoon Sgt. of 1st Plt, A Co at the Tou Long Bridge. We were the security at the bridge on Route 5 which was the road to Hills 10, 36 and 47. At about 1430 on that fateful day, a platoon of ARVN came up the road NW of our position and asked that we provide them with a tank or two and to go with them back to the village where they said there were many VC soldiers. They told us that they would fight the enemy if our tanks would accompany them. We checked with Capt Casey, our company commander, and he got approval from the battalion CO, who was LtCol Gentile. The tank platoon leader sent Alpha 12 and 13 with the ARVN. In due time, there was a lot of shooting including fire from the tanks. A-13 was hit by two RPGs and returned to the CP at the bridge. We then called the CO for the company maintenance chief, SSgt Lund, to come and inspect the RPG damage.

A-12 was still on the road as the 1st Tank Bn. reactionary platoon showed up with Capt. McPherson. They joined WO Carroll and the other reactionary platoon and they all moved down the road toward the fighting in the village. The other Marine officer accompanying the two reaction platoons was Major Dickey.

In the meantime, we mounted up on A-15 and proceeded down the road toward the firefight. As we were beginning to cross a dry rice paddy, we heard over the radios that A-12 was instructed not to fire any of their tank weapons. This word came from some major who was on our radio net. We crossed the dry rice paddy and a corpsman with the grunts came up to my tank and said that there were a lot of wounded and dead Marines up ahead. I told him to only load up the wounded since we could pick up the dead later. They loaded all of the Marines (WIA & KIA) and as we were moving away, the bullets and RPGs were flying in our direction. You could hear the wounded Marines hollering that the gooks were shooting at them and hitting a few. We got back to the CP at the bridge and unloaded the wounded and dead. We then returned to join A-12 in the firefight. A little bit later we picked up more wounded and dead Marines and took them to the CP at the bridge. When we got back to the village, the reactionary platoons were loading up and leaving the area.

(Continued on page 8)

As they left they took their wounded with them. By this time it was getting dark. Unfortunately, there were still dead Marines out in the field, so we gathered them and made an attempt to identify them. There was a sergeant, three corporals and a lance corporal. We called battalion to come retrieve the bodies but we were told that it was too dangerous to travel in the dark and that they would come by at first light to collect the dead.

A year and a half later, I saw Capt. McPherson after checking in at 5th Tanks at Camp Pendleton. The skipper told me that he was one of the first wounded and that he had been carried out (along with all of the other WIAs and KIAs) by my tank. He said that if we had not come in under heavy enemy fire to pick up the casualties that there would have been a lot more dead Marines that day. He also said that he wrote me up for a valor medal.

Dan Wokaty
Hewitt, TX
Phone: (254) 666-7007

Gratitude – Thank you warrior

Gratitude means thankfulness, counting your blessings, noticing simple pleasures, and acknowledging everything that you receive. It means learning to live your life as if everything were a miracle, and being aware on a continuous basis of how much you've been given. Gratitude shifts your focus from what your life lacks to the abundance that is already present. In addition, behavioral and psychological research has shown the surprising life improvements that can stem from the practice of gratitude. Giving thanks makes people happier and more resilient, it strengthens relationships, it improves health, and it reduces stress.

Reprinted with permission from One Marine's View

Sky Rockets At Night

Called you two weeks ago to thank you for the work you do and for publishing the article I wrote "My First Day." I hope you got the message. I've wanted to let you know what happened while I was reading the XVI - No2 issue of the Sponson Box. (The one with the Alamo on the cover)

On May 3rd I stayed late at my shop. My birthday was the 4th and I knew we would be partying at the shop so I had to finish up work that I knew wouldn't get done the next day. I arrived home around 10 PM. I was tired and a little irritated because HD (Harley Davidson) couldn't get a part I needed earlier in the week and I knew that I would miss the first Red & White (motorcycle) Run. As I walked into the house, I noticed I had mail and there was a new issue of the Sponson Box. Kool!!! I need this. I grabbed a Corona, filled the pipe, started reading and my mood had got much better. I always enjoy the "Letter to the Editor" section and I tend to struggle with the "Tank Park in the Sky." I really like to read about those lucky enough to re-acquaint with friends from the past and what other members are doing. I quickly scanned the VA News and started reading an article written by Woody Woodworth. Let's just say that I got more and more upset as I kept reading. Maybe when a controversial

article is published in our magazine, the author's name should be omitted?

Side note: Before Vietnam I was found guilty of UA and given extra duty for a week. The MPs that we worked for treated us like "boots". The second day I got mouthy and ended up waking up in a small dark cell and I was sore all over. I ended up spending 30 days at the Camp Pendleton Brig in solitary, on diminished rations, where I broke rocks and dealt with other pieces of shit like Woody who got heavy handed and always with back-up. Pretty chicken shit! Wow! This happened to me before. When we arrived at ITR, we were given a rifle inspection which I failed. While I cleaned my rifle the DI had my squad do PT. Then he kept inspecting and said it was still dirty. The squad had to do more PT... on and on. Finally we were dismissed and told to shower. I woke up in the infirmary with my eyes covered and I was sore all over. I got beat with those wood handled brushes all over and got corneal abrasions. For two weeks I couldn't see... then two more weeks of recovery. They moved me from "M" Co to "N" Co. I was pissed and the DIs knew that I wanted to retaliate. Things mellowed for awhile and then my first day in Vietnam, Tom Glish gave me a heads up and said to watch out because somebody in our unit wanted to "take me out." He helped me procure a personal .44 pistol for just in case... Thank you Tom.

Jerry Sezar
Discovery Bay, CA
Phone: (925) 634-8743

French Fried Shrimp

I was aboard the USS General J.C. Breckenridge for 18 days on the way to Okinawa in 1963. We stopped in Hawaii and Yokohama, Japan. Every morning aboard ship, we awoke to, "Reveille, Reveille, Reveille. Up all hands. Clean sweep down fore and aft. Sweepers, Sweepers, man your brooms. Dump all trash over the fantail." 1800 Marines and 600 Crew on board.

I served on Mess Duty every other day aboard ship. We had fresh French fried shrimp many times during the journey. Really good food. On one of my days off, I met one of my D.I.'s sitting on deck, leaning against a bulkhead, reading a book titled "How To Become A Millionaire". He had been reduced in rank because he impregnated the daughter of a local civilian politician who had the influence to get that done. (what he said, I don't really know). He wasn't very happy or talkative and I never saw him again. He was a great D.I. Squared away, tough, and sharp in every detail... The stop-over in Hawaii wasn't too exciting, but Yokohama was an eye-opener for a 19-year old from the mid-west.

Thanks for re-generating all of those good memories. After 13 months on the rock, I was lucky enough to fly back to the states on board a C-130. I look forward to your newsletter every week and forward it to my five daughters. SEMPER FI!

G.B. Annin, Cpl (E-4)
Flame Tank Platoon (F-31)
1st & 3rd Tank Battalion
Oct '61 - Jan '65
Reprinted from the Sgt Grit's Newsletter

WOMEN IN COMBAT...?



I wanted to share a photo of a student class from the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) tank school. I don't think that any of us Jarhead tread heads who went through Marine Tank School at Del Mar ever had such good luck!!! By the by, they are calling these students: "crewpersons."

-John

The Below Extract Is For Marine Eyes Only. We Don't Want Anyone Stealing Our Secret Methodology.

"There's a myth that Marine training turns baby-faced recruits into bloodthirsty killers. Trust me, the Marine Corps is not that efficient. What it does teach, however, is a lot more useful. The Marine Corps teaches you how to be miserable. This is invaluable for an artist. Marines love to be miserable. Marines derive a perverse satisfaction from having colder chow, crappier equipment, and higher casualty rates than any outfit of dogfaces, swab jockeys or flyboys, all of whom they despise. Why? Because those candy-asses don't know how to be miserable."

– Steven Pressfield, Marine veteran & author of *The War Of Art: Winning the Inner Creative Battle*. He also wrote the script for the "Bagger Vance" film. It had something to do with golf.

Editor's Note: I have a good friend that is a very serious USMC fan & supporter who lives outside of Washington, DC...she recently wrote this note to me:

Yesterday, as I was driving to work, there was a car in the lane to my left with a small Vietnam decal on his car, a couple of other military stickers, an NRA sticker and a few others.....so I motioned for him to roll down his window so that I might thank him for his service. We were on a main thoroughfare and the light had turned red. I yelled a big "Thank you for your service!" He seemed quite surprised and then he replied: "Thank you so much for caring and for saying something." Then I remembered that I had the "I Served in Vietnam" stickers in my glove box so pulled one out, put the car in park and jumped out. I reached

back to his car and handed it to him with instructions to display it on his car. He gave me a huge smile.

I gotta tell you that it made my day!!! And I do believe it made his! It was just a perfect little moment!

Susan Warren
Rockville, MD
Email: carepackages@verizon.net

Editor's Note: Fred Cruz got an email with a pistol game attached. Here is Fred's comment about pistols in general:

Being a Marine tanker, the .45 cal. pistol was the weapon du jour being that it was relatively small. There ain't a lot of room in a tank for an M-14 rifle, let alone four of 'em. It's a cluster f-ck in there during the best of times and everything goes postal when the shit hits the fan being stuck out in Indian country during an op.

The .45 is a massive weapon in-and-of-itself, as it delivers a lot of punch, and if one is hit by a round all you can really do is lie there (destroyed inside) and bleed out painfully - if not dead on impact.

Qualifying with it, as well as with the rifle, is a huge point of pride as well as requisite in the Marines. I managed to qualify with both. But gotta admit, I ain't hit jack shit yet with this "shoot 'em up" game bud Andria sent me. Damn, Sam!

Thanks, A., ah t'ink. Gotta go back to the range 'n try harder.

Fred Cruz
Columbia, SC
Phone: (803) 708-6872

More from the Sgt Grit's newsletter Who I Would Shoot First?

In the last two newsletters I have been reading about how great the Korean troops that served in Viet Nam were. I hate to start an argument, but the ones I served with, to put it mildly, were WORTHLESS!

The first time was during Tet '68. An ARVN unit had tried to retake a village without any support and they were stopped cold. They called for help and we were sent along with some Korean troops to assist. As soon as the first incoming was received, the Koreans split, leaving the ARVN and my three tanks high and dry. This cost us one tank commander (Plt Leader), one gunner, one loader, all of which were seriously wounded, and one M48A3 90mm tank looking like a Swiss cheese.

The second time was in April '68. We were on an operation in support of a Korean unit and stumbled into an NVA base camp. Again, as soon as the first incoming was received, the Koreans split, leaving my light section (2 tanks) high and dry! We had no choice but to stand and fight it out until we could coordinate a withdrawal between ourselves. We started the operation one man short on our crew and ended three men short! Our driver was hit and hit hard! The gunner, me, received shrapnel in the left knee, but was able to continue until we were back on safe ground. Both the gunner and I were medevaced.

>>

If I were in combat with Koreans versus anybody, I don't know who I would shoot first! As far as I am concerned they would both be the enemy!

Ralph Schwartz
SSgt of Marines, '67-'77
"C" Co. 1st Tank Bn, 1st Mar Div, FMF
Bowling Green, KY
Phone: (270) 843-6268

This is a note that new VTA member Terry Summerlot sent to Pete Ritch after joining our brotherhood last year:

I spent the summer of 1967 in the Great Lakes Naval Hospital, having been sent there as a medevac. I'm told it was the "Summer of Love." As with most things in life it all depends on your perspective. That summer I saw others come in from Vietnam and who I had been stationed with at different times. One was Jeff Stradford. He was a truck driver I knew from Staging Battalion back at Camp Pendleton. He told me a story about unloading casualties on the Phu Bai air strip. Just as I had seen guys I knew arriving at the Great Lakes hospital, he saw guys he knew come in to Phu Bai Med as casualties. One of those WIAs was Bob Stokes. Bob and I had gone all the way from Schools to Staging Battalion (that is where Stradford knew him)... and on to Alpha Company 3rd Tanks in Vietnam. Jeff went on to tell me he didn't think Bob had made it. Stradford said that Bob came in with one of those bad gut wounds that most didn't survive. Bob was unconscious and had lost a lot of blood. I thought about writing his parents but had no home address.

Eventually I was released from the hospital and was sent back to duty at Camp LeJeune. In true Marine Corps fashion, I was put on guard duty. While walking my post one night I noticed another Marine walking the post that was next to mine. This guy looked a little like Bob Stokes, but I thought even if he were still alive, what were the chances he would be here, walking a guard post? A few more times around the building and I noticed he was watching me. It must have been about the same time something clicked and we recognized each other. I'm glad no one came checking posts that night because we spent the rest of our time catching up. I told him I thought he had died and relayed the story that Stradford had told me in the hospital. Of course, Stokes didn't remember seeing Jeff at Phu Bai.

A few years later, I looked up Stradford in order to tell him that Stokes had survived his wounds, and how we both were stationed at Camp LeJeune. Bob and I still stay in touch after all these years. It was Bob who first told me about the Tankers Association and eventually convinced me to join.

When Chris Vargo and I hooked up 40 years after we served together in Vietnam, the first thing he said was "I heard that you had been killed." Like somebody once said, "The stories of my death had been greatly exaggerated".

Terry Summerlot
Port St. Joe, FL
Phone: (850) 227-1828

A Piece of Tail I fell in Love With

I have a story for you about a piece of tail I fell in love with just before leaving Nam. But first, I have to tell you that the article by Woody Woodworth in the April 2013 Sponson Box was rather strange. I re-read it a number of times to make sure it was not a spoof, and I'm still not sure!

Now the "tail" story: "How I Fell in Love with a Piece of Yellow Tail in Nam" Perhaps I should first clarify that this story has nothing to do with any of the beautiful Vietnamese 'mama sans' we came in contact with sporting the betel nut smiles!

In the latter part of 1966, 3rd Marine Division Headquarters moved from the Da Nang area and set up shop in Phu Bai. Then the headquarters of the 1st Marine Division moved into the Da Nang area in relief of 3rdMarDiv. Headquarters of the 3rd Tank Battalion and Bravo Company remained in Da Nang awaiting orders to move north, and while we waited we were under the OpCon of 1stMarDiv.

In early March 1967, 3rdTkBn HQs received orders to relocate to the Phu Bai area. I was the Operations Officer for the battalion, and I took an advance party north to establish our initial command post. With engineer support, we constructed our operations bunker, comm. center and we began security operations in our assigned area west of 3rdDiv HQ. In early April, the rest of 3rdTks HQs arrived...but Bravo Company remained down south on Hill 55.

I got new orders to report as the CO of the Marine Barracks, Naval Air Station, Lemoore, CA. I detached from 3rd Tanks about this time and caught a flight from Phu Bai to Da Nang to then catch the 'Freedom Flight' home. I wasn't due to fly out until the next afternoon, so I caught a ride out to Hill 55 to say goodbye to my old Bravo Company mates. After several farewell drinks that night, I woke up the next morning with somewhat of a hangover!

After the road from Hill 55 to Da Nang had been swept by the engineers that morning, I was heading back into Da Nang Air Base when our convoy was stopped for a napalm air strike on a ville not far off the road. It was hot that morning and, with my hangover head, I was thinking that I really don't need to be out here miles from the cool Transient Center of Da Nang Air Base. After an hour or so, we were cleared to head on. When I checked in at the Transit Center, I was told that they didn't have a firm departure time for my flight, so I needed to just drop my pack and relax. Right!!

All afternoon and into early evening, the only aircraft coming or going were Air Force F-4 Phantoms and cargo planes. After the sun went down, I was starting to feel a bit edgy. Why, you might ask? A few months earlier, the VC staged their first 8" rocket attack against the air base and they had continued to occasionally dump a few more onto the base to keep things interesting. As the night time hours dragged on and I still had no flight, I thought to myself what a shame it would be if, after putting up with "Charlie's" crap for almost 12 months, he dropped one of those 8"-ers between my legs on my last day in country!

Each time we saw the landing lights of a large aircraft approaching, we thought this has to be our fight out of here.

Finally at almost midnight, a Continental Airlines charter plane with that BEAUTIFUL YELLOW TAIL taxied up to the terminal. That's when I knew I was in love with the best piece of yellow tail I had ever seen in Vietnam!"

"Ev" Everett Tunget, LtCol USMC (ret)
Shoreline, WA
Phone: (206) 546-3206

It's a Small Marine Corps World

I wanted to share some happenings from last Saturday. The West End Street Fair is held every year on the main drag of Sierra Vista. Our Marine Corps League chapter had a booth set up (coincidentally right next to the "Right to Bear Arms" booth). Some benefactor had donated thousands of books to us via the Toys for Tots program last year, and we were giving away free children's books to anyone who wanted them. I had a table set up to sell copies of my Con Thien book. It's a small world when the Marine Corps family is involved. One gentleman came up, introduced himself to me as the brother of a Marine who had served with 1st Tank Bn. in Vietnam. His name is McLain. One woman bought a copy of the book for her father who had served as a grunt at Khe Sanh. There were many others who stopped by just to chat. I left there at the end of the day with a much deeper appreciation of our extended Marine Corps family. Semper Fi!

Jim Coan
Sierra Vista, AZ
Phone: (520) 378-9659

TANKER FOUND, Re-FOUND and RELOCATED

Editor's Note: Several years ago, Jim Coan located a former member of his Alpha Co, 3rd Tanks platoon. The Vietnam Marine tanker had recently retired as a 1st/Sgt, and upon locating him, Jim implored him to become a member of the VTA. For some unknown reason the former member resisted. Fast forward to about six months ago, we got a "Looking For" from another retired Marine who was looking for his former 1st/Sgt, and because he had been in tanks in Vietnam he was reaching out to us. Not much later, we put the two in contact. In the mean time, we asked the seeker (Kevin Shenk) to take a VTA recruitment package with him when he visited the retired 1st/Sgt. That visit was just completed and Kevin had this to say:

Bert absolutely is Bert. Thank you John, I hope that I may have the ability to assist any Marine as needed when the time arises as you did for me. Semper Fi! Please relate this history to your members to reinforce how important our loyalty is, not only immediate, but generally and abstract. As a Marine you no longer have a choice about being a Marine, good, bad or dead. Whether you do or do not believe in the principles or traits taught and ingrained in you by the individuals that daily make up the Marines that do believe.....once you earn the right to wear an Eagle, Globe and Anchor you are blessed or cursed forever to be a Marine. It is not optional, and you will be held accountable, one way or the other.

Kevin Shenk
Email: motokrs@yahoo.com

The Colors of the Corps

Note: I share sea stories with Art Nash, a "dark green" Marine who sent me this observation:

One of the things that I love about my Marine Corps is that there were not races or color...just Marines at work...and a mighty fine job we did. On this very note, I recall one morning at a company formation the company commander read an ALMAR message containing the original desegregation order of the early 1950's. Upon completion of the reading, the skipper called the 1st/Sgt to take charge of the troops. At the time, the 1st/Sgt. was a man by the name of Joe Harbin. Joe was from Harlin County, KY and about as Hill Billy as you can get. As country as he may have seemed, 1st/Sgt. Joe Harbin was one of the best 1st/Sgt.'s I ever served with...in some ways I attempted to emulate him. Upon taking over the formation, the 1st/Sgt said the following:

"Now let me "interpolate" just what the Company Commander done said. They ain't none of you people...white, colored, red, yellow or brown...all you SOB's are green. And ya belong to me! Any questions? Then, Platoon Sergeant, take charge and get 'em up to the tank park...Dismissed!"

Yes, indeed, those were simpler times.
Arthur E. Nash Sr
Email: anash3@msn.com

Canard Au Jus?

This photo was taken in the early morning around the beginning of June 1966 during Operation Liberty. Both ducks were swimming in a rice paddy directly in front of my tank



A-34. Everyone had a vision of duck stew for dinner but the "poop hit the fan" shortly after these photos were taken and the ducks spoiled hanging from the gypsy rack in the hot sun for 5 - 6 hours. By the late evening everyone opted for their favorite C-rat selection.

Kenneth (Gene) Whitehead
Richlands, NC
Phone: (910) 545-7306

CON THIEN: The Hill of Angels

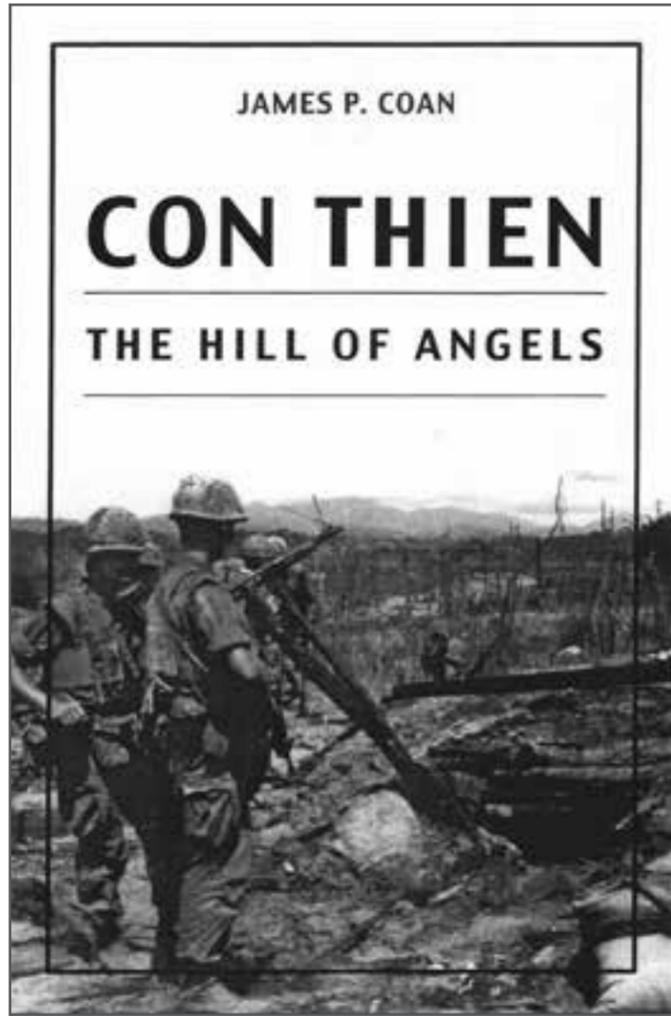
BY JAMES P. COAN.

Published by The University of Alabama Press, 352 pages;
ISBN-10: 0-8173-5445-X; ISBN-13: 978-0-8173-5445-9;
\$19.95 paperback.

James P. Coan, a tank platoon commander during the siege of Con Thien in 1967 and '68, has written a magnificent account of the battles, the suffering, and the enduring courage of the Marines who fought, bled, and died on what he calls a red-clay target. For James Coan, writing became a way to excise the demons in his mind. Those of us who read his book should give thanks that Coan decided to tell this story. His writing style is wonderfully clear and connected. He tells his story with words from the mouths of survivors as well as from official reports. The result is a book that brings all of us along during those dreadful days of the fighting on "The Hill of Angels."

GySgt John Boring, USMC (Ret)
Leatherneck

With this sterling book, Captain Coan, Marine tanker, wounded Vietnam Veteran, and combat leader of many battles fought against the experienced and professional North Vietnamese Army in and around "The Hill of Angels," has arrived as a riveting and knowledgeable Marine Corps historian! In my opinion, with the publication of this detailed and well-researched work, he joins a small, elite band of Marine authors who expand the grasp and understanding of a confusing period



of the Marine Corps heroic battles in the far northern provinces of South Vietnam.

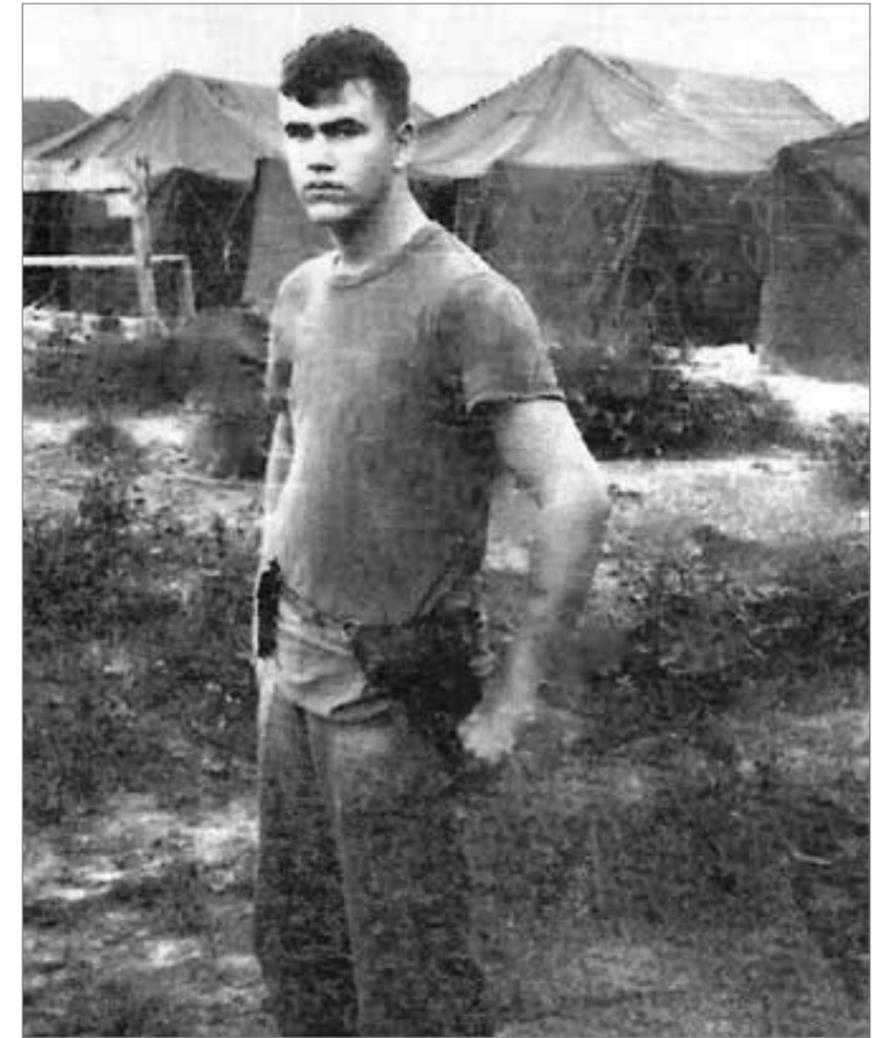
Lt. Col. Kenneth W. Pipes, USMC (Ret)
The Khe Sanh Veterans Red Clay

The strength of this book lies in the way that Coan weaves his own combat experience and the official unit documents and histories together with personal combat narratives to form a cohesive whole. He gives a realistic portrayal of the miserable living conditions, the monsoons, the heat during the dry season, and finally of fighting over and over the same pieces of terrain in the eastern DMZ.

Jack Shulimson, author of Phase Line
Green: The Battle for Hue, 1968

Can you guess who the person is in this photo? The first person to contact John Wear with the correct answer will receive a yet un-named mediocre prize.

Photo provided by Ray Scheurich



GUESS WHO Photo Contest

Last Issue Winner

Last issue's winner was Joe Tyson who correctly identified Robert (Bob) Haller (on the left). Joe served with Bob with 3rd Tanks in Chu Lai during 1966. A very close second identifier was Ken Zebal who also served with Bob.



To the Great Tank Park in the Sky

THOMAS A SHIREY

My very good Marine friend, Tom Shirey, from Buckley, Washington, died recently. He and I were on many combat operations together as fellow tank commanders. Tom was a good leader and always from the front. He will be missed by many. The picture below is of the Heavy Section, 1st Platoon, Bravo Co, 3rd Tanks ('66 -'67) Vietnam. Tom's tank is in background.

Joe Tyson
White Haven, PA
Phone: (215) 514-1791



Back Row...Tom is standing 2nd from the left and Joe Tyson is on the far right.

And From Ev Tungent: We lost another tanker a week ago last Sunday. GySgt Tom Shirey, USMC (ret), passed away in his sleep early that morning. I attended his memorial service held at the Tahoma National Cemetery near Renton, WA on Monday of this week. I'll be getting an obit sent to me and I'll forward it to you. Tom was one of my TC's in Bill Lochridge's 2nd Platoon which performed

with distinction in the An Hoa "Arizona Territory" supporting 3rd Bn, 9th Marines in 1966. He was a fine Marine and received a number of awards, including two Purple Hearts. He also was an active member of the Patriot Guard Riders and there were at least a hundred PG Riders from all over Washington State assembled there to honor him.

MICHAEL C. WUNSCH



Jan "Turtle" Wendling was visiting the Philadelphia area in May and was fortunate enough to be able to visit the grave of his former skipper of Alpha Co, 3rd Tank Bn., who was KIA in 1969.

TALLEN LEO QUESNEL

Allen Leo Quesnel, age 66, died of cancer on Thursday, Feb. 7, 2013. He was born on Nov. 27, 1946. He faithfully served his country in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Viet Nam war and he drove tanks in combat. He will always be remembered

by many family and friends for his big heart, his incredible sense of humor, and his love of laughing, which stayed with him until the very end. Funeral services and interment will be held and announced in the spring at the Vermont Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Randolph Center in Cornwall, Vermont.

From Leatherneck magazine April 2013

RICHARD "RICKY" LEROY SERMONS

Ricky LeRoy Sermons, 65, passed away at his home on Saturday May 25. He was a native of McPherson, Kansas and a member of Beaver Creek Baptist Church and also in the USMC and Vietnam Veteran.

Surviving are his wife, Ann Sermons of Claxton; three sons, James Sermons, Russell Sermons (Kassie), both of Claxton and Ricky Sermons of Jacksonville Fla.; one daughter, Tiffany Williams of Claxton; six sisters, Christy (BO) Mullins of Pikeville, Tenn., Sherrie (Bobbie) McBee of Morristown, Tenn., Faye McLamb of Nahunta, Ga., Barbara Nelson of Glennville, Ga., Sandy Ginn of Thompson, Ga. and Mike (Ann) Brozway of Baxley, Ga.; 11 grandchildren.

Burial will be in Antioch Church Cemetery.

From Laura Riensche: Above is a brief obituary I found in the local Georgia paper for Ricky Sermons yesterday. A man called today and identified himself as Ricky's son. He talked to Harold and told him that Ricky spoke of their time in Vietnam, and Harold repeated his condolences as to being so sorry to hear of Ricky's death.

I am thankful that we did attend that reunion in 2011 in San Diego and reconnect with some very special people. We were able to pass along some of the photos that John provided to us (thank you, John) to Ricky for him (while alive, to enjoy) and for his family to have. Sometimes, a few photos say much about the stressful, hazardous existence that our Marines endured in Vietnam. My advice to any former tanker would be to be sure you attend the reunion in San Antonio. We're still working on one,

very special tanker friend to join the USMCVTA and be a part of the reunion.

Condolences should be sent to:

Ann Sermons and Family
134 Carutha Barnard Road
Claxton, GA 30417
Phone: (912) 334-2281

KENT "DOC" DOETKER

Terry Hunter called the other day and said that he had just heard that his old Vietnam Marine tankers buddy had passed away so I went on line and found his obituary:

Kent Eugene Doetker departed this life Friday, Feb. 15, 2013, at Sunrise Heights in Wauneta, Neb. He was born on Aug. 7, 1942, in Imperial, Neb. to Albert and Velma (Fortkamp) Doetker. Kent grew up on the family farm southeast of Wauneta. He attended Eden Grade School and graduated from Wauneta High School in 1960. Kent was united in marriage to Loralee 'Susie' Mathews on June 21, 1964, at the United Methodist Church in Imperial, Neb. They made their home on the South Divide, southwest of Wauneta. Two sons, Jed and Kelly, were blessed to this union.

On March 29, 1966, Kent was drafted into the U.S. Marine Corps. He was a tank crewman in the Vietnam War and was honorably discharged as a Corporal (E-4) Marine on March 28, 1972. Kent enjoyed staying in contact with other fellow Marines. He was a member of the American Legion and served on the Board of Directors. Kent was a member of the Honor Guard and organized the names of people, who were in the military, for the Veterans' Memorial that is in the Mount Hope Cemetery.

Kent was preceded in death by his wife, Loralee 'Susie' Doetker

Inurnment was at Riverside Cemetery, Wauneta, Neb., with military honors provided by the American Legion Post #304, Wauneta. ■

Looking For

These are three photos taken by professional photographer Dave Powell during the siege of Khe Sahn in 1968. Does anyone recognize any of the tanks or the tank crewmen? If you do please contact John Wear - (215) 794-9052



Khe Sanh Tanks



Khe Sanh Tanks #2



Khe Sanh Ontos

From a collection of photographs by Dave Powell



This truly wonderful photo of "The Duke" and our "Doc" Gene Hackemack appeared in the Feb-March 2013 issue of the Vietnam Veterans of America Magazine. The photo includes a bunch of other Marine faces.

QUESTION: Does anyone recognize any of the Marines behind Doc and The Duke?

If you do please contact: John Wear - 215-794-9052 or Doc Hackemack - (979) 551-0581

"THE MAD HARLOT"



I saw the website about Marine tanks and tankers (www.usmcmvta.org); great site with interesting articles and pictures! My name is Mark Meuleman. I live in the Netherlands and I have a small webshop with accessories for military scale modelers (www.mecmodels.com). We specialize in Vietnam War items.

I was wondering if you have any more pictures or reference on "Mad Harlot", A-51, M-48. Thing is, I would love to produce a decal set (stickers for military models) for the M-48 in Vietnam and the 'Mad Harlot' would make a nice addition. I'm really curious if anyone can provide me the vehicle registration number that was on the sides of 'Mad Harlot'. Anyway thanks very much in advance!

Mark Meuleman

<http://www.mecmodels.com>

Editors Note: If you have any other photos of A-51 from 1st Tanks, please contact John Wear

CHARLES "MIKE" COFFEY

I hope that someone remembers and calls me about my good buddy Charles M Coffey (everyone called him "Mike") was from



Bogalusa, Louisiana. Mike got to Vietnam around February or March 1968 and was with Charlie Co, 3rd Tanks. The last time I saw him in-country was when he was driving the tank in the photo and after the tanks busted up a gook ambush, they took us back to the rear. The photo was taken (I believe) near Camp Carroll. I remember that the NVA tried to take out the tank that was in front of us but Mike's tank came roaring up and did a neutral steer on top of the gooks. In the photo I am on the rear of the tank with Mike bending over looking at something.

Wayne "Reb" Williamson

Kilo Co, 3rd Bn, 3rd Marines, 3rd Mar Div (68 - '69)

7044 Carrabelle Key

Mobile, Alabama 36695

Phone: (251) 447-2608

Email: SWAMPMAN50@YAHOO.COM

DONALD MCMILLAN - FOUND

On the USMC VTA website "Looking For" is a post from John Hughes that is looking for Donald McMillan. Don was a crewman on "Hughie's" tank and he has been looking for him for almost 40 years. A few weeks ago, Don's son, who lives in Corpus Christy, Texas, happened to be surfing the Internet and came upon the post that "Hughie" was seeking contact with his dad. Long story short, Don, lives in Azel, Texas...just up the road from San Antonio and he will be joining the VTA and is planning to attend the next reunion. When "Hughie" called John Harper, his old Platoon Sgt, John was so excited about finding McMillan that he called me as well. Ooo-Rah!!!

John Wear

New Hope, PA

Phone: 215-7694-9052

Note: In a past issue of the S-Box, we featured a "Looking For" for this man and a Vietnam Marine Air Wing friend found this online:

ROY LEE "BUTCH" GRIFFIN, JR.

Roy Lee "Butch" Griffin, Jr. was born on June 20, 1939 and joined the Armed Forces while in Greensboro, North Carolina. He served in the United States Marine Corps and in ten years of service, he attained the rank of Captain. He began a tour of duty in Vietnam on June 21, 1967.



On March 30, 1968, at the age of 28, Roy Lee Griffin, Jr. perished in the service of our country in South Vietnam, Quang Tri Province. Captain Griffin was killed with Peter J. Gallo, First Lieutenant, United States Army, and Dennis Poteat, Sergeant, United States Army, and they are buried together in Arlington National Cemetery.

March 30 1968 - First phase of "Task Force Kilo" begins at Gio Linh, Quang Tri Province, I Corps. The task force launches diversionary attack along Gio Linh coastal plain to divert attention away from Ca Lu where 1st Cavalry Division and 1st Marine Regiment are staging for Operation PEGASUS. Task Force Kilo, made up of the 2nd Battalion, 1st ARVN Regiment pushes north from Kong Ha on a search and destroy sweep through the Gio Lenh coastal plain between the Cua Viet River and the DMZ. The task force confirms 150 NVA KIAs the first day of the operation. Later that afternoon C Troop, 3rd/5th Cavalry finds entrenched NVA. There are ten US KIAs that



include: Patrick Kevin Burke, 1st Lt. Peter Joseph Gallo, Capt. Roy Lee Griffin, Jr. (USMC), George Edward Grubbs, Bert Austin Keeler, James Earl Morse, Dennis Michael Poteat, Charles E. Shaw, Stephen Max Wiggins, and Wilbur Leo Williams, Jr. ■

What Members Are Doing

A New Business Venture

It's been a while since I have communicated with you and I sincerely apologize for that. I hope you are in good health and enjoying your retirement.

Our new business, Crosshairs USA Tactical, has kept both Yvonne and me extremely busy establishing, building and growing the business. It's a lot of work but also a lot of fun. We are at a point now where we are expanding the size of our store and inventory provided we can locate and purchase quality firearms, optics and accessories. Starting this month and every month thereafter for as long as we can afford it, Crosshairs will be sending USMC VTA a donation to assist in accomplishing its mission. Please confirm how the check should be made payable to and the correct mailing address to send the check to.

Mike Flick
 President
 CROSSHAIRS USA TACTICAL
 3902 Pacific Coast Highway, Suite D
 Torrance, CA 90505
 310-791-4327 Store
 310-791-4301 FAX
 Email: mike@crosshairsusa.net
 Website: www.crosshairsusa.net

Back in His Dress Blues

During his 20 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, Veteran Bruce Van Apeldoorn, 63, swore he'd always stay fit. Then one day he realized that instead of having a Marine Corps physique, "I looked like an egg." He regained his focus with the help of the "MOVE! Weight Management Program", which gave him a customized weight-loss plan and counseling sessions at the Rochester VA Outpatient Clinic. Once the pounds began



steadily melting away, his enthusiasm was stoked.

"At first, my goal was to lose ten percent of my body weight," he says. "But then I read an article about training for a 5K race and I decided to give it a shot."

In August 2012, he completed the Brighton Fun Fit 5K in 33 minutes. When he hit a weight-loss plateau, he either got advice from a counseling session or set a new goal. "Every time I changed things up, I'd lose another 5 pounds," he says.

Today, he maintains a rigorous six-day-a-week routine of running, weight training and calisthenics. "It feels five times harder than the conditioning regimen of his youth," he says. "But it's worth it."

This past summer, he attended a Marine Corps parade in Washington, D.C. He'd attended many of these events before, but this time he wore his dress blues, which finally fit again.

"So far, I've lost 65 pounds, and I'm just two pounds away from my goal," he says. "I never would have guessed that I could feel this good in my 60s."

An Update on Clyde Hoch

A few years ago, I wrote a book called "Tracks - Memoirs of a Vietnam Veteran." The book is about my experience from 1965 to 1969 in Marine Corps tanks. I had a hard time calling myself an author and I wondered: "Does one book make you an author?"



Photo: The cover of Clyde's second book.
 My second book is about to be published. It will be called "A

Tribute to Tankers." It will be full of stories about tanks and the men who served on them from WWI to the war in Iraq. As I was working on the second book, I was selected as one of the "50 Great Authors You Should Be Reading" by the radio show called, Authorshow.com. This honor was for my first book which was a total surprise. Of course, I was elated. Here was a national radio show with hundreds of authors and I was chosen! Maybe this validated me as an author? Never-the-less, it was truly a great honor.

I was also selected as participant in the Lehigh County, Pennsylvania "Veteran Mentoring Program." The goal is to offer help to a recently released from active duty veteran who has some issues readjusting into civilian society by pairing him with another veteran who has been through it all. The program has been working in this area for several years. I understand that other counties around the country are working on getting this same sort of program started. If you are interested in helping a veteran, check with your County District Attorney's Office.

Clyde Hoch
 Pennsbury, PA
 Phone: (215) 679-9580



(L to R) Jan "Turtle" Wendling, Todd Phillips, Clyde Hoch, John Wear and Joe Tyson.

UPDATE: On May 18th at the Red Hill, PA public library, Clyde held a book signing event that included members of the following organizations who were able to speak to present their programs: Gold Star Mothers, Rolling Thunder, the Patriot Guard and a new local foundation: "Vets Helping Vets."



This is a photo of the Ed Hiltz family taken at the wedding of his eldest daughter

Here is Doug Scrivner's latest ink. When he was asked about it, his reply was: "It's for real. It goes with the USMC on my ear lobe. No bullshit!!!"



Speaking of Doug Scrivner, the above vehicle is the replacement for the two wheeler for which he reports: "I parted company with my Fatboy (Harley) on Memorial Day weekend. This baby cured my ankle & my right knee problems and it worked a lot better than VA therapy!"

Editor's Note: A story appeared in the Sgt Grit's monthly newsletter. After seeing that the author mentioned that he had been a member of one of the Marine tank battalions in Vietnam, I contacted Sgt Grit and asked him to forward my email to the author. The next day he & I made contact. I soon discovered that he is a former VTA member that somehow let his membership lapse back in 2009. Here is an update for "Dick" Dickerson:

My reunion schedule is pretty full up...I am pretty tied to the K / 3 / 5 and BLT 3 / 5 events but I sometimes make it to 1st Mar Div Anniversary events at Camp Pendleton.

I did manage to serve a full tour with tanks. I was the Bn. Maintenance Officer for a year (76-77) at Camp Schwab. We had two companies of tanks and two of amtracs. We put the M-60's into service there in Oki and the platoon at Camp Fuji, Japan. We used to say it was easy to tell the troops apart as they headed to the ramp in the morning for PM while tankers had 8# sledges over their shoulders (for end connectors) while the "bilge rats" would have a garden hose in one hand, a fire hose in the other and a white paint brush in their teeth. One of those long, convoluted stories...but left ITR as an 1800 (in 1957) and got

off the bus at Camp Horno (1st ATBn) when they weren't real sure what an Ontos was yet. I then volunteered for Maintenance School since back then you had to have 6 months OJT to get the MOS after school. The USMC brass had decided that the Ontos was really an infantry weapon and we got our SRBs "rubber-stamped" as infantry. I then did a tour with Marine Barracks at Naha after 15 months with 2 / 9 on Oki. I then did four years on the Drill Field. Then I went with 3/5. The temporary commissioning board decided my eyes were too bad for me to be in infantry, which is how I went from 3 / 5 to 1st Tanks at Chu Lai. H&S Company moved up to DaNang in late '66 or early '67.

Dick Dickerson
1001 Devon Court
Hendersonville, TN 37075
Email: ddickusmc@aol.com

The below story is what spurred our contact:

"Oh? ven vas you dere?"

Full disclosure... spent first tour '66-'67 split between K/3/5 (Plt Sgt) and 1st Tanks (Ass't Maint O... long story) and second tour with ForkLiftCommand... last six, seven months running LSU 1 at An Hoa, rotated home August of '70.

So, anyway, having acquired sufficient years to become a suspect for prostate cancer, I was visiting my friendly local urologist in Fremont, CA, Dr. Assali (just nothing like having a Greek urologist... good man, actually... Harvard Med, three years in the Navy at Balboa Hospital)... he had an Office Nurse, name of Helga, who had an accent, and quite a few miles on her, not all on paved roads.

Doc had determined that a prostate biopsy was in order, and that it was something that could be done 'in office'. Now, this involves some longish stainless steel thingies with nippers of some sort on the end, and these are introduced at an after orifice usually involved with things passing the other way. So, as they say, there I was... left side recumbent, best side exposed, (think 'full moon, here) on a cold steel table, staring at files filed with medical records (arranged in alphabetical order... good idea...), and Doc is behind me, getting his pound of flesh with his stainless steel sample-getters (four times, as I recall). Helga is in attendance as well.

As they must be taught at Harvard Med, the Doc felt obligated to enquire my status while doing whatever it was that he was doing back there, with a "how ya doin?" (probably in more cultured tones than that, but that was the basic question). My reply was: "Doc... I been shot at with real bullets, and this is just a medical procedure, so let's get on with it." This prompted Helga to ask "Oh? vere vas dat???" Refraining from some snarky comment about from my age you couldn't tell?, I just replied "Viet Nam."

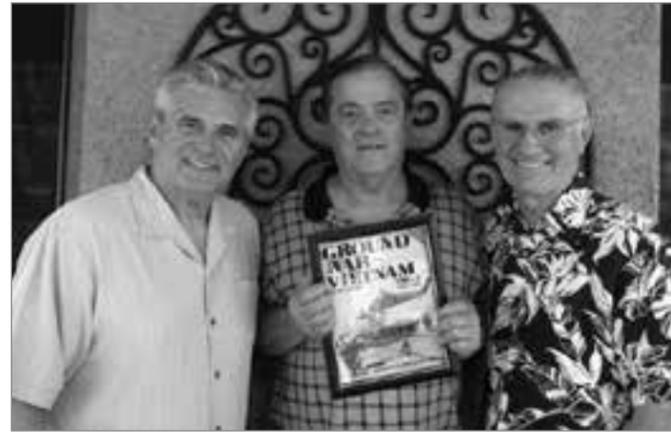
This brings the next question: "Oh? ven vas you dere?" This led to the usual recitation, not that I thought this Brunhilda would have the slightest notion about any of this. As it turned out, she had also been at An Hoa, working with a German medical mission, and we probably had not been more than 500

meters apart at the time... big difference was: she was outside the wire and I was inside. Doc finally said, "You two can tell your war stories later, I need to get this procedure done".

ddick

Reprinted with permission from the Sgt Grit Newsletter

A Mini-Reunion in Tucson



We had a mini-reunion the weekend of April 7th at my place in Tucson. This is the crew of A-32, 1st Tanks: (Left to right:) Chris Vrakelos, Milo Plank and Ken Zebal. Milo is holding the iconic photo of A-32 that was taken during "Operation Starlite."

Ken Zebal
Tucson, AZ

Phone: (520) 834-3597

***Ken also promised to be on Chris like "stink on poop" to get him to return as an active member of the VTA and to attend the San Antonio reunion.*

Fun in Arizona?



Went to Arizona in March to help get my brother-in-law into a home! He got MRSA poisoning from bad surgery for a knee replacement and he almost died. While we were there, my sister and I went down to the canal at Lake Havasu City for one of our breaks and I enjoyed the sights. It was nice of those young girls to boost this old mans morale!

Buck (aka Ira McQuade)

A Birth Announcement

Our granddaughter, Andrea, blessed us with a baby girl this morning at about 10:00. Lydia Anne weighted in at 7lbs 2oz and was delivered by C-Section. Both mom and great granddaughter are doing fine. A week or so ago, the doctor knew that the baby wasn't turned and they were going to try to manipulate turning her but found that her head was wedged underneath Andrea's rib cage, hence the need for the C-Section delivery.

Between Elsie and me, this makes great grandchild #10. That's probably not a record but it'll do for bragging rights! Elsie was so pleased that Andrea and Ron chose Lydia for her name as that was Elsie's Mother's name.

Ev Tunget
Shorline, WA
Phone: (206) 546-3206



In the photo: Ev Tungent and his son David enjoy a Mariner's baseball game at Safeco Field. Ev reports that the game lasted 16 innings and was the longest game in their franchise history. Sadly the Mariner's lost to the Chicago White Sox 7 to 5.



This is VTA member Joe Tyson with MOH recipient, Sal Gunta at the Irish Pub in Philadelphia. The April 2013 gathering was a benefit for the Philadelphia Marine Corps Law Enforcement Foundation. Sal was awarded his MOH in Afghanistan (U.S. Army Infantry). Joe says, "He's a good, down to earth guy."

Election of USMC Vietnam Tankers Association Officers

If you would like to run for a position on the Board of Directors of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association, you will need to submit your name and desired position Elections will be held on November 1, 2013, during the business meeting of the reunion in San Antonio, TX. Positions available are: President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and six director chairs. You must be a current member in good standing to run for office. Only nominations submitted in writing by August 30, 2013 will be accepted at the meeting. Nominations can not be submitted directly from the floor. All who want to be considered for election must submit the request in writing to:

SgtMaj William Carroll, USMC (ret)
2725 Saddle Court-Unit 4
Stillwater, MN 55085
Phone: (651) 342-0913

Please Note: All requests must arrive no later than August 30, 2013.

V. A. News & Updates

For more VA information please go to our website
www.USMCVTA.org

VA Contact Numbers Update:

Following is a list of important VA 800 contact numbers for veterans:

VA Benefits	(800) 827-1000
Beneficiaries in receipt of Pension Benefits	(877) 294-6380
Debt Management Center	(800) 827-0648
Children of Women Vietnam Vets, and Foreign Medical Program or Spina Bifida Health Care	(877) 345-8179 or (888) 820-1756
Civilian Health and Medical Program	(800) 733-8387
Education (GI Bill)	(888) 442-4551
Healthcare Benefits	(877) 222-8387
Income verification and means testing	(800) 929-8387
Life Insurance	800) 419-1473 or (800) 669-8477
Special Issues (Agent Orange, Lewisite/Ionizing Radiation)	(800)669-8477

[Source: NAUS Weekly Update 1 Feb 2013 ++]

VA Social Workers Update:

A question many Veterans should ask themselves is do you need to contact one? You will find social workers in all program areas in VA medical centers who are ready to help

to make decisions on your behalf when you are unable to make those decisions yourself.

- They can help you arrange for respite care for your caregiver so she or he can have a break or go on vacation without worrying about who will be caring for you.

The first step is generally for the social worker to meet with you, and often with your family. The social worker will ask you questions about your health, your living situation, your family and other support systems, your military experience and the things you think you need help with. He/she will then write an assessment that will help you and your VA health care team make treatment plans. If you are in a crisis situation, social workers can provide counseling services to help you get through the crisis. The social worker will then help you with more long-term needs and help you apply for services and programs in your community and through the VA. VA social workers are responsible for ensuring continuity of care through the admission, evaluation, treatment, and follow-up processes. This includes coordinating discharge planning and providing case management services based on the patients clinical and community health and social services resources. If any of the following situations apply to you or your family, ask to see the social worker at your VA Medical Center:

- If you are having marriage or family problems
- If you would like help with moving to an assisted living facility, a board and care home or a nursing home
- If someone close to you has passed away and you want to talk about it
- If you have problems with drinking or drug use
- If you feel that someone is taking advantage of you or if you feel mistreated in a relationship
- If you are a parent who feels overwhelmed with child care
- If your parent or spouse is in failing health
- If you are feeling stress because of your health or because your medical condition interferes with your daily activities
- If you are feeling sad, depressed or anxious
- If you really aren't sure what you need, but things just don't feel right
- Financial or housing assistance

There are many more ways VA social workers can help. You can read about all of the services on their VA website <http://www.socialwork.va.gov>. There is also a web page with a very helpful list of resources within VA and outside of VA. VA social workers place an emphasis on using the strength of their core values to manage serious life challenges, to celebrate the profession, and to be a voice for at risk Veterans and their families. "Today, with our student interns, we are 11,430 strong, with 10,718 social workers employed in the VA. Throughout March, we will identify, recognize and celebrate the numerous contributions of Social Work Departments as well as the many contributions of individual social workers," says Carol Sheets, Acting Chief Consultant, Care

you with most any need. If you have questions or problems, the social worker will be able to help you or can refer you to the right person for help. Here are just some of the ways that VA social workers can help:

- They can advise you on getting help from the VA or from community agencies, such as Meals on Wheels, so you can continue to live in your own home.
- They can help in applying for benefits from the VA, Social Security and other government and community programs? Ask your VA social worker.
- VA social workers develop and implement treatment approaches which address individual social problems and work with acute or chronic medical conditions, dying patients, and bereaved families.
- They are a voice for Veterans and their families who are at-risk of losing their homes.
- They can make sure your doctor and other VA staff on your treatment team know your decisions about end-of-life issues, generally called advance directives and living wills. This includes things like whether you want to be on life support equipment, whether you are an organ donor, and which family member or other person you have chosen

Management and Social Work Services. [Source: VA Have you Heard | Kevin Secor | 12 Mar 2013 ++]

VA Benefits Handbook 2012:

The latest edition of the Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents Pamphlet can be obtained from the Department of Veterans Affairs online or by mail. A chapter listing of the pub can be accessed at http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book.asp for quick reference to subjects of interest. It updates the rates for certain federal payments and outlines a variety of programs and benefits for American veterans. Most of the nation's 24 million veterans qualify for some VA benefits, which range from health care to burial in a national cemetery. In addition to health-care and burial benefits, veterans may be eligible for programs providing home loan guaranties, educational assistance, training and vocational rehabilitation, income assistance pensions, life insurance and compensation for service-connected illnesses or disabilities. In some cases, survivors of veterans may also be entitled to benefits. The handbook describes programs for veterans with specific service experiences, such as prisoners of war or those concerned about environmental exposures in Vietnam or in the Gulf War, as well as special benefits for veterans with severe disabilities. In addition to describing benefits provided by VA, it provides an overview of programs and services for veterans provided by other federal agencies. It also includes resources to help veterans access their benefits, with a listing of phone numbers, websites, and a directory of VA facilities throughout the country.

The 2012 publication in English can be downloaded at no cost from VA's Web site at: http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book/2012_Federal_benefits_ebook_final.pdf.

A Spanish version can be downloaded at: http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book/2012_Federal_benefits_ebook_final.pdf.

Hard copies of the English version S/N 051-000-00242-3, ISBN 978-0-16-090303-8 and Spanish version S/N 051-000-00241-5 can be purchased for \$5.00 which includes regular postage and handling. For international orders add 40%. Make checks payable to Superintendent of Documents. Include your name, address, day time phone number with orders. Use Order Processing Code 3592. Order via:

- Mail: U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), P.O. Box 979050, St. Louis, MO 63197-9000 or Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Stop IDCC, Washington, DC 20401
- Phone: (866) 512-1800 or (202) 512-1800 or Fax: (202) 512-2104 with a credit card.
- Easy Secure Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov

[Source: http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book.asp Mar 2013 ++]

VA End of Life Care Update:

Nearly half of the men who will die in the United States this year — one in every four dying Americans — will be veterans.

Department of Veterans Affairs says nearly 630,000 American veterans die every year. That's more than a fourth of those who die each year in the country, which is roughly 2.5 million. "This is the big World War II tsunami, and it's overlapping with the Korean War tsunami," said Kathie Supiano, an assistant professor at the University of Utah College of Nursing. The numbers of Americans who served in past wars still living as of the fall of 2012 are:

- World War II: 16,112,566 served worldwide during the war-- 1,462,809 living
- Korean War: 5,720,000 served worldwide during the war-- 2,100,735 living
- Vietnam War: 8,744,000 served worldwide during the war-- 7,247,414 living

Such statistics are startling, even for those who work every day with the dying. And it's one reason that professionals in end-of-life care — such as nurses, social workers, chaplains, doctors working in hospices and nursing homes — need to know more about how veterans' needs differ as they die. Supiano, director of the college's Caring Connections: A Hope and Comfort in Grief program, is organizing a workshop for that purpose. Titled "Improving Care for Veterans Facing Illness and Death," the April 18 event is geared to professionals but is open to anyone interested in the topic, Supiano said. The workshop is part of the Hospice Foundation of America's annual Living With Grief Program and will feature a 2 ½-hour video about veterans, followed by a panel discussion. Amy Tucci, chief executive officer of the foundation, said it's an important topic not just because World War II and Korean War veterans are dying in big numbers; the country is beginning to lose its Vietnam veterans at a faster pace. In fact, the Department of Veterans Affairs predicts that by 2015, the number of Vietnam War veterans dying will eclipse the number of veterans from each of the two previous wars who die every year. Vietnam veterans who bore the brunt of their fellow Americans' disgust with the war may struggle with that as they die, she said. "It's hard to imagine right now what Vietnam vets went through when they came home. For many of them, it has affected their entire lives. And consequently, that affects how they die," Tucci said.

Supiano said that old traumas often arise when one is dying. "Things bubble up to the surface that they have been able to keep under wraps. It's their last chance to be aired and voiced," she said. "This is something we need to be very attentive to and learn how to listen, how to allow thoughts and feelings and memories." Kelly Otteson, a social worker at the George E. Wahlen Ogden Veterans Home, said post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) clearly affects veterans of all generations. "It doesn't go away when you're 90," said Otteson, who will be on the panel at the Salt Lake City workshop. "We see that with our older veterans; it's

still an issue." One difficulty for clinicians is trying to assess and alleviate veterans' pain, Tucci said. "If you were in the military, you're pretty much conditioned to endure pain and suffering and to not complain and keep a stiff upper lip at all times," she said. Providers also need to care for grieving families, who often learn details of their loved one's war experiences only as death nears. "Often, families at the bedside don't realize that PTSD has been an issue until the end of life," Tucci said. [Source: The Salt Lake Tribune | Kristen Moulton | Apr 08 2013 ++]

A side note from Tom Fenerty:

VA Claims for Older Vets:

Vietnam veteran John Otte did his best to forget the war. He got married, raised two sons and made a career working at credit unions. But as Otte neared retirement, memories of combat flooded back. Starting in 2005, he filed a series of claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs for disability compensation, contending that many of his health problems stemmed from the war.

The VA agreed and now the 65 year old with two Purple Hearts receives \$1,900 a month for post traumatic stress disorder and diabetes and for having shrapnel scars on his arms. His payments will rise to about \$3,000 if the VA approves a petition to declare him completely disabled and unemployable. Otte is among hundreds of thousands of veterans from the Vietnam era filing for claims four decades after the war. They account for the largest share of the 865,000 veterans stuck in a growing and widely denounced backlog of compensation claims about 37%.

The post 9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq account for 20%. The remainder is from the 1991 Gulf War, Korea, World War II and times of peace. Basic demographics explain some of the filing frenzy. Vietnam veterans are becoming senior citizens and more prone to health problems.

Any condition they can link to their military service could qualify for monthly payments, and for many illnesses, it is easier for Vietnam veterans than other former troops to establish those links.

Heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and several other illnesses common in older Americans are presumed to be service related for Vietnam veterans because the government determined that anyone who served on the ground was likely to have been exposed to Agent Orange. The herbicide is known to increase the risk of those conditions. At the same time, changing attitudes toward mental health care mean that veterans suffering from PTSD and other psychiatric conditions now are more willing to come forward. The uncertainties of older age and possibly the decade long spectacle of the current wars may be triggering relapses of PTSD among some veterans. ■

What Vietnam Taught Me

Editor's Note: After posting that we may have to discontinue this feature, several members stepped up and submitted their stories. Please help support our publication writing your own thoughts & deeds and submitting them for publication.

“We Are Expendable”

BY GUY EVEREST

The other day I was talking on the telephone with VTA President John Wear and during the conversation John asked me if I would write an article for the Sponson Box magazine. The article was to be placed in the section called “What I Learned in Viet Nam.” It turns out that I had recently watched a television movie called “The Expendables” (it starred Sylvester Stallone). This is a movie about a group of mercenaries who are hired by the U.S. Government to do a dirty job that the government does not want to take on itself. The job ends up with most of the mercenaries not surviving through to the end. The movie's mission results is the reason I thought it would be a good heading for this story.

The war in Viet Nam, which in my way of thinking, is the war that President Lyndon Baines Johnson had us fight with absolutely no intention of winning. I truly think that President Johnson really thought that he could offer North Viet Nam an economic aid program after the war that would include offers of building hospitals and schools in order to make Viet Nam a “Great Society”...if only the enemy would surrender. He was willing to expend American lives to do this. I think that he did not understand that the enemy did not care about all those economic programs; all that they really wanted was a unified Viet Nam that was under Communist rule

You might not agree with my heading but it is what I have chosen.

I remember my first day in Nam, getting off the plane in Da Nang, having to walk past all the troops going home as they yelled out at us “You might not make it home...” etc. Then we were held in a strange place with picnic tables that they called Receiving Barracks. They would send some replacements to chow while the

rest of us waited for our unit assignments. Now and then a Staff NCO would come in with a list on his clipboard. He'd call out your name and then tell you where to go for your assignment.

I remember that he called my name and I asked him, “Where am I going?”

I was told “Get down to the airfield, you can see the planes, find it Marine.”

That was about all I was told but somehow I found out I had to get up to Phu Bai. When I got down to the airfield I was just another body lost in the crowd and no one told me much.

Then some young airman said “Get on the C-130 outside.”

That was of little help. Somehow I found the right C-130 that I needed to be on.

Again, no one helped me or cared if I ever found my way. I have a good friend who was in the Army. When he went to Nam he spent three days flying all over the country because he was told to get in this or that airplane. When he finally was able to get to his unit they wanted to bring him up on charges for being late. They thought he had tried to go AWOL.

I was just another cannon fodder Marine, serial number 2206752

Then after being at 3rd Tanks Headquarters in Phu Bhi, I was told to report to A Company, 3rd Tanks in Dong Ha. Again, off to the airfield but this time I had a little experience on how to get around. I hopped a plane to Dong Ha and when I landed, I asked if anyone knew how to find A Co., 3rd Tanks. I was told that they are someplace over that way, as someone pointed out. I picked up my gear and walked on a dusty dirt road that ran inside the combat base until I found some tanks parked in an area. Being a Marine, I was able to figure out that this might be A Co., 3rd Tanks. I reported in and was told to find a rack in a tent just outside of

the office, and they also said that someone would be with me tomorrow. The next day I went to the office and gave them my paper work, but I was able to find the chow hall across the way before reporting to the office. Then I was put on a work detail. Welcome to Viet Nam. That evening I was called to the CO or the XO's tent. Luckily I had known him from Stateside with 5th Tanks. He informed me that he was giving me a tank and crew to TC. I said, “Thank you sir.” I was feeling both proud and dumfounded. Who would give a brand new, just in Nam young junior NCO a tank?

I located my tank and crew. All of the crew had been in Nam for more than a couple of months and they all had seen some combat. In an article in a past Sponson Box, Bob Peavey had reviewed a book called “Matterhorn.” In the book the author wrote about how it was for a young butter bar lieutenant to take command of an infantry company that was full of combat Marines. I'm not sure how the LT felt but I can tell you that as a young 19-year old corporal, I know exactly how I felt. I also had to wonder about the wisdom of placing a young, green E-4 that has only been in Nam less than five days in charge of a tank and a crew. Looking back, I'm sure it was just a numbers game. They had an empty tank and they needed it to be crewed. The tank itself had been pretty well stripped with no .50 cal. in the cupola, any main gun ammo load, OEM gear, etc. I cannot remember if it even had a coax machine gun.

Just a cannon fodder Marine, serial number 2206752.

Well, I would never want to change my experience in the Marines or question the sea stories of any of the Marines whom I have ever met. I also know that in every war the troops are cannon fodder. ■

JOKES

FIRST, HE CUT HIS FIST ON MY TEETH. THEN HE PULLED A MUSCLE TWISTING MY ARM. AND WHEN HE KICKED ME, HE REALLY HURT HIS FOOT. THAT'S ONE MARINE WHO WILL THINK TWICE BEFORE MESSING WITH THE AIR FORCE AGAIN!



Con Thien: The Hill of Angels

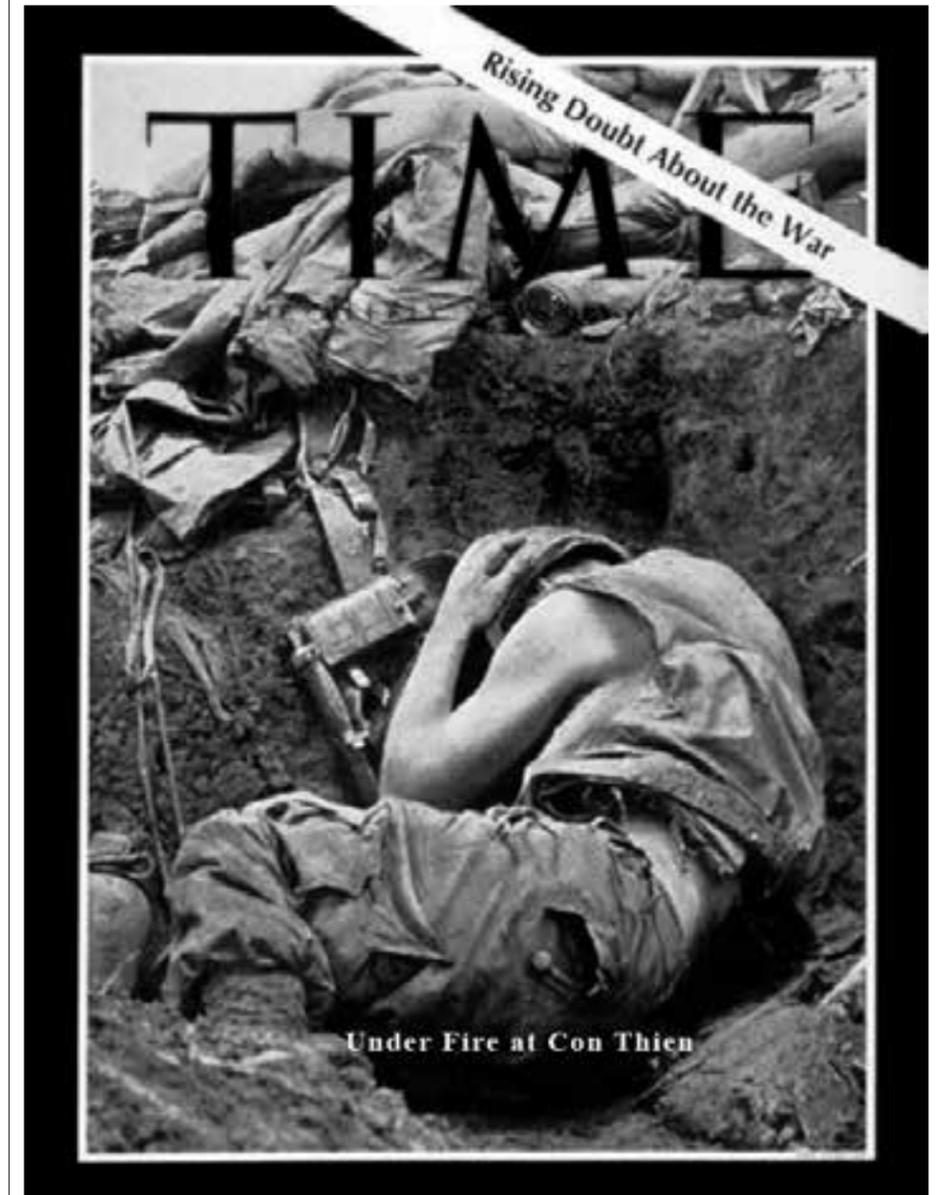
BY: JAMES P. COAN

Throughout much of 1967, a remote U. S. Marine firebase only two miles from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating North from South Vietnam captured the attention of the world's news media. Portrayed as a beleaguered, artillery-scarred outpost overlooking the fiercely-contested DMZ, Con Thien was the scene of numerous bloody encounters between the U. S. Marines and the North Vietnamese Army.

Military maps of the area indicated a prominent terrain feature 158 meters in elevation labeled Nui Con Thien, which in English means "a small mountain with heavenly beings." Early French missionaries believed there was something angelic about the hill.

In some circles, Con Thien came to symbolize America's failed military strategy of waging a high-tech war of attrition. Cynically labeled "McNamara's Wall," far-removed Washington whiz-kids and Pentagon planners devised a barrier system of firebase strong-points connected by a cleared swath of land sewn with barbed wire, mines, and anti-infiltration devices. This "Maginot Line" concept was supposed to deter Ho Chi Minh's Army from moving across the DMZ into South Vietnam. Con Thien was a key component of that much-maligned barrier plan and a lynch pin in the defense of the entire northern border region.

Con Thien also came to represent the U. S. Marine Corps' resolve to persevere, to stand resolute against a dedicated, well-armed and highly trained enemy. The Marines never wavered in fulfilling their mission to hold that piece of high ground at all costs. But the price was high. Official records list 1,419 U. S. Marines and Navy Corpsmen as having been killed in action, and 9,266 wounded in action, all at or near Con Thien from 1966 through 1969.



Why Con Thien? In early 1966, a Harvard Law School professor proposed to Secretary of Defense McNamara the idea of a barrier to halt infiltration across the DMZ. McNamara and his Pentagon "whiz kids" latched on to the idea and went full bore in implementing a barrier plan. Initially, strong points were to be constructed at Con Thien and Gio Linh, with a bulldozed "trace" 200 meters wide

connecting them. Con Thien was a likely location for a strong point, as that high ground offered a commanding view for ten miles in all directions.

The Marines commenced working on the Strong Point Obstacle System (SPOS) in early April, 1967, but not without reservations. General Walt was dismayed to learn that his already stretched-thin Marines would be responsible to both construct and

provide security for those bases. >> The 11th Engineer Battalion, supported by infantry and tanks, carved out the "trace" and, with the aid of U. S. Navy Seabees, commenced fortifying Con Thien (A-4), Gio Linh (A-2), and C-2 south of Con Thien.

The North Vietnamese Army saw this new development as a significant threat. Soon, the Marines along the barrier system came under fire from mortars, artillery and rockets secreted within and south of the DMZ, all in an attempt to disrupt the SPOS. When that failed, the NVA launched a massive ground attack on Con Thien the night of May 8, 1967. Three tanks from the 1st Platoon of Alpha Company, 3rd Tank Bn., played a major role in thwarting the attempt to overrun Con Thien. Led by Gunnery Sgt. Barnett G. Person, the three tanks fought valiantly to stem the charge of the NVA. When the sun rose, three tank crewmen were dead, and all but one of the remainder wounded. Person would receive the Silver Star; Cpl. Charles D. Thatcher and Sgt. David Danner would receive the Navy Cross.

In response to that threat, III MAF commenced a 10,000-man operation named Hickory, intended to clear the NVA out of the southern DMZ area between Con Thien and Gio Linh.

Twenty tanks from Alpha and Bravo Companies participated.

Operation Hickory was a setback for General Giap's Army, but in due time they were back, as the 1st Bn., 9th Marines learned so tragically on July 2, 1967 during Operation Buffalo. After Bravo Company, 1/9, was nearly wiped out to man, a platoon of tanks from Bravo Co., 3rd Tank Bn., rode to the rescue. Led by Gunnery Sergeant Norman Eckler, the four tanks responded from Con Thien and loaded up all the wounded Marines and corpsmen they could find; then shot their way past the awaiting NVA to safety. The dead would be retrieved days later, after reinforcements arrived.

The end of August, 1967, the NVA commenced an attempt to surround and then overrun Con Thien. Fierce battles fought by 2nd Bn., 4th Marines and 3rd Bn. 26th Marines defused the enemy attempt by securing the eastern and southern approaches. Coincidentally with South Vietnam's September 3rd Election Day, the North Vietnamese Army commenced bombarding Con Thien, Gio Linh and Dong Ha with long range 130mm artillery. From that day forth for the next two months, Con Thien was under siege, facing daily artillery, rocket, and mortar attacks.

Initially supporting the 3rd Bn., 9th Marines inside the perimeter wire was the 1st Platoon, of Alpha Company, 3rd Tanks. Outside the wire to the south was the 5th Platoon of Alpha Company supporting the 2nd Bn., 9th Marines. In mid-October, Gunnery Sgt. R. B. English brought up his Alpha Company platoon to relieve the 1st Platoon, battle-weary after 40 days under siege.

Also in mid-October, a sizeable NVA force attacked the Washout Bridge leading to Con Thien. The 2nd Bn., 4th Marines fought off that attack, supported by two Alpha Company tanks brought up from firebase C-2. The vital MSR to Con Thien was secure.

Ironically, while the majority of South Vietnam was fending off attacks by the Viet Cong and NVA during Tet, 1968, Con Thien was strangely quiet. The enemy's focus had shifted to Khe Sanh, Ca Lu, and Camp Carroll along Route 9.

From 1968 on, life on The Hill was never again as perilous as those bad days during the fall siege of '67, but fierce small unit battles were fought from time to time in nearby Leatherneck Square and below the DMZ. By mid-1969, the NVA were no longer contesting Con Thien; it was then turned over to the South Vietnamese Army to defend. ■

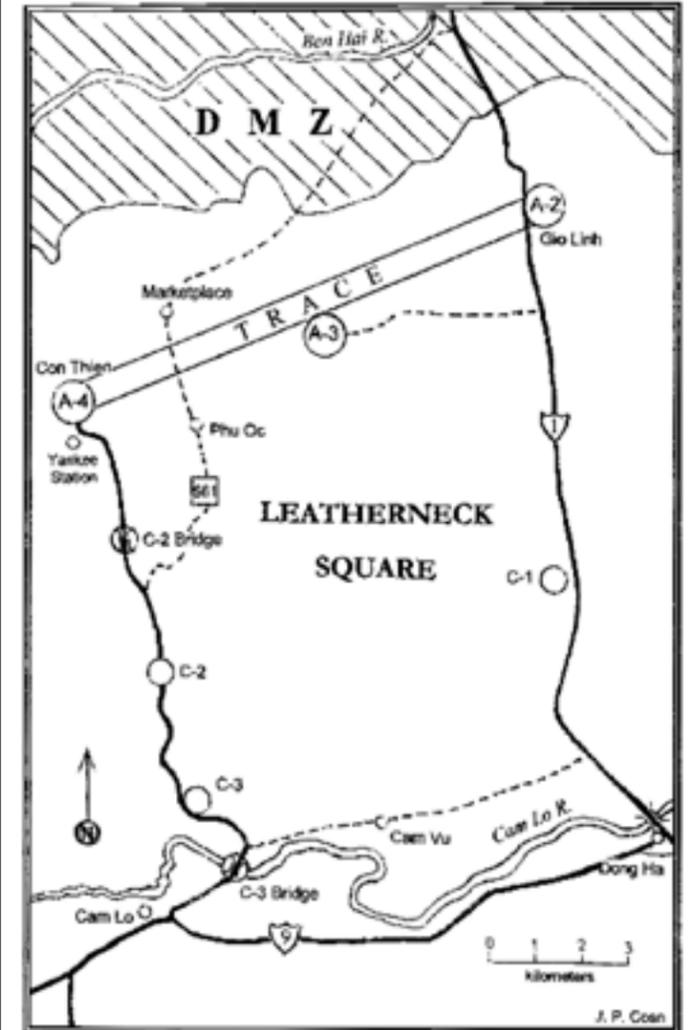
My Story about Con Thien

BY GREG KELLEY

I wonder if my story could be "circulated" to see if anyone remembers serving with me. I know Ben Cole remembers, and I stayed in touch for awhile with Johnny Seiler who drove our tank, but he passed on awhile ago. I served some time with Hank Brightwell during my first few weeks in-country with H&S Company. We were the "advanced" element for moving H&S up from Hill 34 outside of Da Nang to west of Hue. I was a PFC at the time and was the gunner on Alpha 24, 3rd Tanks, for most of '67.

We were attached to various operations and we spent time at The Washout, Con Thien, Gio Linh, Cam Lo, and places in between. We ran through the DMZ several times on quick strikes. I forget which operation it was, but we got caught and almost entirely surrounded while on a major operation [Kingfisher]. The grunts took very heavy casualties that engagement. (Editor's comment: Greg ran into 1st Sgt Barnett Person who was the Plt. Sgt. for that run to the DMZ, and who was awarded the Silver Star for his actions...and boy did the sea stories fly around the room!) We got hit very badly at the Washout one night. My tank commander at the time was a Gunny but can't remember his name. I think that he had been pulled out of stateside recruiting duty. It damn well could have been Gunny (RB) English. Whoever it was, I remember he got hit in the eye with shrapnel one night and medevaced out the next day. We were overrun at the Washout. I don't remember if it was the same night that the Gunny took the shrapnel. Ben Cole was on the north side of the Washout for some of the time we were there. I went through about 5 or 6 tank commanders and I'm embarrassed that I can't remember any names very well. "Nicodemus" (sp) was one TC while at Gio Linh for awhile. We were overrun at Con Thien, too. I spent 43 days there jumping from trench to trench while the horrendous incoming came in. We got really good at knowing which ones were close and which ones you didn't have to jump for.

I read the account of "My Two Days at Con Thien" written by John Wear, and chills ran up my spine as I remembered an incident incredibly similar that happened on a road sweep out of Con Thien while I was on Alpha 24. Two tanks and a handful of grunts were just like this account. We got hit badly. As I recall, we were "suckered" into it by small arms. The tanks were committed deeply into the tree line a hundred yards or so off the road, and one was pretty much knocked out. It was such a blur and it's been so long that I only recall a few details. I was the gunner on A-24. We were firing .30 cal. and canister rounds like crazy and one of the canister rounds broke open into the breach of the 90 when we were rocketed, disabling it with the slugs jamming it. I remember the same air-strike that was so close that it sucked the loader's hatch open. I recall jumping out with my loader (could have been Lance Corporal Calderon??) to attach the cable and hooks to the other tank to pull it out while we were getting showered with small arms and machine gun fire. I recall one or more crewmen from the



"other tank" were wounded, and one was hit in the thigh pretty badly. I recall thinking "he got the million dollar wound". I recall having to leave one of the >> grunts in the trees screaming. I recall sweeping the area a couple of days later with a couple of squads and a few tanks, and finding the grunt who had been screaming. The NVA had tortured him badly before he died. Was this the same incident? Too much the same not to be.

If anyone remembers any of this, I would appreciate an e-mail or phone call so we can catch up. I'll be at the reunion in San Antonio so a handshake and a nod will go both ways. If you remember me, I will remember you too. Although these memories are jammed into the back of my skull, I really want to dislodge them after all these years.

Greg Kelley
Groveland, MA

Phone: (978) 521-1392

>>

WHEN TROUBLE COMES...

BY SSGT ROBERT A HALL

When trouble comes as trouble does,
I never stand alone,
Behind me stands a long green line—
The Corps that is my own.

When trouble comes with grief and tears
And evil does its worst,
I know Marines are at my back—
For I am not the first...

To face the sorrow trouble brings,
Or stand within that breach.

The Corps has forged the heart of me
That trouble cannot reach.

And when I go to join the line
Of Brothers passed from sight,
I know tomorrow's new Marines
Will carry on the fight.

And I will live within their hearts
As live Marines in mine,
For trouble cannot touch our core—
The Corps—that Long Green Line.

Originally published in Leatherneck magazine, October 2012 and submitted by Jim Langford, 1st Sgt USMC (ret) and proud member of the USMC VTA.

THE FOUR GATES TO HELL CHURCH

By John Lee, Hotel Co, 2/3

Hi Doc,

It was great to hear from you and I hope that you continue to get better. I am the guy that sent you the email referencing you pulling some kind of medical strings or whatever you did after I was shot in the legs. At that time, I was L/Cpl. Lee, J.T. 2180700 / 0311 of 2nd Squad, 2nd Platoon, Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment (2/3). My squad leader at the time was Cpl. Farley and the Platoon Commander was 2nd Lt. Carl Zander of "Zander's Zeros". The Company Commander was Capt. Culver. This was the second time I'd been under Capt. Culver...an excellent officer...as was Lt. Zander.

Anyway, here's what I recall about the "4 Gates to Hell." After choppering into an LZ just out of Cam Lo, the company swept in the general direction of Con Thien. We got into the area called the



"4 Gates to Hell" late in the afternoon. The steeple of the church could be seen sticking up above the trees that were roughly a click away. The company set in for the night, and early the next morning 2nd Plt. (rein.) under Lt. Zander with two tanks (one gun tank and one "flame" tank) were sent on a reconnaissance-in-force around the area of the church. The force was organized in two columns with the flame tank--they had "The God of Fire" painted on the gun tube and a Hawaiian tiki mask mounted above the name--leading the left column, while the gun tank was leading the right

column. I was "tail end charlie" on the right column.

As the flame tank that leading the left column got just past the church (from my perspective) there was sporadic gun fire, which quickly escalated into heavy fire that was punctuated by explosions (grenade or RPG fire?). At that point I was just crossing a dirt road / path that ran roughly perpendicular to our direction of advance. At the sound of gunfire I hit the ground, facing outboard. I recall Cpl. Farley (a big black guy) saying, "It's Charles...he come to get us." (He said it, I swear on the Bible). Anyway, I hadn't been prone more than 30 seconds when a squad of NVA started coming down the road about 10 yards from me. My first thought was, "Why don't they see me?" And then I thought, "When they do, I'm screwed!" because I was lying right in the open. Without aiming, I fired two quick shots and missed. Then my damn rifle jammed. It was the classic M-16 jam where the spent casing stayed in the chamber (that is, it was not extracted as the bolt came back) and as the bolt came forward it stripped a fresh round out of the magazine and jammed it behind the spent casing. The NVA then jumped off the road and into the bushes. I rolled off of the road and yelled to LCpl. Gene White to throw me his cleaning rod. The month before, Capt. Culver had instituted an SOP that every fire team had a cleaning rod ready to clear jams and White was our fire team's cleaning rod carrier. I got the rod, cleared the jam and shot an NVA that stood up in the grass about 10 yards or so away. I guess that he was trying to figure out where we were...that was a dumb move on his part. I then threw a couple of frags into the area where I'd seen the NVA and I tossed the M-72 LAAW that I was carrying to Farley. He fired it at the church. LCpl. White was calmly sitting cross legged in the open the whole time, cranking off aimed fire just like he was at the rifle range back in The World. He was very relaxed about things.

Meanwhile, the gun tank at the head of the right column was burning. The smoke seemed to be coming from the aft area of the turret. Later I heard that the tank driver had seen an NVA in a bunker and decided to crush the bunker; the NVA popped up with an RPG and he fired it at the tank. The rocket hit the bow of the tank, "skipped" up, killing the driver and detonating under or against the turret.

On the other side of our column "The God of Fire" was creating havoc. It burned out the whole front of the NVA ambush and pretty much screwed up the enemy's plan. Apparently it was a "U" shaped ambush, with the bunkers in the slight rise, in amongst the foliage that was down range of and to the "right" of the church (which was relative to the direction of our advance) forming the base of the "U", the church forming the left flank of the ambush, and the trees and foliage on the right, the right flank of the ambush.

During this time, Cpl. Hoolihan (sp?), the only other Marine KIA (along with the tank driver) was hit. As I recall he was a 3.5" gunner and, as he had stood to fire against the church (which was full of NVA firing out of every window), he was hit in the jaw and throat. It was said that he was "short" and by SOP, he didn't have to be on the patrol.

I'm not sure how much time went by (15 - 20 minutes or maybe a half hour?), I looked back toward the company area and saw two gun tanks coming toward us (just like the cavalry in the Old

West!) with Marines running behind them. Just as one of the relieving tanks pulled up by me, the Marine running next to it was shot in the foot. I don't think it was a bad wound but it blew the heel and back of his boot off and his foot was bleeding "like a stuck pig." The tank driver was driving with his seat full up that exposed him from the chest up. I yelled at him to drop down into the hull because there were NVA all over the place. He said "I can't, 'cause then I can see. Where's the gooks?" I pointed to where I'd seen them last, that was just to the left of a large tree. The tankers swung the turret around and cranked off a 90mm round (that may have been a canister round). I was kneeling about 15 feet from the muzzle break of the gun tube when it fired and the gas shooting out from the muzzle break spun my helmet about 120 degrees on my head. One of the reinforcing gun tanks went up to the stricken gun tank and I saw a tanker (I heard later he was a S/Sgt) with an M-3 "grease gun" in one hand, trying to hook a heavy towing cable to the burning tank. He got it done and they towed the tank out.

At some point everyone seemed to have had enough. The shooting died down and we pulled back to the company CP area. There is where I helped unload Cpl. Hoolihan's body off one of the gun tanks. I remember there was a huge ass chewing going on with the 81mm section leader. It seems that the aiming stakes for the 81's hadn't been set up, so when Lt. Zander called for 81mm fire, they couldn't deliver indirect fire because they didn't have stakes set up to read deflection to the target. The story was that we couldn't get heavier indirect fire (105, 155, et. al.), because they couldn't get clearance from the RVN Province Chief who was not that far north of Cam Lo (where there were the nearest civilians). I ask, "Why the f*ck did they need clearance from the Province Chief?"

Next morning the company gunny (I don't remember his name, but he was, as I recall, a slight, deeply tanned white guy who always carried a pump shotgun) asked for volunteers to go back to the church to remove the Catholic vestments. My buddy, Chris Baker (who hadn't been in the fight the day before) was really pumped up to go, and I didn't have anything else to do. A platoon (minus) with the gunny in command and with two gun tanks headed up to the church to get the vestments. At first everything was cool, as a group went into the church and came out with a statue and some kind of embroidered cloth that they loaded on a tank. I stayed outside of the church and just watched things going on. It didn't seem like a good place to be. I heard somebody say they had found something (or words to that effect), and then I saw a Marine walking toward the "find". A second later there was an explosion, and a guy I remember as "Santiago" came running from the site of the explosion with most of his uniform blown off, covered in blood from head to foot. A couple of other guys were banged up but luckily nobody was killed. It seems the "find" had been a mine or booby trap and the guy that walked toward it had tripped a wire.

The gunny decided it was time to leave; and about the same time that he said to mount up, somebody called "They're in the tube!" Sure as hell, you could hear that soft "coughing" in the distance. We got the wounded loaded on the tanks and started back toward the company area and, sure enough, we no sooner got started when the first mortar rounds started coming in. I'm sure the gooks had

that whole area registered and the fire was being adjusted on us. The gunny yelled for everyone to get on the tanks because it was obvious that we weren't going to outrun the mortar fire and we were in the open. Everyone scrambled onto the tanks and by the time I got on, the tank was covered with grunts. We looked like one of those National Geographic pictures of the mother scorpion covered in baby scorpions. I wound up way out on the right front fender, just where it rounds down over the track with nothing to hang on to. By this time, the NVA are firing for effect and our shit was starting to unravel quickly. The tankers put the hammer down and started covering ground with the mortars walking behind us. As you know, Doc, an M-48 tank, even though they weigh around 52 tons, can haul when they need to, and they pitch and roll like boats in a heavy swell. At one point I got pitched out so far over the fender I could see the track spinning, I thought I was toast, someone or something pulled me back.

We got back to the company area OK, and I was standing near one of the tanks. She was a regular gun tank and had "Gypsy Rover" painted on her gun tube. Capt. Culver was talking to one of the tankers and they were discussing the church steeple and how it was probably being used as an observation platform for an NVA forward observer. To the point, Capt. Culver told the tanker to take the steeple down. The "Gypsy Rover's" gun tube swung around and fired one round (probable High Explosive or HE-T). The tracer seemed to hang motionless in the air for a minute in that weird way they do and then splashed right at the base of the steeple, and the steeple toppled over. As you probably recall, an A-4 jet put a bomb right in the center of the church, and where the congregation normally sat there was a big crater. That was a cool church, too.

Well anyway, it was probably in December of '67, we were in Dong Ha or Quang Tri (I'm getting fuzzy) and you handed me a set of orders to leave the Nam. I hadn't asked for them and I don't know how they came about, but you were the one that handed me the orders and said "Congratulations." And you said that it had to do with the gunshot wounds. There have been times when I have wished I'd have turned them down and stayed (I had a chance to go to the S-2 Scouts), but then...

Stay in touch, Doc, and let me know if you know anything about Farley or Baker or whoever. Best wishes, Doc.

THE TANK PLATOON SPEEDING TICKET

By Ev Tungent

I would bet money on the fact that I am the only tank platoon leader in the history of the Marine Corps who received a speeding ticket for the five tanks in his platoon. This occurred at Camp Pendleton in the summer of 1956 shortly after I joined the 1st Tank Battalion following graduation from The Basic School at Quantico.

The 1st Marine Division was conducting a sweeping Base-wide field exercise that summer, complete with Aggressor Forces. As large as Camp Pendleton is, operating area terrain is fairly well chopped up by the build-up of Base buildings/Camps >>

cultivated fields along the coast which were leased back to local farming concerns. A number of times it was necessary to go "administrative" to reposition units from one operating area to another prior to resuming the exercise.

It was during one such "administrative" move that I fell afoul of "The Law". While moving from the southern portion of Pendleton north toward the San Onofre area, we had to traverse one of the cultivated lettuce fields on a small dirt road. Interstate 5 had recently been opened and old Highway 101 became part of Base property. It was toward Hwy 101 that I was headed with my tanks in order to make a speed run north to another staging area.

Unbeknownst to me, some local farmers had complained to Base that any vehicles moving through their fields were raising too much dust which settled in the heads of lettuce and made the crop hard to sell! To placate the farmers, Base issued a bulletin requiring any vehicle speed through the fields be slow enough not to raise large clouds of dust. The only problem here is that the bulletin was issued while the Division operation was ongoing and the word didn't get passed down. As I recall, speeds were to be no more than 2-3 MPH through the fields.

I was leading the column and clipping along at a pretty good speed. I had the following tanks hang back from each other so as not to eat too much dust from the tank ahead. When I reached Hwy 101, I pulled up far enough for the platoon to close up on the road before continuing on. When I looked back to make sure all the tanks had left the field and were on the highway, I saw a vehicle with flashing blue lights bearing down on me. It was a Base MP patrol with a Sgt. and a shotgun rider. My Plt. Sgt., GySgt Bill Robinson, came up to see what was going on. The MP patrol told us about the speed restrictions, and when we pled ignorance, they said normally they would simply issue a warning, but our dust cloud was unlikely to dissipate for days!

So, the MP's very politely issued me a traffic ticket for the 3rd Plt, Delta Co, 1st Tank Battalion for excessive speed through cultivated fields with an appearance date before the Base Provost Marshal TBD after the field exercise. I KNEW my career was over at that point as I had just been accepted for a Regular Commission a few days before. My Company CO was 1st Lt Bob Larson, with whom I served in Nam years later. Bob said not to worry about it, as the Base PMO was a former tanker himself and would probably go lightly with me. I can tell you that was small consolation for a fresh caught 2nd Lt.

On the day of my appearance, after explaining the circumstances of not being aware of the speed limits, the major gave me a "tongue-in-cheek" ass chewing about "ignorance of the law" being no excuse. He then said that this was one for the record books for citations which came across his desk. He told me he had probably pulled some real boners himself, but that this one was a story he was going to get a lot of mileage out of. He told me to go back to my company and "sin no more"!

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Marine Arrogance

Author Unknown

A Marine Sergeant wrote this in response to an army guy who posted a comment on a Marine Corps site that he was sick and tired of "Marine Arrogance."

The Sergeant said, "I think that's what makes Marines special, if only in our own minds, is that elusive quality of Esprit de Corps. It's the fact that we, as individual Marines, don't feel that we are individual Marines. When we wear our uniform, when we hear our Hymn, when we go into battle, we are going with every other Marine who ever wore the uniform.

Standing behind us are the Marines who fought during the birth of our nation. We're standing with the Marines who fought in WWI and gave birth to the legend of the "Teufel Hunden," or "Devil Dogs." We are standing with the Marines who took Iwo and Tarawa and countless other blood soaked islands throughout the Pacific.

We are standing with the "Frozen Chosin" and our beloved Chesty Puller. We are standing with the Marines who battled at Hue City and Khe Sanh and the muddy rice paddies of South East Asia. We are standing with the Marines who fought in Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom and now are fighting in Afghanistan.

Like real brothers, their blood courses through our veins, and when we go into battle, we would rather lay down our lives than be a disappointment to them. We carry on our backs their legacy, their deaths, and their honor. We carry that for the rest of our lives.

The Marine Corps uniform doesn't come off when our active duty is over. We wear it daily in our attitude and our love of Corps and country. We wear it on our tattoos and our bumper stickers. We wear it on our hearts.

It's why, no matter where we are in the world, on November 10th, every Marine celebrates the Marine Corps birthday. It's why we'll never be an army of one. It's why we never stop being Marines. That's why, for most of us, being a Marine isn't something we were; it's something we are.

It's the most important part of who and what we are. Some say we're arrogant. We say we're proud. We have a right to be proud. We are the United States Marines, the most feared and ferocious group of warriors to walk the face of this earth.

When America's enemies formulate their battle plans, they plan on going around Marine units because they know damn well that they can't go through them. We are what other branches wish they were.

We are the modern day Spartans. This isn't bragging. It's written in the battle history of our country. When there's a parade and the Marines march by, everyone pays a little more attention. Some say, "Arrogance." We call it "Pride." That's why, in a crowd of servicemen, you can always spot the Marine. Why are Marines special? I don't know. We just are.

Saeplus Exertus, Semper Fidelis, Frater Infinitas, Often Tested, Always Faithful, Brothers Forever. ■

A Sound in the Distance

By Sgt. Ben Cole
3rd Plt., Alpha Co., 3rd Tanks
Vietnam 1967- 1968



The sound was faint, just a dull thud from the hills to the north. But it caught my attention and instantly I knew what it was. It was late in the summer of 1967, about a mile south of the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam. My Marine tank platoon had just emerged from the bush near the road to Con Thien where we were to link up with a grunt battalion for an operation.

Sitting in the open cupola of my tank, I had watched the arriving trucks with their human cargo. As soon as they stopped, tailgates slammed open and several hundred young Marines with packs and weapons unloaded, forming into squads and platoons beside the road. Cases of C rations and bandoliers of ammo were unloaded and divided up as they wrestled on their packs and weapons.

They were a good unit, fresh and eager, but un-bloodied and untested to ways of warfare here near the DMZ. Most of their experience had been down south, tough fighting but not constantly under the threat of large caliber weapons from the North Vietnamese. And judging from the

time it was taking them to get off the road and out of the open, they didn't realize the imminent danger. Around here, every square foot of ground was under observation and zeroed in by the big guns north of the Ben Hai River.

Our five tanks had arrived an hour earlier and were in a loose perimeter among the trees and brush beside the road. It gave us some concealment, but we were still edgy and ready to mount up and get back in the bush. We had good reason.

A couple of nights before, after a day pushing down trees and searching for a mobile gun and the NVA unit that used it, we set up a night perimeter just after dusk. It took them a while, but just after midnight their muzzles found us. They were probably Soviet-made 152 shells weighing 95 pounds, probably being fired less than ten miles away. They had been pretty accurate too, but not precise. Accuracy scares, but precision kills.

After a dozen or so rounds impacted around us and quit, probably because the big guns at Camp Carroll would have time to find them and return the favor in

volume. We didn't lose anyone that night, just a little sleep.

The road at our rendezvous point a year earlier been typical of the Quang Tri bush. Rutted and unpaved, it connected the small river town of Cam Lo to the old French outpost Con Thien a few miles to the north. When the Marines first came to this area it was only a wide path bordered on both sides by trees and undergrowth making it perfect for a close ambush. To remedy this, a swath thirty yards wide on both sides was bulldozed and cleared of all vegetation.

This solved one problem but created another. This wide bare strip of red ground now was visible from the hills in the distance. Before the widening, the drill was to creep along quietly to avoid being discovered. Now that it was open, you were more likely to be seen, and driving like hell became the rule of passage. It's harder to hit a moving target.

We continued to patiently wait as the first company filed by and took cover nearby. The others still forming up along the open road, casually stowing rations and ammo, were oblivious to eyes watching from a distant vantage point. It must have been an exciting moment for an NVA forward observer. Several hundred Marines milling around in the open unaware of the process ongoing that soon would rain death down on them. While information and coordinates were being fed to fire controllers and guns crews were preparing fuses and loading shells, their targets were going about their mundane tasks with no sense of urgency.

Their commander, a major, and his command group who had met with us few minutes earlier to coordinate the hook-up, was standing near my tank. Apparently he didn't want to believe the warnings that we gave him about this position, suggesting that he should get all the troops

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in the cover of the bush, then they could stow gear and organize. I again called this to his attention urging him to hurry his troops. He gave me a condescending look and went back to what he was doing. I was just a kid, what did I know?

Back across the road, the truck drivers were patiently waiting for the troops to unload before they started back to the safety of Dong Ha, although their trucks were magnets for big guns. The NVA knew that taking out a company of five-ton trucks and troops in the open would be well worth chancing the wrath of an airstrike or artillery pounding that would surely follow if they were spotted.

On the road near the convoy, I could hear a gunny sergeant swearing at his men to move off the road and to the cover of the bush quickly. Already heavily loaded with weapons and packs, canteens hanging from their belts, they balanced cases of rations on their shoulders and bandoliers of ammo around their neck as they jogged and stumbled to the tree line. Other platoons seemed to understand the urgency in his voice and started to follow them. Maybe, we would be lucky.

Our tank's engine was not running while we stowed a few cases of rations and a couple of jerry cans of water in our gypsy rack. But my antenna was up and my ears were tuned to the sound that could give us

some warning, but I only heard the voices of men and the truck engines.

I chided myself as being overcautious and I relaxed and lit a cigarette. Just as I took my first drag, I heard it. At first it was just one report then a few more hollow thumps in succession. The sounds came from a northwesterly direction, meaning there was no chance of them being our guns. I looked at my loader sitting beside me and he nodded, he heard them too.

When I yelled "Incoming," the major beside my tank looked up at me with a puzzled expression, his eyes questioning my call. For a few seconds he didn't move and continued looking over his map. I told my crew to button up as a few more left their muzzles in the distance signaling more shells were on the way.

Turner had already crawled in the loader's hatch, and I was standing in the cupola when the first round hit. Around the tanks there was a mad rush to find a low place, but it was too late. A second round hit close to a group of Marines twenty yards to my right. Then others shells followed, finding men running to cover or hugging the hard red clay. Shells fell at random, some harmlessly on the far side of the road, others nearer. After the first shells, the screams for corpsmen started, but no one moved as a second barrage insured a few more customers for him.

After a short lull, I opened my hatch and listened for more reports. There were none and I crawled out to look over my tank through the dust. The two rounds that bracketed our tank had only punched few holes to a front fender and the gear in the gypsy rack.

Men and machines came to life as the smell of cordite mingled with diesel exhausts permeated the air. Marines were crouching over and hurrying to the cover of the bush picking their way around splintered stumps and smoking craters.

On the road, one truck was hit and another backed up to hitch tow cables. Another one had pulled off the road and bravely waited for casualties to be loaded. A few limp bodies in ponchos were loaded and a couple of walking wounded boarded. Seconds after it sped off, two shells impacted where it had been.

My radio crackled and my lieutenant told me to bring up the rear as we moved out. After making sure there was no one crouched under the tank we pushed our way through the brush and away from the road. As we left, I looked back at the discarded bloody rags and gear and knew it could have been worse. I could have been in one of those trucks now barreling home with wounded and dead. ■

Con Thien: "Hill of the Angels"

Submitted by Jack Hartzel, Echo Co, 2nd Bn, 9th Marines, Vietnam '67 - '68



Con Thien was a hill 158 meters high! It was actually a cluster of three small hills. It was an ugly bare patch of mud! I was told that local missionaries called it "The Hill of the Angels" due to the massive amount of casualties attributed to the hill. The hill was only large enough to accommodate a reinforced battalion of Marines. It was the northwest anchor of what we called the "McNamara Line" (or The Strip or The Trace). Mac's Line was actually a 600-meter clearing constructed by the 11th Engineers and intended initially as a buffer zone from the Laotian border to the South China Sea. It was originally constructed for the placement of sensors to detect infiltrating enemy troop movements, but the project was called off in favor of fortifying Khe Sahn.

Con Thien was clearly visible from 9th Marine Headquarters located at Dong Ha to the south. We could also see Gio Linh, a "firebase" east of Con Thien. We knew that if the NVA overran Con Thien and Gio Linh they would have a clear path to the south. It was our job not to let this happen. We would run patrols and ambushes every day to keep the NVA on the move. We wanted to make certain they couldn't build fixed positions in and around the area. It was a very hard job for us. We would destroy a bunker complex one day and a couple days later it would be rebuilt. We actually found bunkers as close as 1500 meters to Con Thien. There was not much we could do about the NVA in the area

though. We were very short-handed and had such a large area to patrol that the NVA could move around freely without much chance of detection. We would patrol an area and they would return as soon as we were gone. We had a couple of nicknames for Con Thien. We called it "Our Turn in the Barrel" or "The Meat Grinder."

Almost daily we would receive at least 200 rounds of NVA (mostly artillery) incoming. I don't remember a day in which we didn't get hit with incoming rounds of some sort. We also suffered something that was almost unheard of elsewhere in South Vietnam. It was called "shell shock" and it was not unusual. The constant pounding every day could make you go nuts. You would sit there on edge, wondering if the next round that came in would have your name on it. In official Marine Corps history they make mention of the "dye marker" bunkers. They were Navy Seabee-built bunkers that were supposed to be well reinforced with timbers and steel. My unit never got to live in any of those. We were in holes in the mud!

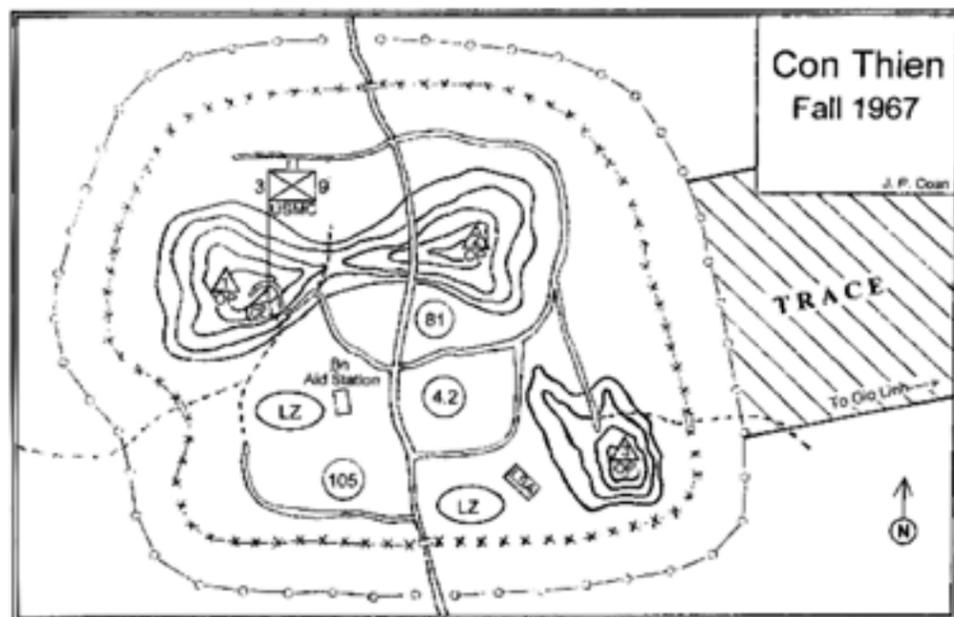
Echo Company 2/9 was on one of the small hills on the southern edge of Con Thien, right next to the LZ and the main gate. We had hardly any protection at all. We caught more than our share of incoming because every time a chopper would land or a truck convoy would arrive, the NVA would shell the shit out of us. From September 19th to the 27th, 1967, we received over 3000 rounds of incoming during that eight day period.

I will never forget specifically September 25th 1967. I thought the NVA were going to blow Con Thien off the map with artillery, rockets and mortars. We took

over 1200 rounds during that one day! I don't think there was hardly a spot on that hill that was not hit by an incoming round of some sort. To that point and time in the war, this was the most incoming rounds ever taken by a unit in Vietnam in one day. That's a lot of incoming rounds for such a small place! There was almost no place to hide! Every time a helicopter would arrive, incoming rounds would follow. That made it very hard for us to be resupplied. During that week in September a helicopter didn't touch down at Con Thien except for a medevac; instead of landing they just dropped the boxes of chow and mail out the doors. The Marine Corps thought the choppers were too valuable to lose. Every night Charlie would probe our lines to try and find a weakness they could penetrate, and there was Always the ever-present threat of NVA snipers. That was also the time my high school buddy Louie Torrellas had a Russian rocket hit right next to his hole. I remember him staggering out of his hole with blood running out of both ears and his mouth. I never saw him again after that day. We medevaced him out of there! After a week or so I received a letter from him written while he was on a hospital ship; he said he was going home. I was glad he was going home but I wished it were me! I remember arty rounds hitting all around us that day. I believe God was watching over us, otherwise we'd all be dead.

It was really hard on the "brain bucket" (your head) just sitting there waiting for the next barrage, the one that could take your life. The stress of the constant incoming artillery barrages could drive a man insane. It would have been different if we could have

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shot back at them. Then we would have been able to get a little relief. As if the situation wasn't bad enough already, we also had to put up with the monsoon rains. Our holes would fill with water; we'd have to bail them out four or five times a day. We also suffered from "emersion foot." That is where your feet would bleed and hurt like hell. Then there was the damn mud! You walked in it, you sat in it, you slept in it and you even ate it. There was just no escaping it!

I can remember when the helicopters were not able to land because of incoming rounds, that not only did we run out of chow but that also meant no C-Rats toilet paper. So we started to tear strips of cloth from the bottoms of our trousers to wipe our asses. At one period we were not resupplied for over three days. During that time we actually scrounged around in our trash pits trying to find something to eat. At least the choppers came to pick up our wounded! The choppers kept flying over us and resupplying other units located elsewhere on the Trace. I know the one door gunner on a chopper that finally brought us chow saw the look in our eyes and decided he'd better drop chow out that door. We knew the pilots were only following orders but that didn't change the fact that we were hungry and we were mean! There is nothing in the world meaner than a 20-year-old Marine hungry, angry, with a loaded machinegun in his hands!

That was also the day I realized the Russians were supplying the NVA. It was during one of many rocket barrages that day. We stayed glued to our holes while the rockets came screaming in. About 40 yds. behind my hole a rocket dud landed in the mud and it hit a Marine but it didn't go off. I was told the Marine's flak Jacket was stripped off of him by the incoming rocket that landed in his hole. Luckily that Marine lived to tell about it! I bet he counts his blessing every single day of his life! How lucky can you get? Why it didn't go off is anyone's guess. It was really eerie and everyone was afraid to go near it. We didn't know if it was time-delayed or what! We finally got up enough nerve to get out of our holes and went up to investigate. It was colored OD green and was about 12 ft. long. It had funny looking Russian writing

on it. It really pissed us off. Not only did we have the NVA and the Chinese soldiers fighting against us, now the Russians were fighting us too!

One day I had "the shits" (dysentery) and decided to take a chance and go out in front of my hole and dig a "cat hole" to take a crap. Just as I was finishing up, I heard the sound of rockets taking off in the distance. I also heard someone yelling "Incoming!!!" I was already half way up the hill by then and I hadn't had time to fasten my trousers yet. I was holding them up with my hand and attempting to run the rest of the way up the hill to my hole, but it was muddy and I slipped and fell. I scrambled the rest of the way to my hole on my hands and knees with my pants down to my ankles. I fell into my hole in a heap. The second my body hit the mud in the bottom of my hole a rocket round hit right next to it. The impact of the rocket round threw mud all over us. The concussion made my ears ring and, for awhile, I couldn't hear anything or for that matter even think straight. When the incoming finally stopped, I tried to get out of my hole but I couldn't. I was stuck in the foot and a half of mud in the bottom of my hole. I had to get my a-gunner to pull me out. When he finally got me out of my hole, I had my pants down to my ankles and I looked half-brown and half-white from lying in the mud. We all laughed our asses off at how stupid I looked. It felt good to laugh again; there wasn't much laughing going on at Con Thien during the month of September 1967. We had a poncho covering the top of our hole we were using for shelter from the rain. It was shredded from the rocket blast. I believe that if I hadn't hit my hole the split second that I did, I would have looked just like our poncho did! Swiss cheese!

Just because we were receiving incoming rounds didn't mean that patrols stopped going out. I remember a patrol trying to go out of our perimeter right in front of my hole. We started to take incoming rounds again and the Marines in the patrol were jumping into the closest holes to them. My a-gunner and I hit our hole while five other Marines piled in on top of us. It was great because it was the most protection we'd had in a long time. I remember thinking; I didn't think my

hole was capable of holding that many Marines. Then in came another rocket barrage. A CP bunker 100-yds off to my right took a direct hit by a rocket round. There had been two Marines in that bunker, a Lieutenant and his radioman. There was the familiar scream for help, "Corpsman Up!" Following that plea there were at least 4 or 5 more pleas for help with no response. Doc Dave, our corpsman, said to his hole partner Sutton, "I'm probably going to regret what I'm about to do, but I just can't sit here when a Marine needs my help."

He was up and out of his hole and sprinting across the top of the hill and down to the CP bunker during which time he was totally exposed to enemy fire. The rounds were hitting all around him and it's a miracle that he wasn't hit himself. He covered the 100-yds plus in record time and jumped into that bunker. The Lieutenant and radioman were still barely clinging to life. A Marine in our unit from "guns" by the name of Fred Gilham ("Angel") arrived at the bunker first and said when he arrived the Lt. looked up at him and said "Thank You" and then he drifted off into a coma. Angel quickly tucked the Lt.'s guts back into his stomach and was holding them in when Doc arrived. Doc immediately covered the gaping wound in the Lt.'s stomach with a battle dressing, and he worked on them furiously to try and stop the bleeding and tend to their burns. Doc and Angel and some other grunts quickly pulled them from the bunker to the safety of another hole. The entire time that Doc was there, everyone was screaming at him, Angel, and the grunts to get the hell out of that bunker. Doc jumped into the closest hole to him and almost immediately another rocket round came screaming in. The Lt.'s bunker had taken another direct hit. Doc just lay there shaking and thinking about how close he had come to death. Then he decided to look around and see what hole he was in, realizing he had jumped into an ammo bunker! He noticed "willie peter" rounds lying right next to him and smoke canisters going off all around him. He said, "Holly shit, I'm in an ammo bunker!" And he jumped up and ran back across the top of the hill and back down to his own hole. He said he realized later that those Marines on the other side of the hill

weren't even "his" Marines! They were in the 4th Marine Regiment [editor's note: 2/4 was protecting Con Thien's eastern flank, 2/9 was southeast]. He said, "All I knew was a Marine yelled "Corpsman Up" and I was up and running. Doc Dave and Angel probably deserved a medal that day for their heroic actions but they got nothing. Hell, if our corpsmen received all of the medals that they deserved, they probably wouldn't be able to walk from the weight!"

The day after the barrage, that bunker was torn down, never to be used again, although I thought that it was stupid to tear down any bunker at Con Thien. The NVA undoubtedly had every bunker and hole on the hill charted. I think the NVA had a spotter in a tree line about 500 yds away.

I remember lying there at night trying to sleep, but sleep was impossible. I was too nervous. All I could manage to do was close my eyes and hope to get some rest. I would lie there with my eyes closed and my feet dangling in my hole and I could hear every single sound in the area. I remember I could hear the rocket rounds when they were taking off in the distance and I would be the first one in the hole. We could actually hear them taking off just cross the Ben Hai River in North Vietnam. We were that close! I can honestly say that I never got any real sleep the entire time we were at Con Thien. If you ever really went to sleep, you might not wake up!

I remember our own artillery and mortar crews doing a bang-up job of trying to keep the NVA gunners off our backs. We would hit them with everything we had. I heard some mighty big guns firing that day. I do believe I was told that naval ships out in the South China Sea were firing support for us. They had huge guns. It must have been hell on the receiving end of those babies! I also remember being bounced around in my hole by the shock waves from B-52 bombers dumping their loads of 1,000 lb. bombs. It was truly a sight to behold, watching the B-52s at work. During one bombing run, I remember large pieces of shrapnel flying around. One piece in particular was the size of a VW bug!!! When we first spotted it coming towards us it seemed like it took forever to reach us. It was a giant twisted

piece of hot metal. It was like watching a movie in slow motion. It kept coming and coming and coming! It was making a whistling - whirring sound, sort of like an Australian Aborigine noisemaker. As it approached, we all ducked lower and lower into our holes. The last time I remember seeing it, it passed over our heads and continued on in a northerly direction.

I also got to witness something not many people have had the opportunity to observe. A Huey helicopter was being chased by an NVA SAM (surface to air) missile. About 100 yards off to our left we spotted the chopper that looked like it was crashing because it was coming down so fast. The helicopter landed very fast in a zigzag downward motion. Then this big slow SAM missile appeared with a flame coming out of the tail fin section. All of a sudden out of nowhere appeared a Marine Phantom jet doing a victory roll right over top of our heads and the SAM missile slowly turned in pursuit. . . in very slow pursuit! The jet was literally flying circles around it. The jet led the missile out and away from our perimeter and then the missile exploded. I believe without a doubt that had we not had supporting arms at Con Thien we would have been overrun many times over!

The one thing about September 25th that really sticks in my mind is a picture of a Marine sitting in a puddle of blood and battle dressings on a poncho with his legs blown off from the waist down! He was numb from morphine and in shock from a loss of blood. He was smoking a cigarette very calmly as if nothing had even happened! He was waiting for a medevac. He probably died on the chopper ride back to Dong Ha. I hope to God he did. Our platoon arrived at Con Thien with 45 men and when we left we only had 12! Now you know why we call it, "The meat grinder!"

Editor's note: The above story appears on the Sgt Grit's website Vietnam blog. After I discovered it, I sent it to my old Alpha Company, 3rd Tanks platoon leader, Jim Coan, the author of "Con Thien, the Hill of Angels." His comments are below:

Jack Hartzel was real helpful on my

book. He was with 2/9 that was located southeast of the Con Thien perimeter. They really had it worse than we did inside the wire, as we had bunkers and trench lines. All that most of 2/9 had were muddy fighting holes. Gunny English's 5th Platoon Alpha Co, 3rd Tanks was there with 2/9 when all five of his tanks got stuck in the mud and had to be abandoned (temporarily). Two of those 5th Platoon tanks were later retrieved and integrated into 1st Platoon when we pulled out on 14 October, 1967.

One thing I have long felt regrets about was that we Marines inside the perimeter wire cheered when rounds fired by the NVA went over us and impacted outside of the wire. We had no idea they were not misses, but were being aimed at 2/9 dug in to protect our flanks and rear from an attack. No one told us 2/9 was out there. It wasn't until years later, working on my book, that I learned from Jack Hartzel what hell his battalion was going through out there. One of the other Marines helping me on my book was Capt. Southard, the CO of Hotel 2/9 at the time. He lost a leg when a rocket landed near him at Con Thien.

ATTENTION 2013 Reunion Attendees

We will be scheduling your personal history recording sessions during the San Antonio reunion. Please be prepared to sign up at the Welcome Table on the first day of the reunion. Also please bring your Vietnam scrapbooks and photo albums with you.

THE HILL OF ANGELS

BY RIC LANGLEY

We left Dong Ha in the afternoon on a clear sunny day making the short trip to Cam Lo. We would spend the night and



roll out on the sweep to Con Thien first thing the next morning. This may have been part of operation Prairie, but as I said before, the operations all kind of ran together.

Alvin Hamby had replaced Whittington as our loader. Hamby was a large quiet guy from Texas with an unmistakable slow Texas drawl. I think Siva had hand picked him to be part of the crew. He had been with the platoon for only a short time, but seemed to be doing a good job and was liked and got along well with everyone. There was one other factor that may have influenced his choice as our new crewmate. Hamby had developed a reputation as an outstanding scrounger. If you needed something and it was in the immediate area, it would be yours. This trait, along with his laid back personality, made him a true asset to the crew and the platoon.

At dawn the next day we began the sweep out of Cam Lo. We were told we would be combing the area between Cam Lo and Con Thien for any enemy fortifications, bunkers, tunnels or supply dumps. According to the experts this

should take us from two to three days, depending on whether or not we made contact with the enemy.

The countryside north of Cam Lo offered all different types of terrain. Rolling low brush covered hills, swampy, low-lying rice paddies, tall elephant grass and overgrown jungle. The first day out was uneventful. We moved through the rolling hills at a slow pace with the grunts and tanks spread out on line. When the brush would become too difficult for the grunts to break through they would fall into a column behind the tanks and let us break ground for them. At times the undergrowth would become so thick that I would be unable to see anything but the wall at the nose of the tank. Siva would have to guide me from his perch on top of the turret. The sweep continued throughout the day with only a few stops to check out areas that showed signs of enemy activity.

As the sun dipped in the sky we came upon an old abandoned French church. This would be our stopping point for the night. The minute we pulled into our position for the night I got those funny feelings again. The grunts went about digging their fighting holes. They always complained that we didn't have to dig, we just parked. The fact was that after a day beating the brush there were a lot of issues on the tank that we had to address. When the grunts had finished their holes and were napping we were still getting things squared away. On most nights it was nine or ten o'clock before we had our

evening meal and were trying to catch some shut eye.

As it seemed to do every time we visited the church, in the early evening it began to rain. It was not a heavy rain, just a drizzle, but it stayed with us all night. We were standing fifty percent watch, which meant that half the crew was up at all times. I was awakened some time in the early morning and along with Sellers took a spot on top of the turret to stare out into the darkness. It was cold, wet and miserable so there was little conversation between us.

Sometime during this watch I noticed two or three dim blue lights moving around the ruins of the church. I watched intently for several minutes trying to make out who was carrying them. I punched Sellers and pointed out the lights. We watched as they seemed to float around with what seemed like no particular destination. We knew they were not grunts as the grunts used red lenses on their flashlights. The lights eventually floated off into the darkness. We looked at each other, shook our heads and attributed it to just being tired. I visited this church several more times before I would leave Vietnam. It was always the same story. It always rained, I always saw, along with many others, the lights and we would always make contact with the enemy either the day before or the day after our stay there. This was, I believe, a truly haunted place.

The next morning, as we moved away from the church, the clouds parted and the sun came out. Charley also came out. We were no more than a mile from the church when mortars started to fall around us. Breaking out of some tall elephant grass the mortars increased and we began taking small arms and machine gun fire from a tree line about seventy five yards to our front. The tank platoon moved up on line and began firing into the trees with

HE and machine guns. The grunts were maneuvering to try to flank the enemy but were meeting heavy resistance. The tanks edged forward to within about fifty yards but the fire only increased. As we again started to close the gap we saw, from deep inside the tree line, the flash of a recoilless rifle. The round missed all five tanks and impacted in the grass behind us. We backed up to a spot where we had some cover and continued to pound the trees. The fire fight continued for an extended period of time when word was passed that the grunt commander was calling in air support. I didn't realize the planes were there until one was right over my head climbing straight up. I could feel the heat from his engine and smell the burnt jet fuel. He had released his napalm bombs behind us and was pulling up to miss the aftermath. No sooner had he passed over head than the bombs whished over, headed for their target. The trees erupted in flame and black smoke. The heat from the napalm was incredible. The planes made several more passes and then headed for home. Job well done.

The massive fire power of the U.S. military again had proved too much for the NVA. Charley disappeared, leaving behind dead and wounded. The grunts searched the area finding a large bunker and tunnel complex. The tunnels and bunkers were searched then destroyed by the engineers. We didn't realize it at the time but we had several photographers traveling with us. Life magazine, October 28, 1966 issue, has pictures of the air strike.

The rest of the day went by without any further clashes with the enemy. That night was spent in another perimeter somewhere south of Con Thien. It was decided that the next day the battalion would make an effort to reach its final objective, Con Thien. We were mounted up and moving even before it was fully light. The pace was quick; you could tell that everyone wanted to be on top of that hill by night fall. Just as the sun was setting I shut down the engine on Charley 1 Deuce.

We moved into our position on the northwest side of the perimeter and went about setting up house keeping. Our first

order of business would be to build, as ordered, a bunker. Tankers are usually not too fond of bunkers. Why should we go to all the work of constructing a bunker when we have one on tracks? Orders were orders so we started planning our new home. It would have to be big enough for all four of us to stretch out and sleep at night. We wanted it to protect us from the rain and wind when the rainy season did arrive. The floor would be made of wooden ammo boxes with sleeping platform for each crewman. In the middle for the floor there would be a fire pit for cooking and heating. With the plans laid out, all we had to do was fill the hundreds of sand bags that it would take to build this Hilton of the boondocks. I don't remember who came up with the idea, but it sure saved us a ton of work. Just outside the south side of the perimeter there were several abandoned ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) positions. The sand bags in these positions looked to be in good useable condition. We fired up the tank and made three or four trips back and forth across the compound before we had enough sand bags to build our dream home. Without having to fill all those bags the bunker went up in no time at all. We fitted the ammo box floor, stretched the tarp over the top and with the tent pole Hamby had procured from the nearby supply tent we had a roof.

After a couple of days of just sitting around the area, we started asking why they had brought us all the way out to this remote hill top. Surely we were not going to just sit on the perimeter and watch the grass grow. This question was answered that afternoon when Siva returned from a briefing. The next day we would begin daily search and destroy missions out into the country side with various sized grunt units.

Early the next morning we moved out of the wire and headed north toward the DMZ which was only a short distance away. The grunts spread out on line as we rolled down the gentle slope away from the hill. We had been on the move for no more than a half an hour when we started to see indications that the enemy had been in the area in large numbers. There were spider holes, trenches,

tunnels and bunkers at every turn. The grunts were very cautious, clearing every complex with great care. The going was slow and deliberate. This part of I Corps contains a lot of hedgerows not unlike the hedgerows encountered in Europe by our military during WWII. Hedgerows are a thick growth of trees and brush a few feet thick that normally surround an agricultural field. It is almost impossible for an individual to break through one of these rows, as we called them, without help. There were paths running between the fields with openings for foot traffic in the rows. The grunts learned early on to avoid these paths and openings like they were the plague. The paths were almost always mined and the openings were either booby trapped or the enemy had their rifles trained on them. To defeat the booby traps, the tanks would line up on line and on a given signal break through the row. If the tanks found the other side of the row clear the grunts would follow. The grunts loved this. The NVA would dig spider holes into the rows with openings on both sides. They would let you pass by them, then as you moved out into the next field with your attention on the next row, they would ambush you from behind. We became very weary anytime we encountered these rows.

On one such sweep after breaking through a row and moving about three quarters of the way across the next field we began receiving sniper fire. With our heads down we kept pushing forward until we were about ten yards from the next row. I was just peeking out of the driver's compartment when I saw movement in a spider hole straight ahead of us. I drew my pistol and as I jacked a round into the chamber the NVA soldier bolted out of the hole. Clutched to his chest he had a Chi Com grenade. I leveled my pistol and fired several rounds. The soldier crumpled face first to the ground, the grenade still held tightly to his chest. Within a second or two there was a muffled thud and a cloud of dust as the grenade detonated beneath his body. He was blown in the air and rolled on to his back. We stopped only long enough for the grunts to search what was left of the body, and then it was

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on to the next row.

We would return to the hill each evening to refuel, rearm and regroup only to do it all over again the next day. These were long days and they were taking their toll on us as well as our equipment. Our days usually lasted from sun up to sun down. On some days I would never leave the driver's compartment. When we did return to the perimeter in the evening, we still has several hours of work ahead of us to prepare for the next day. We had become very smart about avoiding mines and booby traps. We stayed off the roads, trails and paths and never traveled in our old tracks. Sometimes we would have to forego these rules if there was no other way to get where we wanted to go, but only if there was absolutely no other choice.

One day as we were sweeping through an area of banana trees we came upon a rocky drop off of about ten feet. At the bottom of the drop off there was level ground that ran for approximately thirty yards, then climbed up to a small rise. I stopped just short of the ledge as the grunts moved passed us and down into the depression. As Siva started to give me directions as to where to go, a group of NVA on the other side of the depression popped up from a system of trenches and started firing on us. The only way to get passed the rocky ledge was to move to our right and onto a path. Once on the path we would travel about twenty yards, make a hard left turn and drop down into the depression. This would put us below and out of the reach of enemy fire.

I cranked the steering wheel hard right and headed for the path. We rolled slowly along the path with our machine gun firing short bursts into the enemy trench line. Just before I was to make the left turn there was a small explosion next to the tank on the left side. I thought at the time that it was a hand grenade. I made the turn and headed across the flat area to just in front of where the enemy fire was coming from. As I tried to turn to the right the tank shuttered and I heard a loud pop. I knew in an instant that we had thrown a track. I locked it down as Siva confirmed my diagnosis. With bullets bouncing off the top of the turret the rest of the crew

bailed out to begin work on the broken track. As always, in such cases, I stayed in the driver's seat using the steering and brakes to help feed the track back on to the suspension. The explosion we had heard while on the path had been a mine. Two track blocks had been damaged and could not take the strain when I tried to make the right turn. The track had not come all the way off so the repair was quick. The crew replaced the two blocks and had the track back together and adjusted in no time.

The whole time the crew was working on the track, the fire fight had continued with no signs of letting up. Siva was mad as hell as he climbed back into the turret, yelling something about kicking some gook ass. He came over the intercom telling me to head full throttle straight up over the rise and, when he gave me the word, to give it a hard left neutral steer. On Siva's command I put the throttle on the floor and pointed the nose of the tank straight at where the enemy fire was coming from. The tank reached the top of the rise and just kept digging, showing the enemy nothing but the underbelly and two churning tracks. As the nose slammed down I could see the faces of the NVA soldiers, their eyes were the size of baseballs. The tank seemed to jump over the stunned soldiers position, like it was as pissed as the crew. Siva gave the word and I jerked the gear shift into neutral and again floored the throttle and pulled the steering wheel hard left. The tank spun around and around in its own length. After two or three revolutions Siva told me to back up and hold my position. As I backed up, I could see enemy soldiers running into the brush with Marines right on their tails. Directly in front of the tank was the patch of newly plowed red earth. There were arms, legs and rifle barrels sticking out of the ground in all kinds of funny directions. We had been judge, jury, executioner and funeral director for those boys.

Being as busy as we had been over the last few weeks we didn't even realize that it was almost Thanksgiving. We rolled back into the perimeter on November 27, later than usual. It had rained most of the day and we had a couple of tanks get stuck.

The going was tough for tanks when it rained on that red clay dirt around Con Thien. As we began our nightly routine we got word that nobody would be leaving the perimeter the next day due to it being Thanksgiving. This news brought no broken hearts to our crew. We attended to the chores that had to be taken care of that night, leaving the rest for the next day, had some chow and turned in for the night. Morning came and with it a bright sunny day. We had slept late and were in no hurry to do what had to be done.

At around one o'clock, we heard the sound of choppers in the distance. As he always did, when we heard the choppers, Hamby headed for the LZ. Choppers meant supplies and hopefully mail. Hamby had become best friends with the guys who ran the LZ and took care of any material coming in. In just a short time Hamby was back and he was empty handed. This was unusual as he almost always returned with something. With a huge smile he announced that the choppers were carrying a complete Thanksgiving dinner. Nothing made Hamby happier than the prospect of a good meal. We made our way over to where they had set a make-shift dining hall. Sure enough there it was. There was turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, dressing, yams, cranberry sauce and, for desert, apple cobbler and as always there was good old grape Kool Aid with real ice. They did also have some decent coffee. We just could not pass this meal up. It was great, cooked to perfection. After stuffing ourselves we waddled back to our bunker for the traditional after meal nap. Surprisingly we suffered no ill affects from the meal.

The next day it was back to operations as usual. It was another day of off and on rain. Throughout the day we would have to stop to clean the mud out of the suspension on the tanks. We were continually fighting to keep from getting stuck. The rains were coming much more often and staying much longer as November came to a close. The winter monsoon season had arrived with a vengeance. We were no longer an asset to the grunts so it was decided that tanks would be parked on the perimeter until the rains subsided. The rains became

a daily occurrence, at times raining so hard you could not see the barbed wire to the front of our position. Everything was under water except our bunker. We had the forethought to not dig it into the ground but place it on top and also to place it on a slight rise. We remained high and dry.

Not only was it raining almost constantly but the weather had also turned extremely cold. The most miserable nights I spent in Vietnam were on that hill during that monsoon season. I would stand guard at night wearing boots, two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a field jacket and on top of all of this a poncho to keep the rain off. I would sit there shivering for my whole watch with the wind blowing the rain sideways until it felt like pins hitting me in the face. The days were not much better, although it did warm up a little bit. We would stay in the bunker and from time to time light a piece of C-4 (plastic explosive) to heat some coffee just to warm things up. Hamby procured the C-4 from his buddies at the LZ.

Once a day I would wait for the rain to slack up a bit and go out to the tank, start the engine and let it run for an hour to keep the batteries charged. The rain not only slowed us down but it had slowed Charley down also. The daily sweeps by the grunts had been changed to a couple of times a week. There had been no contact or sightings of the enemy for some time. It looked like Charley didn't like the rain any more than we did. He was probably out there in his bunker just like us trying to stay warm and dry. After several weeks of being cooped up in the bunker everybody was just a tad bit cranky.

One morning after I had the last watch I noticed something unusual. There was this bright light coming up over the horizon. Could it be the sun? The day dawned bright and clear without a cloud in the sky. It had been who knows how long, since we had been able to do any laundry, so we set about making this laundry day. We filled a fuel drum that had been cut in half with rain water, set it on top of a large fire, cut up two bars of Ivory soap into the pot and added every

stitch of clothing we owed to the brew. All four of us were standing around the fire enjoying the warmth. I was wearing nothing but a towel, Siva and Hamby had on mud stained skivvies, and Sellers, in all his modesty, was buck assed naked. The heat felt great as we stirred and poked at the pot with a long stick.

About mid way through the wash cycle we noticed a large group of individuals gathered a short distance up the perimeter from our position. This was not just a bunch of grunts out enjoying the warm weather. These people had on bright green fatigues with new helmets and flak jackets. We kept an eye on the group as they made their way down the perimeter toward our location. As they stopped at the grunt position next to ours, we noticed that the person who was getting all the attention was a woman. Sellers immediately started looking for something to cover himself with. He ran into the bunker and emerged wrapped in a poncho. It looked like a great big green diaper.

The group finally arrived at our position. The woman marched up and stuck out her hand, introducing herself as Martha Raye. She shook hands with each of us, asking our names and where we were from. With the introductions taken care of she commented on the laundry and asked if we could wash out a few things for her. We replied; sure bring them by, we could have them back to her by afternoon. She seemed in no hurry to move along. She wanted to know all about our tank and if it would be possible to take a ride. We told her we were sorry but with all the mud in the area the tank had to stay parked. We promised her that if she came back when it was dry we would be more than happy to take her for a little spin. We would even drive her right up to the DMZ for a closer look. We talked for quite some time before the brass, which was escorting her, convinced her that it was time to move on. We shook hands and wished each other luck as she made her way to the next group of surprised Marines on her tour of the outpost at Con Thien. They say she talked to every Marine on the hill that day, making sure no one was left out.

Ms. Raye's helicopter did not lift

off from the hill until very late that afternoon. I like to think that Martha Raye brought the sunshine with her that day. She sure brightened the day for us. She was the only entertainer I ever saw that close to the real war and that far out in the boonies. Bob Hope did a lot for the troops in numerous wars, but I never saw him out there. Martha Raye is a true American hero.

With one good day of sunshine we were able to not only do our laundry but also take a good bath. We were all more than a little ripe. As my friend from home, Don Newby, would say, "Is that my ass I smell". The rains not only continued but I believe they got worse. By early December they wanted to move us back to Dong Ha and place another tank platoon on the hill. With the rains and, at this time, having no road to Con Thien, this was next to impossible. We hung on praying for a break in the weather; it did not come.

Sometime in the middle of December it was decided to fly a platoon from Alpha Company out to Con Thien and to fly us back to Dong Ha. We would just switch tanks. This idea did not set well with the tankers of 1st Plt. We really wanted to return to Dong Ha but we hated having someone else take over our tanks.

Orders being orders, the day of the change-over came. We waited at the LZ, gear in hand, as the huge Jolly Green Giant helicopters swooped in to land. We had very little time to brief the new crews before we boarded the choppers and were flown back to Dong Ha. So much for our first trip to Con Thien.

First Platoon was the first tank unit at Con Thien, but by no means would it be the last. We would spend more time on this hill than at any other location we visited in northern I Corps. I would have more brothers killed and wounded on or around that hill top than any other place in Vietnam. Con Thien roughly translated means "hill of angels". Any Marine who spent time on this hill saw no angels. Any Marine who spent time there will attest to the fact that Con Thien was hell on earth. ■

One Really Lousy Day at Con Thien

BY: JIM COAN

When I arrived at Con Thien on 10 September, 1967, the NVA siege was going



full bore. All manner of artillery, mortars and rockets could be expected at any time during the day. I was not only new to being a tank platoon leader, I had to be a quick study on knowing how and when to dodge incoming. Fortunately, my platoon sergeant was Gunny Hopkins, a Korean War vet who took me under his wing and schooled me quickly. One learns fast in that situation or he gets carried out in a body bag.

One task I had to perform daily was to make the arduous trek up to the CO's bunker on the reverse slope of OP-1. Every afternoon at 1600, all attached unit leaders would meet inside a large Dyemarker bunker dug into the hillside to get the S-3 updates and learn the password for that night. Afterwards, I would make the perilous journey around the perimeter to check in with each of my five tank crews and share with them what I'd learned at the CO's briefing. On more than one occasion, I had to jump in a hole or trench to dodge incoming.

A good day at Con Thien was when nobody got killed. The icing on the cake was when the fog rolled in and it rained, turning the sun-baked hard laterite clay to mud. Shrapnel from a shell detonating down in the mud tended to blast straight up, not spray laterally. And the reduced visibility negated any NVA snipers lurking outside the wire. Then there were those absolutely lousy days,

ones that you hoped you'd eventually forget about... but couldn't.

One afternoon in mid-September, I saw that it was getting on to 1600 and I knew I had to make that dreaded 100 meter trek up to the CO's briefing. Pausing outside of our tanker's bunker to listen, I couldn't hear any mortar tubes or artillery pieces firing at us, so I took off in a trot. About halfway there, when I was near the Battalion Aid Station, I saw three dead Marines lying on stretchers outside the BAS bunker. They were each covered with a blanket, only their combat boots exposed, toes pointing skyward. Hearing the unmistakable sound of NVA mortar

rounds blasting out of their tubes, I hit the deck, landing face down in a mud puddle. Once the danger had passed and I got up on my feet, I realized to my disgust that the "mud puddle" was really bloody water having been deposited there by one of the casualties lying outside of the BAS. I retreated to my bunker and washed up, changing clothes. Once again I headed out on the perilous trek up to the CO's briefing.

On my return from making the rounds of the tank platoon, I was almost back to our bunker when I again heard the "thunk, thunk" of mortars being fired at us. This time I landed at the bottom of a trench. Two Marines piled in on top of me. It felt like I was playing high school football again. A mortar shell impacted about 10 meters from our trench line. I feared the next one would land right on us. Something told me not to greet the grim reaper with my eyes closed so I kept them open. Then, "BLAMM!!" The next round barely cleared our trench, landing outside of our bunker. A white frothy material rained down on us. One of the Marines yelled, "My God, they're shootin' willie peter at us!!" Thoroughly traumatized, I saw some white blobs had landed on my wrists. . . . But why weren't they burning? Then I realized that a piece of shrapnel had punctured an aerosol shaving cream can left outside the bunker

that morning. For some reason, the seat of my trousers felt damp. That was when I realized that the Marine lying on top me had . . . well, you know what, when the other Marine screamed "WILLIE PETER!!" So, for the second time that day, I had to wash out a pair of utility trousers, then put on the still damp ones from the previous incident outside the BAS.

Sometime after dark, I was inside my tank checking in over the radio with Captain Jacobsen, Alpha Company's CO. He informed me that I had to notify one of the short-timer tank crewmen 50 meters directly north of my position on the lines that he was going to have to board a chopper at first light to head back to Dong Ha. As I stuck my head out of the TC cupola into the blackest of nights, I realized that I literally could not see my hand in front of me. And, a howling wind was blowing stinging rain drops horizontally. I put on a rain jacket and followed my CO's orders, much to my dislike. Waiting till morning would make more sense, but orders are orders.

Hunched over against the wind and driving rain, I plodded through the mud towards the other tank. I was almost to my destination (I thought) when a flare popped high up over the minefield. To my horror, I realized in the swaying flare light that I had drifted off to the northwest, heading towards the minefield wire instead of going parallel to it. I was roughly 30 meters out in front of our lines, directly in front of a machine gun position! My only hope for survival was to play possum. As I sat crouched down and froze, praying for all I was worth, I stared at the machine gun that would cut me to ribbons at any second. Two glowing cigarette butts inside their bunker told me, however, that those Marines were not paying attention to their front. If they had been, you wouldn't be reading this story. As soon as the flare light faded out, I retraced my steps very carefully in slow motion and got back on the right path.

Did I have to make a third change of trousers that night? . . . I ain't sayin'! ■

CON THIEN – Fall 1967

Original story by John Wear © 2003

As told by Sgt. Maj. Bill "J.J." Carroll, USMC (Ret.) & Ken "Piggy" Bores

I joined Ken "Piggy" Bores with the First Platoon, Alpha Company, 3rd Third Tank Battalion at Con Thien after returning from my 30 days of leave I earned for extending my Vietnam tour. I had left Vietnam on July 3rd or 4th (Operation Buffalo) and during my absence, my original platoon (Platoon Sergeant GySgt R.B. English) got shot up around July 27, 1967. I believe that the "damage" to my old platoon was four KIA and eleven WIA during that day.

On September 1, 1967, the first day I was back at Con Thien, I recall working on a tank and talking to a Marine by the name of Charlie Brown. Charlie was well known. He was a L/Cpl but had been a sergeant at least three times. Since I was a corporal and had been in-country for over 12 months, my primary MOS was shitfister and secondary was tank crewman, so they assigned me as the loader of the tank.

I thought that our Platoon Leader was Lieutenant Jim Coan (now our association treasurer); however, Jim recently told me that the platoon leader was 2/Lt. Tom Barry. Tom is also a current member of the USMCA.

My tank was assigned to guard the south gate of the Con Thien firebase. The next morning we had a road sweep to the Washout and back to Con Thien that included two tanks and a bunch of grunts from India Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines. The road sweep to the Washout went without incident. However, on the way back the engineers discovered a mine just south of Con Thien.

They dug up the mine that was covered in blue protective plastic, and then they started following what I assume was a wire that ran to the tree line to the left side of the road as we were looking north toward Con Thien. As the engineers

approached the tree line, the NVA sent off a command-detonated explosion that was probably a claymore mine. Then all hell broke loose. Almost at once, the NVA fired an RPG at our tank, but the keen eyes of Ken "Piggy" Bores, who was the driver, enabled him to stop the tank, letting the RPG fall short of its intended target, our tank.

The NVA had the Marine grunts pinned down with heavy machine gun fire. I was the loader on the tank. My comm. helmet did not work so it was hard for me to figure out what was going on in front of our position. One time, I peeked out of the loader's hatch and saw the NVA trying to outflank our infantry. Unfortunately we were unable to fire at the flanking NVA for fear of hitting our own infantry.

The grunts must have called for help because more Marines showed up. I believe they were from Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines. When the relief grunts arrived, we were ordered to go into the tree line to evacuate our wounded. So we made a run into the tree line and loaded our tank with the wounded.

Piggy Bores remembers: During the initial firefight, I recall the firing was so hot that our TC had me drive over the top of one badly wounded grunt. He had me open the escape hatch and then I grabbed the grunt by the belt and hauled him inside the tank. We did this maneuver a few times that morning.

JJ continues: Once the wounded were unloaded, we were told that the NVA were in a complex of bunkers and that we were going to attack them. As we lined up for the assault, air strikes were called in on them.

Those air strikes were so close; you could feel the vacuum pressure inside of

the tank from the explosions. Upon the completion of the air strikes, we began our assault. However, the other tank with us developed a problem with their main gun and it was unable to fire. I later heard that a canister round had broken open in the breach and pellets from the canister round jammed the breech block. But their machine guns were in good working order so they continued with the assault.

Our tanks assaulted the bunkers with the Marine infantry flanking us. I had to fire our machine gun by hand because the celluloid was broken. No comm. helmet and no machine-gun celluloid...what a fine example of Marine Corps equipment!

I remember turning the delay screw on our HE rounds to enable them to penetrate the bunkers. I had emptied the turret wall ammo box of .30 caliber ammo and was taking it out of the deck boxes. Then the machine gun jammed (ruptured cartilage). I cleared the jam and, when I pulled back the charging handle to chamber a round, the whole turret lit up.

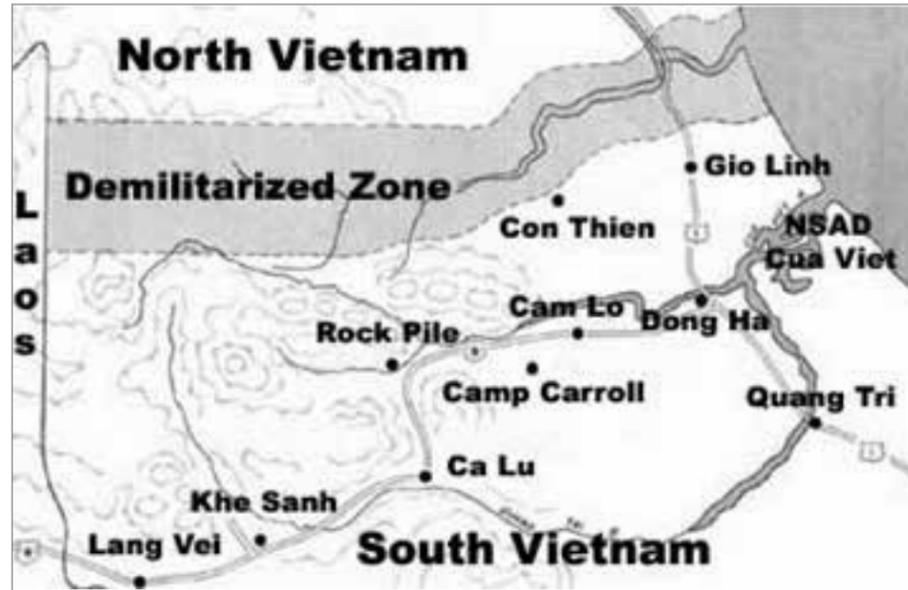
Ken Bores: The grunts started to lose a lot of men. I was buttoned up but I could see a lot of action through the driver's periscopes. As we approached the tree line, I saw an RPG team getting ready to fire at us. I yelled, "One O'clock, One O'clock!" The gunner had traversed the turret to about the 3 O'clock position so the TC grabbed the TC's override and traversed to bring the main gun back to One O'clock. Then he fired a canister round. The gook RPG team and several gook riflemen vaporized in front of my eyes. But the gooks got their RPG round off just as we fired at them. At the exact same time as the gunner said, "Got 'em!"... the RPG hit our tank on the loader's side.

Bill "JJ" Carroll: The main gun went off firing the canister round that I had

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THE VANDEGRIFT - CON THIEN ROAD TRIP

By: Pete Ritch, with input from Bill Davis (Col., USMC Retired), Claude (Chris) Vargo, Mike (Boris) Bolenbaugh and Andy Anderson



During the spring of 1969, most 18 to 25 year old American males were taking exciting trips to venues like Galveston, Tijuana and Woodstock. For the young and experienced Marines of Bravo Company, 3rd Tanks, the spring of 1969 included a road trip but it was not to any exotic locale. It was a road trip from Vandegrift Combat Base (VCB) to the Fire Base at Con Thien, aka "The Hill of Angels."

In June 1969, Vandegrift Combat Base was the Forward Operating Position of Bravo Company, 3rd Tanks, under the command of 1st. Lt. Bill Davis. The Company located at Vandegrift was composed of thirteen (13) gun tanks, a flame tank, and several support vehicles.

Vandegrift Combat Base was the largest base in northwest I Corps, and was the launching point for many operations including Scotland, Scotland II, and as a staging area in Lancaster I and II. The area surrounding Vandegrift was used by NVA regulars to infiltrate south. To say that Vandegrift was in the heart of "Indian Country", may be an understatement.

Con Thien, together with bases at Gio Linh, Dong Ha and Cam Lo, were situated in the area known as Leatherneck Square. It was located on the highest elevation in eastern I Corps, and overlooked the primary NVA troop and supply routes, heading into South Viet Nam. The Hill was also in range of NVA artillery, fired from across the DMZ. In September 1967 it had come under intense enemy rocket, artillery and mortar attacks with over three thousand rounds hitting the base in one day.

The distance between Vandegrift and Con Thien, as the

crow flies, is approximately 15 kilometers (9.3 miles). However, the "road system" between the two bases, with its switch backs and twists and turns, made the actual distance 40 kilometers (25 miles). The only paved portion of the road was a stretch of Route 9 north and east from Vandegrift to Cam Lo.

After Cam Lo there were a series of dirt roads and trails heading north past the Rock Pile, through the Wash Out, across "the Trace," and finally arriving at Con Thien.

Around mid-day on 17 June 1969, Lt. Davis ordered all thirteen gun tanks, including his command tank, B-41, and a flame tank to "saddle up". It was one of the largest USMC armored units ever assembled at a forward position in I Corps.

Davis met with his platoon leaders; Gunnery Sgt. Burr, Staff Sgt. Williams and Staff Sgt. Jewel, and advised them that the entire company was moving north and east to Con Thien in support of Marine units from 1/3 and 2/3.

All of the tanks were to have maximum ammunition for the 90 MM cannon and the .30 and .50 caliber machine guns. All crew members were to be armed with their .45 caliber pistols. In addition, most of the tanks had at least one M79 grenade launcher on board and, my personal favorite, the M3A1 grease gun.

Spare track sections were fastened to the turrets. All gear in and outside of each vehicle was to be tightly secured. With this level of preparation, it was obvious that Lt. Davis was going to make this road trip in record time and that Bravo Company would be "loaded for bear".

At 1615 hours on 17 June 1969, Davis ordered the entire unit to move out. The late afternoon departure meant that a segment would be made in the dark and headlights would not be utilized. The noise alone would be enough to wake the dead.

Due to the size and importance of this armored movement, Lt. Davis took command of B-41 and the loader, Corporal Mike "Boris" Bolenbaugh, ended up making the trip to Con Thien, riding on the back of the tank. Boris started out holding on to the gypsy rack as the convoy roared up Route 9. When the convoy left the paved surface and hit the dirt roads, Boris was

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The Vandegrift - Con Thien Road Trip

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bounced into the gypsy rack and made the rest the trip crammed between cases of C-rations and spare track. He described his ride as follows: "it was like riding a bucking bronco, in the dark of night, while being sand blasted with red dust."

He figured that B-41 did not draw any sniper fire because the enemy snipers were too busy laughing at "the poor SOB on the back of a tank, hanging on for dear life." Lt. Davis remembers seeing Mike "cradled in the gypsy rack, smiling."

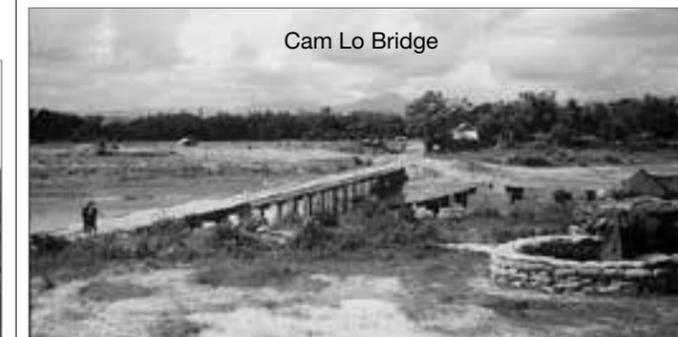


It must have sounded like rolling thunder to anyone along the route. I can just imagine, some NVA trooper curled up in his underground bunker or spider hole, trying to get some sleep, and suddenly the earth starts shaking, dirt is collapsing in on him and he thinks it's the end of the world. And minutes later, it's deathly

quiet and whatever it was has disappeared into the night.

The convoy slowed to a crawl across the Cam Lo Bridge and to maneuver through the Wash Out. Other than those two slowdown points, the average speed was estimated to be over 20 kilometers per hour. It was rumored that the motor governors had been removed or modified for the trip.

At 2015 hours, exactly four hours after leaving Vandegrift, the entire convoy drove through the south gate of Con Thien Combat Base. Flawlessly executed, and due to Lt. Davis and



his tankers' preparation, the convoy experienced no enemy resistance, no injuries (not counting Boris's bruises) and no mechanical problems.

It was one of the largest Marine armored vehicle movements in the war and reflected Bravo Company's ability to get from point A to point B, on time and without incident. This was one hell of a road trip. ■

CON THIEN - Fall 1967

(Continued from page 43)

loaded. Then all of a sudden I was "flash-blinded." I could not even see the other crewmen in the turret. I looked out of the loader's hatch and it appeared as if I was floating in a red cloud. I thought the tank was on fire. I thought that maybe they got us with a satchel charge. I crawled out of the tank and rolled behind the turret and, as I did this, the NVA were attempting to pick me off with rifle fire.

I remember thinking to myself: "Man, this is like a John Wayne movie!" The only problem is that I was in it! A Marine grunt jumped on back of the tank when he noticed that I was bleeding all over the place. The artery in my right calf had been punctured and blood would shoot out every time my heart beat. The grunts

dragged me off the tank and onto a knoll where they set up a hasty aid site for the wounded. I then heard our tank back out and, as I looked toward it, I saw it was filled with wounded and dead Marines. Then I too was loaded on our tank and it took us to the road for medevac. I was lying on the back of our tank next to a grunt that had been shot in the chest. I remember Piggy handing me a piece of the shrapnel that was lodged in the hole in our tank.

I was medevaced to four different facilities. I first went to Delta Med in Dong Ha, then to Alfa Med in Phu Bai. They then sent me to NSA in Da Nang and finally the USS Sanctuary. I spent a total of five weeks in the hospital. When I was released, I was sent back to 3rd Tank Battalion and back to a platoon at Con Thien.

When Piggy and I reunited over the

telephone just prior to the 2001 reunion in Minneapolis, he told me that we sent the RPG team and some gook rifleman to "The Big Rice Paddy in the Sky". Ken said he thought the RPG had come in on the right side of the turret. However, I thought it came in on the left side near the machine gun. I thought that if it had come in on the right then the gunner would have been hit harder. As it turns out, the turret was traversed too far to the right and the TC had attempted to correct the situation, but we got hit in the meantime.

Ken Bores states: "I rotated back to the World before Bill returned to Con Thien. I sure was glad to reunite with him this past year. I thought for sure that he had lost his leg. He had bled like a stuck hog and his leg looked really nasty." ■

USMC Vietnam Tankers Association
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