



# Sponson BOX

*Voice of the USMC  
Vietnam Tankers Association*

**Ensuring Our Legacy Through Reunion, Renewal & Remembrance™**



**38 MONTHS**  
*My Time In The Marines*

**BEN COLE**

## TANKS IN THE MUD AT CON THIEN

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## Election of Association Officers and Directors

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 in writing. Elections will be held during the business meeting of the 2025 reunion in San Diego. Positions available are: President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and five director chairs. You must be a member in good standing to be eligible to run for office. All who want to be considered for election must submit the request in writing to the Nomination Committee Chairman: SgtMaj William "JJ" Carroll, USMC (ret), 4806 Heather Ridge Road North, Oakdale, MN 55128, post marked no later than June 30, 2025. If you have a question, you may call SgtMaj Carroll for details at 651.440.9924 (CST). No nominations will be accepted from the floor during the annual meeting in San Diego.

## A Podcast Appeal

By Carol Colucci

I wanted to write to the Vietnam Marine tankers to ask each one to please conduct a telephone interview with Frank "Tree" Remkiewicz. It took me about a year to get my husband Ron to partake of Tree's offer. I can honestly say he was a little apprehensive of the whole process, but me being me I kept prodding him. Then Frank and Ron exchanged emails to get the rules of engagement (none) and what Ron wanted to talk about. When the day finally arrived, Ron was ready. I think after his introduction he talked almost an hour. Frank only interjected to clarify nicknames, such as "beehive" and "bouncing Bettys," I guess Frank did that so that when the wives and kids listen to the podcast, they can envision the discussion. Ron's experiences were similar and totally different from Frank's own service experiences and you could tell he was an eager listener.

While Ron talked on the telephone, I sat next to him in awe listening, not that I haven't heard a lot of Ron's stories, but it was more about how it all just flowed on an afternoon without a room full of tankers at a reunion. I have listened to many stories with very little minor changes over the years at reunions. Thank God Frank is documenting them. Ron's son will get a flash drive with this as well as Bob Peavey's interview done in Seattle. Yes, some is difficult to hear, but maybe Ron's son will understand his father better.

Please reach out to Frank to possibly schedule an interview, you were there and you are the best one to share your personal experiences. I have listened to about 8 of Frank's podcast interviews so far and each one has given me so much more insight to the men I have met at the reunions.

Editor's Note: We featured Carol's appeal in a 2022 issue of our magazine. Within a few months her husband, Ron, passed away. Please take her appeal to heart and get your interview booked. Now!!!

**Tree's cell phone number is 209.996.8887.**

## Letter from the President

**Putting your story to paper will assure its permanence. They will know and remember you.  
If it is not written, you will soon be forgotten...**

**YOUR MILITARY MEMORIES:** Your personal stories, captured in your own words and photographs, are one of the most valuable legacies you can leave your family. By being able to read what you did serving your country, enables family members and future generations to understand and appreciate what you went through in order to provide them the freedoms they enjoy today. We are currently running out of member stories. Please keep the Sponson Box healthy and happy by submitting your own personal accounts of your service to our nation.

**WE ARE EXCITED** to continue the new venture in our magazine. For the past several years, Frank "Tree" Remkiewicz has conducted an exciting and highly successful telephone interview podcast program. And fairly recently we found an AI program that will effectively translate the spoken word into writing. This issue features the second (of many) personal stories that were recorded on the podcast program. Please stand by for many more as Tree has them transcribed and submits them for publication.

**REUNIONS:** Over twenty years ago I was blessed to meet an Iwo Jima Marine veteran on line. His name was Orin "Bill" Schwanke and we turned out to be pretty good email "pen pals." Bill had gotten out of the USMC right after WW2 and took over his family farm in Southeastern Missouri. Over the ensuing years Bill kept in touch with another Iwo Jima Marine veteran that had been a fox hole buddy and who lived in Nebraska. Bill's buddy happened to also be a farmer after he got out of the USMC. During those 50+ years, the two Marines exchanged Christmas cards; birthday cards; as well as an occasional telephone call.

Interestingly enough, even though they were living only six or so hours away from each other, they never met up for a face-to-face reunion. When Bill finally retired and had his son take over the family farm, Bill made plans to drive up to Nebraska to actually pay a visit to his old Iwo Jima Marine friend ... who he had not seen since the long boat trip home from the Pacific. One day, without giving his pal any advanced notice, Bill got in his car and drove up to his buddy's Nebraska farm. When he pulled into the driveway, his buddy's wife came out to greet Bill. She had never met him but she knew how much Bill meant to her loving husband. She greeted Bill and said that she was pleasantly surprised to see him. And then she added that it was very unfortunate that Bill came when he did because her husband of 50+ years had passed away three weeks before. As a result, Bill told me, "Never put off for tomorrow what you should do today. If you have US Marine buddies who you can reunite with, you should absolutely do it!" A few years later, Bill also passed on to the Guard Shack in Heaven. Please don't die regretting what you have not done. Come to the 2025 San Diego Reunion. And call and convince your Marine buddies to attend with you.

**GUESS WHO?** Due to space limitations, we will not be featuring this section in this issue. We'll announce the winner of the last contest in the following issue.

**ATTENDANCE:** After the VTA first started and then after I took over from Dick Carey, we never seemed to be too worried about reunion attendance numbers. The really great number of attendees just seemed to happen. We'd always get 100 - 150 members plus their guests attending each biennial gathering. Lately, it seems as if we are more and more concerned with those reunion attendance numbers ... but you know? They have always seemed to work out to the good. The choice of location may be the biggest draw but

we had really good numbers in San Antonio, St Louis and even Colo. Springs. I am willing to bet that 2025 in San Diego will be a record attendance ...especially with the number of VTA members living on the West Coast.



**Risking is better than regretting...**

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## Our Readers Write

(Formally known as "Letters to the Editor")

### Pete Ritch's Podcast Interview

Thank you so much for sending the podcast transcriptions to me. I do think it would be wonderful to publish the transcripts of Pete's interview in the Sponson Box. It is so important to share this with the rest of the tankers. Thank you for all you do!—Joyce Ritch, Pete's widow.

### Remembering Bert Trevail

**Jim Coan writes:** Thanks for printing my Leatherneck magazine essay about Bert Trevail in the Sponson Box. As a second-place prize winner in Leatherneck's essay contest, I received \$750 plus a nice plaque. The magazine had a typo that was also in the Sponson box on page 41. the photo caption should have read "...take over command of 1st Tank Plt."—not 1st Tank Bn.

After Leatherneck published my essay, I received phone calls from Bert's son, Michael, and also from his wife, who informed me she had served in the Marines. I've also had several Marine tankers contact me who knew Bert to thank me for writing that essay about him. They all agreed that Albert Trevail was a special Marine.

### Remembering the Fallen

**Rick Lewis writes:** With regard to the "West Wing" video of the homeless veteran getting a USMC Honor Guard funeral, we used to watch it and I remember it and the feelings then and now have not changed. I guess that's why I help on Tuesdays at the National Cemetery when we honor unclaimed vets with no families. We are given a little bio that the VA does it's best to put together and we also add a few words and then fold the American flag for them and play taps. Then we do the next vet's service. The most I ever helped do was 11 on one day. But ever Tuesday across the US at every National Cemetery the same is done for unclaimed Vets, what a shame.

**John Wear adds:** One of the many reasons for the existence of the USMC VTA is for YOU to be remembered. But you will not be remembered by anyone if you don't record at least something about your service to our nation as a US Marine. We offer you the tools so all you have to do is get off your butt and either write, video record or do a podcast.

### LEADERSHIP

**Submitted by Ron Knight:** I was listening to Gen Mattis comments on leadership this morning. He was asked what was his most difficult command issue, he had as a Marine. Gen Mattis replied that he had just been ordered to end the first battle of Fallujah for political reasons. As

always, his Marines had fought very well in this house-to-house battle. He worried his Marines might lose faith since they wanted to finish what they had started. His fear was quickly overcome when he saw a clip by NBC reporter interviewing a tough Marine SAW gunner.

NBC reporter, "Are you upset not being allowed to finish the fight?"

The slow southern talking Marine gunner reply, "Nope, we will just hunt them down and kill 'em somewhere else!"

God love the Marines, Semper Fi

### FROM LEATHERNECK MAGAZINE:

#### The Article on LZ Russell Was Outstanding!

I would like to pass my respects and appreciation to Kyle Watts, the Staff Writer at Leatherneck for his exceptionally well researched and well written January 2024 article, "Enemy in the Wire." It is a fantastic follow on to his June 2023 story, "90 Days a Grunt," which made a deep impression.—Col Walter Ford USMC (Ret), 1969–1999 Rock Hill, S.C.

I just finished reading the February 2024 issue of Leatherneck, it was quite the issue with the Iwo Jima articles which really rendered some good history. However, your article on "Enemy in the Wire" was really outstanding, where once again you hit it from the battle side, and the human emotional factor. The layout was perfect with the placement of the words written by Dennis Gardner with his illustration, really brought some deep thoughts to me. Thank you for another great article!—David Jensen Golden, Colo.

"Enemy in the Wire: The Fight for Survival on LZ Russell" in the February 2024 issue of Leatherneck by Kyle Watts dramatically tells the selfless heroics of the men from Echo Company, 2/4 and Hotel Battery, 3/12 as they were being overrun by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) sappers on the early morning of 25 February 1969. In 10 pages with marvelous photographs, Watts accurately captures the moment-to-moment, six-plus hours of continual night combat that resulted in 29 Marines and corpsmen killed and 80 others wounded. The article's conversion from combat to the LZ Russell vet's first reunion in 2000 was perfectly told. As a Vietnam veteran with Fox 2/5, I know we and many, many combatants of all wars suffer PTSD. For combatants reading Watts' "LZ Russell" story, you may reflect un pleasantly while reading moments of this lethal story as it will cast you back into your battles and skirmishes when your death was nearly certain. Bottom line: Thanks for the story, Marine Watts, and I was glad to be fighting with Marine brothers during my war.—Dave Brown Swansboro, N.C.

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ON THE COVER: A muddy tank driver

## Remembering Christmas

We sent an email that included a large number of photos of troops in Vietnam celebrating Christmas back in the day.

**Rick Lewis commented:** Christmas in '66 was out in the bush no Bob Hope Show as our tank lost in the draw of the cards and besides it was supposed to be quiet but the gooks saw it as time to run resupplies. The gooks also saw it that the "Christmas Truce" was a way to move around and get re-grouped. The second day with 7th Marines got ugly since everybody was just hanging out while we were in the bush. I don't think that any patrols were sent out and some of guys got together and came around singing Christmas carols and a few even had make-shift trees. But that night the gooks made us pay for not playing war. The enemy came hard and fast and it lasted a few hours where the grunts called in "Puff", which helped a lot. The 7th Marines then were loading KIA and WIA's on to many different choppers, and then the grunts called in choppers to haul them out. We were close to being out of main gun ammo and our 30 ammo was very low, by pure luck we made the trip back to the CP without being hit. We found out later that the grunts lost 9 KIA and 13 WIA's that night.

So again in '67, as the TC, my tank lost in the card draw and out we went. This time it was with 1st Marines, who did not mess around. They dug in deep; set out patrols and moved around at night into different holes. They even had the tanks move around. The gooks left us alone that night but they did give us shit the next night ... but no one hit us. Even on my third tour, I didn't get to see the Bob Hope Christmas Show since we were out again on patrol ... but this time I was a grunt.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about your tasks in the military?

**Me:** I carried out daily biological decontamination at critical military facilities using a specialized mobile hydraulic dispensing unit



## Remembering Richard Cecil

**Carl Hokenson writes:** Back on July 2020 I wrote an article "First Time Attendee Thoughts About the 2019 Seattle Reunion" that was then published in the Sponson Box. In the article I wrote that I was shocked when I saw the name tag of another Marine standing close by. That Marine was S/Sgt Ricard Cecil. He was my platoon commander when we served together with Delta Co., 3rd Tanks, 5th Marine Division, from 9 February 70 to 4 February 71 (NOTE: we served on the M103A2 120mm "RAMP QUEEN" tanks).

After the Seattle reunion we stayed in touch, with phone calls and sending Christmas cards. When he sent the card, there was a photo of him, his wife and dog. He will always write, "I always enjoy all the time I can with my grandchildren." When he called, he would ask if I could get him a custom-made tanker license plate frame. I would and in return he got me a subscription to the magazine "Great Last Stands of Vietnam" so I could learn more about what the Marine tankers did while in-country.

So, it now brings me to the sad part of this article. I received a letter in the mail on 12 November 2024 from Sgt Cecil's wife, Dorinda. In the letter she informed me that he had passed away on 06 September 2024 from complications of a fall in July. In the note she wrote that he was a great Marine, husband, grandfather and a friend to so many people. I know firsthand because of serving with him in Delta Company.

One of the more important things I would like everyone to know is about another article that was in the Semper Fi magazine March 2015 about a Marine from 1st Tanks that fulfills final wish for "LEISURE LADY." Let me explain: Late in 1971 Delta Co with all her "RAMP QUEENS" were headed out to the tank firing range located on Camp Pendleton. When we got there and we noticed an M4 Sherman tank that was going to be used as a target. S/Sgt Cecil came up with a better idea. Instead of destroying it, he would fix it. He ordered Corporal Christenberry in Delta 1-5 to remove the tow cables from his tank. Then he along with L/Corporal Burns and me, we took the tow cables, hooked them up to the M4. The M4 Sherman was then towed back to area 41 - Camp Las Flores. She was parked there for a while because I know, I would check on her when I had guard duty.

I left the Corps in August 71. Then when S/Sgt Cecil and I were at the Seattle Reunion, I asked him about "LEISURE LADY." He said that he got help from the maintenance people locating new batteries, taking apart the carburetors to clean them, locating new glass for the lookouts and even got her a new coat of paint. So, with his hard work and dedication of a true Marine Tanker, she was reborn.

Let me say in closing, I will miss talking with him. The time I spend with my grandchildren I will think of him every time. When I see a tank, I will think of him and all the other tankers that are at the Tank Park in the Sky. When



it is my time to go to Heaven, it will be an honor to relieve him and stand his post.

**John Wear notes:** We will see "Leisure Lady" at the Camp Pendleton track museum when we are out in CA from Sept 10 - 15, of this year.

**Carl Hokenson adds:** First let me say Happy New Year and hopefully all is well with you. Received my copy of the SB today. In reading it any seeing you picture on page 17. You guys look like you're still in high school. And what was Peavey wearing? A gillies suit

## Blessed

**Jim Coan writes:** I read and closed out your last letter, then started thinking about what you wrote about being "blessed." Thank you for those kind words. It meant a lot to me to have you say that. I have always felt blessed re: my RVN tour because none of my platoon members or any attached unit members got hurt or worse because of any decisions I made. My overriding goal from Day One over there was to get all of my Marines back home alive. I was never thinking "What can I do to enhance my promotional future." And I never once thought "What can I do to get me some medals?" There were times during the siege at Con Thien when I was pretty certain that I would never survive that hell hole. Somehow, I did, and I've always felt blessed to have made it home in one piece.

Like most combat vets, I had PTSD initially, but it has faded away over the years, thankfully. I think writing about my experiences helped greatly. Marrying the right woman also helped. Next year will be our 50th Wedding Anniversary. S/F

## Remembering Jeff Griffith

**Mary Beth Griffith writes:** Thank you for getting my letter posted in a recent issue of the Sponson Box. It was a bit long-winded ... (as critiqued by my son!) ... but I feel better now that I said what was in my heart. I was sifting through Jeff's papers while cleaning out his desk and I came

across a stack of business cards. Five were from Saudi Arabian engineers but I felt that presently it's not a good time to contact them to inform them of Jeff's passing. LOL!

I found Charlie Carson's card, so I gave him a call. I asked him if he'd heard about Jeff's passing and he said, "No, but I figured that's what you were calling about." Charlie went on, "I don't know if Jeff had anything good to say about me. We really didn't see eye to eye. He picked me up...and what was he? A corporal or a Sargent. I don't know. We started off on the wrong foot."

I replied, "Charlie, Jeff always had good things to say about you and that's why I called."

He laughed, "You know, Jeff always wanted to be a tanker, but..."

I said, "Charlie, did you happen to read the latest Sponson Box?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Oh! I wrote an article in it that you might want to read!"

Wish I could have seen his face as he read it and the follow-up letter in next Sponson Box! Harry Christiansen also called me and was very angry. It was great to hear the great things that he had to say about Jeff and him out on some combat missions together. Hope all is well with you! You helped the Marine's wife aching heart more than you'll ever know. Hugs and a smooch! Semper Fi!

## Retiring from the USMC VTA ... (?)

**James (Sgt Mike) Ledford writes:** Last Christmas Huey Ward and I were talking about our PTSD related problems. Losing too much sleep and reliving nightmares about our Vietnam experiences. We used to like our Sponson Box publication, but it keeps reminding us of things that are best left in the past. Even though we weren't tank crewmen, driving ammo through the enemy gauntlets had its share of adrenaline. I'll never forget my Con Thien ammo runs or the battle of Dong Ha Bridge. I do want to forget them some day. I always want to remember my fellow Marines to my dying day, and that is not so far into the future. Huey and I were in the company of heroes—Alpha Company, 3RD Tank Battalion, 3RD Marine Division. When I checked in at Da Nang in September, 1967, the admin guy said we've got an ammo tech with track experience. You're going to "Bloody Alpha". The rest is history. SEMPER FI.

**Rick Lewis responds:** Gents, the whole point of coming to reunions, is getting Vietnam off your chest. Over all of the many reunions that I have attended, I have had more members come to me and say this has been the best therapy for my PTSD far above anything the VA has done for me. My wife, Joy tells me of wives who have talked to her telling her how much better their hubby has been since becoming a member and coming to reunions. She even had one wife tell her she never knew that her husband had even been in the service, let alone in >>

Vietnam, but said the VTA reunion is the best thing that has happened to our marriage in years. I know for myself it's been very for good for my soul. So, to both Ledford and Ward: Yes! Getting the Sponson Box is just part the healing process ... attending the reunions and sharing

stories is the other very important part of unloading the bricks of Vietnam out of your ruck pack. I'm sorry they didn't see the big picture!

**RE: REPLY = Something the U.S. hasn't done in over 70 years**

The idea that keeps me sane ... Well, relatively sane... is that by the US engaging in the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese begged Russia and China for help. The Russians spend billions on helping their slant-eyed little brothers. And after the end of hostilities, the Russians spent more billions rebuilding the country. In the end, the Russians went bankrupted and the USSR simply went away. By participating in the Vietnam War, our contribution to the end of Russian communism was complete. ■

**This is completely true in the US Military**

**"In the barracks you'll have a black friend dancing cha-cha to Bad Bunny because your Puerto Rican friend is DJ. Your Indian buddy is making naan for the country boy who never heard of it, Your Russian friend is admitting that whiskey isn't so bad, and your other buddy is trying to teach you a game he grew up playing in Vietnam...and we're all just confused about why idiots are racist."**

3RD TANK BN. NOV 10, 1970  
HEADQUARTERS PLT.  
USMC 195TH. BIRTHDAY



OKINAWA (THE ROCK)

A peaceful Marine Corps Birthday for 3rd. Tanks for the first time since March of 1965, it's now 1970 and the US has started it's pull out from VN. Tanks were one of the first units pulled out. Looking at this picture, you can't see all the new tankers that were upset they were not going to VN. Standing to my right is Greg Auclair. He too was on his way back to VN, but like the rest did his time on the Rock. I had 6 months in VN when tanks got pulled so I had 180 days and sea bag drag left on the Rock. It also was the last time Auclair and I saw each other for many years, and when we did, we were both 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt's.

NOTE: Rick is the tall skinny Marine standing to the left of the "dark green" Marine. ■

*To the Great Tank Park in the Sky*

**"When people don't express themselves (in writing), they die one piece at a time." --Laurie Halse Anderson**

**Lt. Col. Everett L. Tunget (Ev) USMC (Ret.), 1932–2021**



Born on August 26, 1947 in Stockton, California. Passed "When people don't express themselves (in writing), they die one piece at a time."—Laurie Halse Anderson

Lt. Col. Everett L. Tunget (Ev) USMC (Ret.), was born July 28, 1932 in Fort Wayne, Indiana and died at home in Ridgecrest on September 5, 2021. Ev was the fourth son born to Brant and Bessie Tunget. After graduating from high school, Ev attended Butler University on a football scholarship before enlisting in the Marines. His first duty station was China Lake. Ev served in Viet Nam as a Tank Battalion Commander and was awarded a Bronze Star for bravery and a Purple Heart. After retiring from the Marines, Ev had a second career in the aircraft industry in California and Arizona. Ev retired to Morro Bay and Whidbey Island and then Woodland, CA., eventually returning to the Indian Wells Valley in 2019 to be near family. Surviving him is his Significant Other, Donna Tolkmitt. Ev was a very active member of the USMC VTA.

**Frederic N Goger 1945 – 2024**

August 31, 1945–October 25, 2024 (79 years old). It is with deep sorrow that we announce the death of Frederic N Goger (Middletown, New Jersey), who passed away on

October 25, 2024, at the age of 79, leaving to mourn family and friends. Leave a sympathy message to the family in the guestbook on this memorial page of Frederic N Goger to show support.

In the quiet moments of reflection, amidst the gentle rustle of leaves and the whispered song of the stars, we shall carry Frederic's memory with us, a guiding light illuminating the path ahead. May Frederic's journey be filled with peace and serenity, as his find rest in the embrace of eternity. Fred was an active member of the USMC VTA.

**John M. Sukel**

John M Sukel, 81, of Scranton, Pa. After graduating from high school in 1961, he enlisted in the Marine Corps where he served as a tank crewman and eventually a tank commander with 2nd Tank Bn at Camp Lejeune. After his service he worked as a karate instructor. Unfortunately, he was not a member of the USMC VTA. This obit was posted in Leatherneck magazine.

**LtCol Robert L. Gover Jr**

LtCol Robert L. Gover Jr., 99, of Orange County, Calif. He served in the Marine Corps for 26 years, including in China, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. He was a tank commander and pilot and was the recipient of two Purple Hearts. Unfortunately, he was not a member of the USMC VTA. This obit was posted in Leatherneck magazine. ■

*Editorial comments in the following article represent the views of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Marine Corps or the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association. We'd like to ask that anyone who thinks that they may be offended by what is written in this article, please skip over it and do not read it. The article is intended to be thought provoking and is not intended to be dogma.*

## A Better Plan for the Marine Corps and the Nation: Vision 2035

BY LT. GEN. MARTIN STEELE (RET. JAN 4, 2023)

*Force Design 2030 mandated cuts in infantry, cannon artillery, aviation, engineering and armor have degraded the MAGTF's combined arms capabilities, this retired lieutenant general writes.*

The Marine Corps' current plan, Force Design 2030, eliminates critical war-fighting capabilities and radically restructures the Marine Corps as a force to support sea denial operations in a Pacific war with China.

But, a new proposal for the Marine Corps, created by retired Marine generals and available online, offers an alternative approach.

Vision 2035 seeks to restore and enhance the Marine Corps' principal role as the nation's premier expeditionary force-in-readiness — organized, trained and equipped for forward presence and global response in support of the combatant commanders and their regional campaigns to compete and win against adversaries across the spectrum of conflict.

At the core of Vision 2035 is the Marine air-ground task force. Each MAGTF has unique and incomparable war-fighting capabilities, which are flexible and scalable. They contain organic aviation, ground and logistic units under a single command element, making them integrated and self-sustaining.

This approach has been used successfully by the Marine Corps, is unique and cannot be replicated by any other service. Using the versatility and expeditionary nature of the MAGTF, commanders can task organize Marine forces to operate globally in support of all combatant commanders.

Unlike Force Design 2030 with its focus on the employment of small, dispersed forces operating in the littorals, Vision 2035 generates MAGTFs capable of conducting theater shaping and sustainment operations prior to hostilities and then quickly shifting to offensive operations for crisis response and contingencies.

As a middleweight force, the Vision 2035 MAGTF can set conditions for the joint/combined force and contribute to the conduct of decisive operations as part of a Naval expeditionary force or for sustained ground combat ashore.

To revitalize the MAGTF's potency and assume a robust posture for global response, we must build back lost capability. Force Design robbed the MAGTF of key combat and combat support capabilities needed to fight as a combined arms team. Cannon artillery remains essential for units engaged in sustained ground combat.

Ukrainian forces fire 2,000–4,000 shells per day to suppress Russian artillery and support maneuver by Ukrainian infantry and armor units. Standard artillery projectiles cost hundreds of dollars per round while a single HIMARS rocket costs over \$100K and a single Naval Strike Missile cost about \$1.7 million.

We must also build back the MAGTF's resiliency and endurance.

Casualties are inevitable in war. Marine infantry battalions, cannon artillery and rocket batteries, helicopter and fixed wing squadrons, and armored protected firepower must possess the organic personnel and equipment to function during combat operations even after taking casualties.

It is essential to reverse cuts in force structure, equipment and personnel that were billpayers for Force Design under a questionable "divest to invest" strategy.

Force Design 2030 is a defensive strategy, while Vision 2035 is an offensive strategy that retains maneuver warfare as a doctrinal approach to war-fighting. It relies on the single-battle concept described in MCDP 1–0, Marine Corps Operations, in which commanders and planners synchronize forces in time, space, event and purpose to maximize opportunities for

success across the battlespace.

Force Design 2030 mandated cuts in infantry, cannon artillery, aviation, engineering and armor have degraded the MAGTF's combined arms capabilities for close and rear battles at the expense of an overemphasis on long-range fires.

Vision 2035's center of gravity is the individual Marine infantryman. The potency and lethality of the MAGTF will be built back with the capabilities required to support Marine infantry in the close battle where decisive outcomes are achieved and winners and losers are ultimately decided.

An indispensable component of Vision 2035 is to increase the Marine Corps' capability for global response through forward presence and rapid power projection.

Key enablers include a robust fleet of amphibious ships and strategically located maritime prepositioning squadrons to support deterrence and capacity building with allies and partners, and permit a rapid transition to hostilities if deterrence fails. These capabilities are strategic assets that directly support combatant commanders during military competition and war-fighting. Their current and future funding must be prioritized over lesser programs like the light amphibious warship.

Sufficient amphibious shipping must also be available to support larger expeditionary formations allocated to support multiple combatants and sub unified commander's contingency requirements.

A properly configured and strategically based Maritime Prepositioning Force, comprised of independently deployable squadrons, is required to project military power and support the employment of MAGTFs tailored to meet known and emerging requirements. The numbers of amphibious ships and maritime prepositioning squadrons must be driven by operational requirements and not solely by budgeting considerations.

The mostly unstated premise of Force Design 2030 is that advancements in sensors and precision munitions have rendered maneuver all but impossible. Vision 2035 rejects this conclusion.

For every advance in technology a counter-capability can and will be developed rendering the advance either ineffective or obsolete. Ongoing operations in Ukraine show that while advanced sensors and munitions are combat multipliers, they alone are not decisive.

Vision 2035 values innovation and seeks to leverage existing and emerging technologies to make the MAGTF more maneuverable and lethal.

In conclusion, Vision 2035 provides the conceptual approach to restore the Marine Corps as the nation's premier expeditionary force, mitigates risk in an uncertain world, and provides the foundation for the Corps to meet its Title X and Goldwater-Nichols' responsibilities. It restores the primacy of the MAGTF with infantry and combined arms as the central components of Marine operations. It ensures the Corps remains ready, relevant and capable of responding to the crises and contingency requirements of all combatant commanders. And finally, it provides an alternative to Force Design 2030, which is on a course to destroy the nation's 9–1–1 Force.

Lt. Gen. Martin Steele, USMC (retired) is a career armor officer. His last assignment was as Deputy Chief of Staff Plans, Policies, and Operations, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. "Marty" is also a charter member of the USMC VTA as well as currently serving as a director on the VTA Board of Directors. ■

## Protecting Our Nation

AUTHOR UNKNOWN, BUT APPRECIATED.

Last night, I learned a big lesson about patriotism, compassion for your fellow man, and respect...from an 8-year-old little boy at McDonalds in Shamrock, Texas. Amongst French fries and chicken nuggets, in walks a man and his wife. The man was wearing a Vietnam Veteran cap that was adorned with several pins. I don't know that anyone noticed him when he walked in, nor did they notice his cap; but the eight-year-old little boy did. Even after he had asked his mom several times (three to be exact) if he could "go shake that guy's hand and tell him thank you for his service", she said no, for fear of disturbing his supper.

But on the fourth plea, mom gave

in; and the little boy marches right over to the gentleman and says, "Sir, thank you for your service" and shakes his hand. The gentleman pauses, and with a cracking voice says, "Young man, you are very welcome and thank YOU for noticing...you just made my day, maybe my whole week!"

Everyone went back to their meal and before the boy left, the gentleman walked over and said, "Son, I would like for you to have this." It was his 1st Marine Division pin that he wore on his cap. The little guy says thank you and quickly takes his cap off and let's his uncle attach the pin to his cap and runs to show his mom and aunt what

the veteran had given him.

I don't know who was more overcome with emotion, the veteran, for someone noticing all that he had fought for; the little boy, for meeting "a real-life hero" or those that observed this interaction. All in all, it reminded me that no matter the place, no matter the time nor situation, honoring our soldiers past and present, and their unselfish sacrifice is paramount. So, here's to all those that stepped up and shouldered the responsibility of protecting our country, there are no words big enough to say thank you."

## And so, it Began

SUBMITTED BY VTA MEMBER LEE AKIN

Shortly before midnight, on 4 August 1964, President Lyndon Johnson interrupted national television to make an announcement in which he described an attack by North Vietnamese vessels on U.S. Navy warships and requested authority to undertake a military response. Johnson's speech repeated the theme that "dramatized Hanoi/Ho Chi Minh as the aggressor and which put the United States into a more acceptable defensive posture.

Two days prior, 2 August 1964, The Destroyer USS Maddox (photo), cruising in the Gulf of Tonkin waters, 28 miles off the coast of North Vietnam, engaged three North Vietnamese Navy P4 motor torpedo boats. The commander of the 7th Fleet's Destroyer Division 192, Capt. John J. Herrick, who was aboard Maddox in charge of the mission, ordered the



ship's captain (CDR Herbert Ogier) to have gun crews fire upon the torpedo boats if they came within 10,000 yards and when they did, the American sailors fired three rounds to warn off the North Vietnamese boats, but they kept coming.

Two of the P4's fired first, but due to Maddox's heavy fire of 5-inch shells, the torpedo boats had discharged their torpedoes at excessive range and all four missed their mark. The third fired its torpedoes, without effect, but dueled Maddox's 5-inch guns with its

twin 14.5 mm machine gun, achieving one hit on the destroyer.

Soon, four F-8 Crusaders from the USS Ticonderoga arrived on scene and attacked the torpedo boats. The combination of fire from Maddox and the F-8s severely damaged all 3 boats, and forced them to retreat. Several NVN sailors were wounded,

and 4 killed. No US sailors were killed or wounded.

Another attack was reported on 4 August, but found to be false. In Johnson's speech, he emphasized commitment to both the American people, and the South Vietnamese government. He also reminded Americans that there was no desire for war. "A close scrutiny of Johnson's public statements ... reveals no mention of preparations for overt warfare and no indication of the nature and extent of covert land and air measures that >>

already were operational." Johnson's statements were short to "minimize the U.S. role in the conflict; a clear inconsistency existed between Johnson's actions and his public discourse. Within thirty minutes of the 4 August incident, Johnson had decided on retaliatory attacks (dubbed "Operation Pierce Arrow")

That same day he used the "hot line" to Moscow, and assured the Soviets he had no intent in opening a broader war in Vietnam. Early on August 5, Johnson publicly ordered retaliatory measures stating, "The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitment to the people and to the government of South Vietnam will be

## Thoughts

BY VTA MEMBER GARY MCDANIAL

My wife said that I should, on a daily basis, sit and write down my blessings. While I may not write them all down, I do count them and remember how blessed I am.

We live on a small farm not far from the capitol city. That city has pretty well overtaken us, but I still am able to live and move in somewhat of a small-town environment. Included in that environment are barber shops, mom-n-pop restaurants, gas stations, several farm stores, pawn shops, gun stores. Within this environment can also be found former military members (both short-term enlistees/draftees and active and retired military), retired business men and women, school teachers, and many people who have immigrated here. What a joy to be able to "swim" in such a pool of friends and acquaintances!

If I could only learn to conjugate the verb "To Be", I could be a writer. Sad that I will have to take such experiences/memories to Fiddlers' Green" at my demise.

In my mind, there are at least two places where a cup of coffee really made the day. The first (and those who wore the green utility uniform will remember) was when the temperature was in the mid-thirties, your utilities were covered in mud, and your green socks were soaking inside your combat boots and the chow truck arrived. As we stood in line for whatever the mess hall sent out to the troops in the field, we filled out canteen cups to the brim and warmed our cold hands as we tried to get some portion of comfort.

The second place comes to mind now. It was about two weeks ago when I stopped by the farm store to pick up feed for the chickens and a couple of sacks of crimson clover to sow in two small pastures. The Old Sarge was sitting on the tailgate of his beaten-up truck, large coffee cup in hand. "Hey Mac, come join me." Almost as fast as the bolt went forward on the M-14, he produced another large coffee cup that was covered in advertising for a savings and loan bank (no longer in business, to be sure). The cup was once white, but is now stained by months and years of use and abuse (say rolling around on the floorboard of the old truck). Sarge reaches for the largest thermos in the county, pours two fingers of coffee in the cup, swishes it around, dumps it out, and pours the cup full of the blackest and thickest brew, and hands it to me.

I plop down on the truck's tailgate (a little concerned that it might not hold the two of us), and we start chatting. First topic of the day turned out to be China. How the Old Sarge is able to keep up with not only the local and state news, but national and worldwide, boggles my mind!

All that watching and listening on top of being the "man-about-the-county" is hard for me to fathom. When does he have time? After we discussed the balloon flights (by China) over several military bases, I reminded him that on the fence surrounding the brig at Camp LeJeune, there was a sign warning (troops, visitors, passers-by) that photographs were not permitted. "Yeah, and I am sure if we had snapped

redoubled by this outrage."

One hour and forty minutes after his speech, aircraft launched from U.S. carriers reached North Vietnamese targets. On August 5, at 10:40, these planes bombed four torpedo boat bases and an oil-storage facility in Vinh.

And so, it began...

a few shots, we would have bypassed the LeJeune brig on our way to the Navy brig at Portsmouth" he replied. For a few more minutes we beat that subject up, sipped our strong coffee, and watched the lads load up farm supplies on at least twenty pickup trucks.

All of a sudden I remembered that my boss had given me a list of items to pick up at the Chinese Super Store and that list included items for the Old Guy's supper. Jumping off the tailgate, I carefully dump out the remains of my java (that stuff could explode). As I headed toward my truck, I mentioned an article on the China Marines (1900-1941) and told him to look it up. For those of you who are laboring through this disjointed article, check it out! It can be found online and in the November 2005 issue of "World War II Magazine." I don't remember any mention of tanks in the story, but you will come away with a lot of information and be glad you searched. One of these days I will pen an article about my father's fishing buddy, a real China Marine!

I enlisted in the USMC in 1962. The CMC at that time was General David M. Shoup, a World War II Medal of Honor winner. He was the only one of the Joint Chiefs who opposed the Vietnam War. Looking back over the years it saddens me that our Country let a third-rate Communist country outlast and defeat us and that our government never had total victory (Unconditional Surrender) as our goal. Ten plus years, billions of dollars, and sadly, the lives of fifty-eight thousand American lads, wasted.

## More Stories from Jim Cowan

### The Nancy Sinatra's Show

Nancy Sinatra's show was scheduled for Feb 8, 1967 at the 9th Engineers Bn area. Maj. Hooker and I concocted a scheme to attend. Nancy's song "These boots are made for walking" was a bit hit at the time. Nancy's group also included a bunch of most attractive young American females, a rare sight indeed in these parts. Hooker and I arrived early and managed a seat in the fourth row, left front. The show was great, the American gals looked better than ever! Later in the show, Nancy walked to our area, down the aisle right in front of us and she sat down in the lap of a Marine right in front of me. Why him and not me? This young Marine had an M-14 slung around his shoulder, Nancy sitting on his lap and flash bulbs going off! I'm sure it was a 40 - 50 second episode that he will never forget. So, Hooker and I got a good look at Nancy Sinatra, who was as pretty as ever and smelled great. It was a good show.

### The Coin Flip

On June 8, 1967, orders took me from 1st Tank Battalion to the 5th Marines at An Hoa. Another officer and I made the flight together and as I recall neither of us were over pleased with this assignment. We arrived at An Hoa, were issued flack jackets, helmets and other combat gear. We were told to "stand by" to catch the next resupply chopper to our assigned units. One of us was to join the 5th Marines and the other to join the 7th Marines

(I think). Both units were deeply involved with Operation Union at the time. We decided to flip a coin to see who went where. We flipped. I can't recall who called the toss or who won but I ended up going to Hotel Co, 2/5. The Lt went to the other unit. The story of that initial flight for me from An Hoa to Hotel Company will be told later, as it was an exciting venture. The story of the other officer ends here, he was killed that day.

### Tich Tay Showers

The 1st Tank Battalion civic affairs section was assigned the small village of Tich Tay.

This village was located near Chu Lai. The battalion did the usual "good" things for the village: Improved the school, provided Med Caps and Dent Caps, provided security, etc.

One of our brainstormers had to do with the construction of shower facilities near the small hospital/dispensary that we had constructed in the ville. These showers were 55-gallon drum that were mounted on short scaffolding with some sort of rope pull device to release the water.

The drums were filled by rain or manually from the river nearby. Soap was provided and promptly stolen. Of course, the sun would warm the water.

The 55-gallon drums were stolen faster than we could replace them. We wondered why the locals valued the drums so much. We gave up on the shower caper when we found out that the 55 -gallon drums made excellent

ovens to dry fish! Showers and cleanliness could wait.

Dried fish were most important! Before Christmas the tank battalion moved north to Da Nang and I am sure the lumber in the shower scaffolding and dispensary went into the village cooking fires.

### Bullet Hole Decals

In early 1967, the 1st Tank Battalion was firmly in place near Da Nang. A Company was left in Chu Lai, the other gun companies supported Marine infantry units in the Da Nang area. The battalion had a maintenance facility with a concrete pad. Ceremonies and formations were held on this pad when visiting dignitaries rated such performances.

During one such change of command function, a visiting VIP commented on the battle damage visible on several of the tanks (M48A3's). These gun tanks had recently been fitted with a vision ring or a "donut" as it was called. This vision ring device enabled the tank commander to see in all directions with his hatch "buttoned up." The ring had eight or so vision blocks in it, the glass was some seven inches thick. What the tank crew had done was obtain some decals that resembled bullet holes in glass and they had placed several of these decals on the vision blocks. The alert VIP spied the decals, commented about the vicious close combat and left. The tank crew laughed for days.

## Cooking is an Art

BY JOHN WEAR

One day Lt "Fuzz" calls me over to the platoon bunker and tells me that "Chewy" Bonilla has to take his gun tank down to Dong Ha for quarterly maintenance and that my tank needs to cover that part of the perimeter. That section of the Con Thien perimeter is the East gate where the grunts

leave the safety of the wire to go on foot patrols (mostly at night). We pull out of our "permanent" tank slot and motor south a short way. The road along the perimeter is a sea of dark reddish-brown mud. The monsoons are still with us and the morass is a mess. We arrive at the bunker that "Chewy's"

crew uses and since the doorway of the bunker is situated next to the muddy road, we see that the mud has washed into the bunker. It takes us all day to scoop out the mud; create an earthen berm to hold back the mess and make the bunker livable. Just about the same time as we finish a 6-By truck >>

splashes by and since I recognize the driver, it is Bartlett, from bootcamp, I hail him down. He smiles at me and says, "Hey Wear! How long has it been...Bootcamp?"

"Yeah, that's for sure. You're Motor-T, huh?"

"Yeah, it's a livin'. Tanks huh?"

"Yeah. What you packin' in your truck?"

"Shit for the officers' chow hall. You want some fresh eggs?"

"You bet your sweet ass we do!"

He climbs on the back and hands down a piece of blue cardboard egg crate with a dozen fresh eggs in it. I offer him my hand and my thanks and

we bid our farewells.

Next, I have Steffo and Pappy start a small fire of C-4 and wood while I grab a piss pot (steel helmet) and very carefully break all 12 eggs inside the piss pot. I scramble those beauties up and apply the heat to the bottom of the helmet. All three of us have this dreamy look of anticipation when all of a sudden, our beautiful scrambled egg omelet turns onto a foul-smelling burned mass of crap. Shit! I figure that due to no grease or butter, the lousy heat conduction of the cheap steel and way too high heat we have learned another lesson of life. Cooking is an art. Rats!!!

## Prologue to Fields of Fire

BY JAMES WEBB

"And who are the young men we are asking to go into action against such solid odds?"

You've met them. You know. They are the best we have.

But they are not McNamara's son, or Bundy's. I doubt they're yours.

And they know they're at the end of the pipeline. That no one cares. They know."

- An anonymous general to correspondent Authur Haley.

Hodges sat against a wet, grassy paddy dike and lazily stirred a can of Beef and Potatoes with a dirty plastic spoon. Raindrops popped and sizzled as they pelted the tiny stove in front of him, which he had made from punching holes in another C-ration tin. His eyes were sunken, his face gaunt and bearded. He dragged mechanically on a muddy cigarette, mindless of the stream of water that was pouring off his helmet down the back of his neck. There was no way to avoid the rain. This body was crinkly from it and he did not care anymore.

Snake approached and sat on the dike, at Hodges' shoulder. He took off his glasses, and absently wiped mud off the lenses using his skivvy shirt. He put them back on without examining the wiped lens.

Across the paddy o their front, in the mist of a rain drenched tree line, a group of dark-clothed figures hastened into a stone pagoda. The tank's turret followed the shadowed apparitions, its long 90-milimeter gun tube point-

ing toward the trees like an ominous finger. The turret halted and the tube exploded and in one quick moment a White Phosphorus shell erupted inside the pagoda, having been shot expertly through the door. Thick with smoke rushed from every opening of the pagoda, and mixed with the low rain-mist.

Snake nodded, lighting a cigarette. "Get some tank. Half a dozen crispy critters in there, now."

Hodges grunted, "Fucking tank."

"Ahhhh lieutenant." Snake continued to stare absently at the shrouded tree line. "More gooners than I ever seen. We could really be in the hurt locker tonight."

"That's what I mean. Fucking tank."

Snake shifted his gaze to the treeless tank that had anchored them in such an indefensible position. It sat like a wounded mastodon in the middle of the exposed paddy. The company was digging a perimeter around it, to protect it. "Senator is pissed again."

"Is that all?" Hodges tested the juice form the Beef and Potatoes. "The

Editor's Note: Back in the late 1970's when US Marine Vietnam veteran, James Webb's book (Fields of Fire) first came out, I read it cover to cover. I recently went to my rather extensive library of books on our war and I noted that his novel was missing from my collection, so I went online and purchased what turned out to be the 40th Anniversary edition and I after receiving it and reading it cover to cover again, to my surprise, I had exactly zero recollection of reading Mr. Webb's words. Not that it was bad, but it was like I had never seen them before. I want to share the book's prologue with you-all.

man needs a baby-sitter. Do they have babysitters in the dorm at Harvard?"

"Kersey came down and told me to put a team in the tree line. The one on the other side. I sent Senator. You shoulda heard him bitch and moan."

"I hope you tied a string to his arm so he won't get lost."

"Kersey told me to move my holes farther out, too."

"Out where?"

Snake grimaced, "In the middle of that paddy. He's a hopeless case, Kersey. I ain't gonna do it Lieutenant. Enough is enough."

Hodges grunted again, with a sort of apathetic irony, "Old Kersey would like that. Then when you get blown away out there, he can get another Silver Star."

"You want me to do it?"

"Nah. Go back and gid in behind the dike and eat your chow. If scumbag comes back, tell him to deal with me."

Snake allowed himself a small, appreciative smile, "I already told him that. Thanks Lieutenant." The >>

turret moved slowly again, and the gun exploded. To the north, out of their vision, there were other sounds of another unit fighting furiously. Hodges began eating his Beef and Potatoes, holding the can by the half-opened lid. He ate slowly, impervious to the other fighting.

Snake measured Hodges from the perch atop the dike. "Senator been talking to you, Lieutenant?"

"Senator?" The 90-millimeter gun exploded again. Hodges grinned wryly. "No, I don't speak Harvard."

"He ain't said anything about when you were medevacked and we lost Baby Cakes out on Go Noi?"

"Nope. Why? Was it his fault again?"

"No. No, sir. It wasn't his fault. But it wasn't our fault either. You know how it is in the bush, Lieutenant. Sometimes things do dinky dau. You know that. But that Senator. He's got some weird ideas. He's been sulking ever since the Bridge, but he's worse lately. Five months you and him been with the platoon. You'd think the man would get some bush smarts in five months." Hodges continued to eat, apparently uninterested. "Miss your woman, huh?"

Hodges grinned, suddenly awake. "Yeah, I do. Gonna marry me a Jap.

## REMEMBERING RICHARD CECIL

CPL. DON DOTY, GUNNER CHARLIE 2-4

While reading the latest issue of the Sponson Box I noticed the passing of MSgt Cecil. I'm pretty sure this is the same "Sgt Cecil" that I remember from Vietnam. I didn't know him well, just saw him a few times when on operations or back in our tent area at Phu Bai. I've written the following story from what I remember, it might be a little foggy.

During operation Beaver, (as I recall) in May '66 we were on an armored column with our company, Charlie, 3rd Tanks, consisting of 15 tanks and with a platoon of five Ontos in the lead. The first Ontos hit a mine which set off all the rounds inside and completely destroyed it. There was nothing left of the crew and pieces of the Ontos were scattered for about a hundred yards.

We continued on for the next several days through Co Bi Thanh Tan valley clearing out VC and North Vietnamese Army. It rained nonstop. The whole valley was pretty much nothing but mud up to

your knees.

Finally, we were in so much mud that several tanks couldn't move. After crossing a low spot, the two lead tanks had made it out and were on higher ground about a thousand yards ahead of the rest of us. The remaining tanks of the column were stuck and unable to make the crossing. Choppers flew in a unit of infantry to set up a perimeter around them while we tried to dig out and join up with them.

The first night there we were on 50 percent alert. The platoon commander,



Remains of ONTOS after hitting mine.  
Co bi than tan valley ,June ,1966

Figure that one out, will you? I think we've all gone dinky dau, Snake. Senator flipped out, you extended your goddamn tour, and I'm marrying me a Jap."

Snake stood up. The tank fired again. Far to the north an artillery mission dug into wet earth. "Well, I better go dig me a deep hole. We're gonna be sucking wind tonight. I never seen so many gooks." Snake turned to walk away, then called to Hodges, "Don't let that tank sneak off, Lieutenant."

Hodges shook his head. "Goddamn tank. Goddamn Kersey. Goddamn Senator. You better dig a neck-deep hole."

Lt Pinion, was laying on the floor trying to get some sleep. The driver, PFC Bob Funaro, was asleep in his hatch. The loader, L/CPL Lavalli, and I had the watch. Around 4:00 AM I was so tired I felt like I was in a trance when a loud noise brought me out of it. Several more bangs. We were under mortar attack. I jumped down and landed in the middle of Lt Pinions chest. He assumed the commander's position and I took my gunner's seat. We could see off in the distance that the other two tanks were also being hit. As I recall, the tank commander of one of those two, Sgt Cecil had to crawl around and find his crew and move them to safety and then get back up on his tank and move it to a better position then crawl out and up into the gunner's position and button up. He radioed for us to fire on his position as the VC were crawling all over his tank. Before the attack the crews of these tanks were laying on the ground trying to get some rest and a break from being cooped up inside their hot tanks. I believe the first rounds killed two of them and bad- >>

ly wounded the rest. This sergeant was the only one able to function. His ventilation system had been knocked out and he was choking on the fumes from the 90 mm rounds he was loading and firing by himself. My hydraulic system was knocked out and I was only able to traverse the main gun by cranking it by hand, I was able to get off sixteen 90 mm rounds towards the other position and at some old abandoned French stucco buildings that we believed



Crossing the small stream/large mud hole. We laid the large timbers out to enable the crossing

the VC were firing the mortars from. Don't know if we hit anything or not. The battle lasted until near daybreak.

They had to fly in some 10" by 10" timbers that were about 15 to 20' long. We laid them down to make a

kind of road and started moving out. There were only about fifty or so of these timbers so we had to dig them back out of the mud and kept leap frogging them forward. They didn't come out of the thick mud very easily

crew as best he could. I believe he was awarded a Silver Star for his action. Thought I would share what little I knew of a Great Marine. ■

after a fifty-four-ton tank mashed them down. They also became water-logged. It took about a dozen or more Marines to lift one. It took several days for us to get out.

I didn't personally know any of the dead and wounded Marines but some of the other men in my platoon did as they had all come from Camp Lejeune together. They took it pretty hard.

Sgt Cecil kept a cool head while repelling the enemy and caring for his

## Cover Story

38 Months, My Time in The Marines by Ben Cole is the latest book by a US Marine Vietnam tanker. Available on Amazon and other E-book. It has many of his photos in a variety of stories that includes the book's front cover and how it happened in Chapter 24...

### TANKS IN THE MUD AT CON THIEN

*"One Marine carrying an M60 sunk and almost disappeared in the mud beside the tank."*

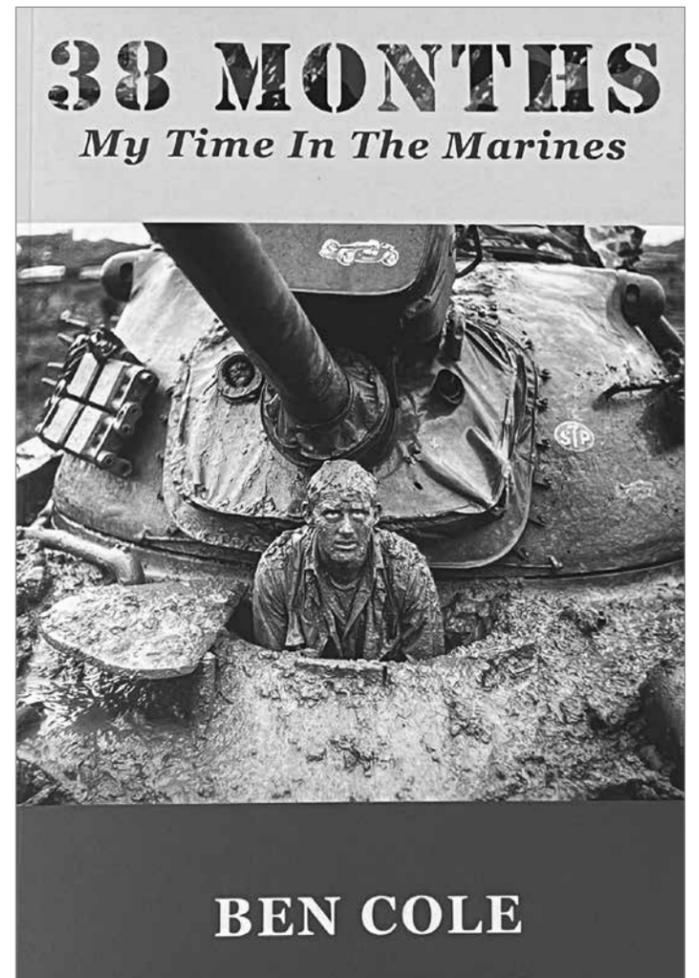
It was just another muddy and dreary morning at Con Thien in November 1967. This small shell scarred hillock was just a rifle shot south of the demilitarized zone and North Vietnam. Grungy and muddy sand bagged bunkers sitting in a red clay mush, surrounded by barbed wire and minefields, was christened the Hill of Angels in an earlier era. This most northern outpost in South Vietnam, soaked by monsoon rains and targeted by the big guns of North Vietnam, was a dismal and dangerous place in the fall of 1967.

At its center was an old weathered concrete bunker built by the French decades earlier, marking the high point of local geography and their influence in the region. Now it overlooked the new firebreak or "McNamara's line," a new defensive firebreak to help stop the infiltration from the communist north. At 525 feet above sea level, it became a strong point for the bulldozed defensive barrier that was never completed. This muddy little hilltop remained a major obstacle to an invasion across the DMZ.

Concealed and dug-in weapons just a few miles along the Ben Hai River had every square foot zeroed in as far south as Dong Ha, the main headquarters and supply base. But being closer and sited on a rise, Con Thien was the default target for everything in the North Vietnamese arsenal, from the Russian sniper rifles to Chinese field guns.

Our counter batteries at bases at Camp Carroll and air strikes from the south would sometimes silence them when they were spotted, but they would soon be back in business at another location. Their shells usually targeted Marines in the open, but their random shelling found many in bunkers. Adding to this misery was a drizzling rain creating thick mud that made it almost impossible to move about.

Medevacs and resupply flights were perilous. Near my position on the western perimeter was the wreckage of a H34 that was brought down during one such mission. Not only did the fire from the NVA make the approach to the outpost a dangerous proposition for choppers, the landing pad itself could become a trap with thick mud. Knowing that disabled choppers could only be retrieved by air, bringing in more inviting targets, watchful spotters hunkered down close by and waited.



## What Members Are Doing

### Christmas Dinner 2024



Armando Moreno writes: Here is an article for the Sponson Box, involving these two Marines on my left. Michael Maldonado and John Contos. Mike was transferred to our Ontos platoon, after he contracted Malaria, and was transferred from a grunt unit. He survived his tour. John was a passenger on the USS General Leroy Tinge transport that took us over the Pacific to Okinawa. He was awarded two Purple Hearts and served two tours, got out as Staff Sgt. Retired as a Captain, California State Corrections. All three are Life Members of the Marine Corps League Coastal Valleys Detachment 1340. Mike lives nearby and I found him 25 years ago and John and I did not know each other until after meeting him at the local VA clinic, we were surprised that our paths had crossed in December 1966. John, also, served admirably, as a previous Commandant for our Detachment.

Hope you are well, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Thank you, John for keeping the candle burning, my total respect for all you do for all of us. ■

One morning, the sound of two large aircraft engines preceded the sight of a Marine CH-53, a heavy lifter flying over with a H-34 slung underneath. After passing over our tank slot heading south, the noise slackened, and we listened for muzzle blasts that would probably follow. We weren't disappointed. Seconds later, rounds impacted where the damaged chopper had been grounded a few moments earlier. In retrospect, it was surprising that the Marine Air Wing would risk one of their few heavy lift choppers to retrieve one that was considered obsolete especially over the dangerous skies of Con Thien.

Truck convoys would sometimes resupply us, but they would have to run the gauntlet on the last leg up the hill from Bastards Bridge. More trucks brought more guns to fire. A successful convoy required planning and luck, when and where to make a run. Night runs were typically safer, but without lights, getting struck and stranded meant a dark, treacherous hike in NVA territory.

Another idea that evolved and worked reasonably well, involved the use of our tanks. The south side of the hill was out of the direct view of most spotters from the north. A helicopter flying in on the deck coming from the >>

south could land at a random location down the hill behind the base. It could off-load a trailer from a sling and pickup medevacs and be long gone before the enemy guns could shift their fire. The tank could then retrieve the loaded trailer. A bird dog observation plane with fighter bombers on station could keep the NVA gunners' heads down long enough to get the job done.

Our 53-ton M48's surprisingly, were about the only vehicle that could navigate the mud. It would sink through the watery slush to the firmer, un-churned and harder red clay where, with its weight and higher ground clearance, it would find traction. It could then push through the brown mush near the surface.

The monsoon rains made the path to each tank's position a mud-filled ditch. This slot of slush served its purpose when almost no other vehicle could move inside the wire. For most tankers, this job was a welcome break from the monotony of sitting around and getting shot at. One day the word came down was it our tank's turn again and having done it before we knew what to expect. We would load up a squad of grunts for security at the gate and proceed half-way to Bastard's Bridge and pull a water trailer back. Almost everyone looked forward to getting on the move around again, except the driver.

Driving down the tank trail, this sunken road filled with mud, a watery wave would build up on the slope plate directly in front of the driver's hatch. Closing this hatch wasn't an option because the mud would cover his vision blocks and he could not see. The best way was to open the hatch and try to keep the right speed. It was a fine balance to go fast enough not to get stuck, and slow enough not get covered with a wave of mud.

It would become an exercise of driving the tank with one hand and wiping the mud from your eyes with the other. It was such a nasty experience that everyone agreed to take a turn. I still remember my time, returning cold, wet, and muddy with little prospect getting warm or dry anytime soon.

But that morning something happened that made our day. A motor transport driver from headquarters came by just as we were preparing to go. He expressed an interest in becoming a tanker. I asked if he had ever driven a tank and if he would like to learn. He said he would, and I told him it was his lucky day. After a little basic instruction, I told him he would make a great tank driver. Now crawl in and start it up.

We backed out and started down the sloppy tank trail. He kept it moving and made it to the lake of mud near the gate, maintaining his speed and keeping the mud wave at bay. After helping the grunts on board, the engineers opened the southern gate, and we rumbled out. The chopper had left the trailer about a quarter mile down the road. We were able to hook it up on the first try and high-tailed it back up

the hill. A couple of shells hit close to where the trailer had been, but we were well away from that impact area.

Back inside the gate, the grunts off-loaded. One Marine carrying an M60 machinegun sank and almost disappeared in the mud beside the tank. I turned the turret so I could lower the barrel to help get him, and a couple of guys grabbed his flak jacket and pulled him out. There were a few inaccurate shells intended for our congregation, so we headed back home to our slot.

Our new driver, now confident of his driving ability, rapidly accelerated up the mud trail apparently forgetting about creating a big mud wave. Going uphill a little too fast, the tank created a mini tsunami that engulfed him before he could slow down.

He managed to wipe his eyes and make it back home safely. As I climbed down to turn off the master switch, a muddy blob with two white eyes stared back at me. I retrieved my camera and took a couple of shots of our newly qualified tank driver before he emerged from the driver's hatch. That photo still reminds me of one small and funny experience on that muddy and otherwise miserable day.

During this time, I recall standing watch one rare sunny day beside the tank. Hearing a muffled hissing sound, I looked up and saw dirt flying from a narrow furrow as if made by an invisible plow no more than ten feet away. There was no explosion, just a long-plowed groove in the ground. Apparently, an NVA recoilless rifle gunner missed the elevated outpost next door, and the shell came over and landed near our tank. It impacted in the soft mud and did not go off. I promptly added a few more mud-filled sandbags to the front of our tank-side bunker.

On the other side of our tank's slot there was a mud filled crater that would catch clear water when it rained. Not having a shower for quite some time, I would sometimes take a sponge bath with my sweat towel and helmet full of the water. One day, I was told that crater had been a bunker that had taken a direct hit with Marines inside. I never used it again.

Thirty-two years later, on a revisit to Vietnam, I found this exact position that we had occupied in that fall of 1967. The site was being cultivated as a dry rice paddy and in the corner of the small plot was a pile of unexploded ordinance. Apparently, those explosives had been collected by hand and placed out of the path of a plow or the hand of a curious child, hopefully preventing a terrible event that occurs too frequently in this war-scarred country.

I wondered if that unexploded anti-tank round was part of that pile or still buried nearby, only to be found in the future unexpectedly? It is said that Leatherneck Square was the most heavily bombarded area on the earth. The area around that muddy little outpost was undoubtedly the site of countless events whose stories will never be told. ■

Summary: In this edited transcript of episode ten of Tracking our History, where Pete Ritch and Frank "Tree" Remkiewicz reflect on Pete's extraordinary experiences as a Marine Corps platoon leader during the Vietnam War. Transitioning from infantry to tanks, Pete recounts intense operations such as land-clearing missions, firefights, and the constant challenges of combat. Through vivid recollections, he explores themes of leadership, trust, and the unbreakable bonds formed with fellow Marines in the heat of battle. As he shares stories of survival, loss, and resilience, Pete offers a deeply personal look at how the war shaped his life, both during his service and in the years that followed. Focusing on preserving his history, he discusses his work with the Vietnam Tankers Association and his efforts to pass down the memberships' stories to future generations. A powerful testament to brotherhood and bravery, this interview offers an intimate look at the human side of war and the enduring legacy of those who served.



PETE RICH

## From Grunts to Tanks

A Marine's Journey Through Vietnam

### Introduction:

**Tree:** Our guest today is Lieutenant Pete Rich. Pete is the secretary of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association. His background in Vietnam starts with a three-month infantry platoon and ends with the 3rd Marine Division, 3rd Tanks, and Bravo Company. Yes, Pete is another officer who spent a little time with the grunts before joining Bravo Company as a tank platoon leader.

As an infantry platoon leader, his operations included Operation Scotland 2 and the Dawson River. As a tank platoon leader, his operations included Scotland 2, Kentucky, Lamson 277, Cato Creek, Virginia Ridge, Herkimer Mountain, and Georgia Tar. Pete rotated back to the world in October 1969.

I know this will embarrass Pete just a smidgen, but Pete is the recipient of a Bronze Star and a Navy-Marine Corps Commendation Medal. Both are further signified with combat attachments, which means both medals are for actions done in combat. The Bronze Star, the higher of the

two medals, is worn just above the Marine Corps Commendation Medal, which is also for performance in combat. Perhaps we may persuade Pete to describe some of that specific action in a while.

Welcome, Pete. Could you give our listeners a brief description of your duties as a platoon leader in the Marine Corps infantry?

**Pete:** Tree, thank you for allowing me to take advantage of your podcast that will be posted on the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association's website. Your creation of this particular program is just what we need to beef up the history project with more ways of doing things.

### A Grunts Unexpected Journey

**Pete:** It was ironic. I flew out of El Toro with two or three of my other tankers, who had just finished tank vehicle school and arrived in Okinawa. I spent about two days there, and then I arrived in Vietnam. I think it was October 15th, 1968. I wonder why that date sticks in my head. >>

When we got to Da Nang, two of the tankers and I were pulled aside: Jay Heffernan and Hank Fuller. And they said you're going up to 3rd Division.

We said, "Yep, 3rd Marine Tank Battalion, right?" "No, you're 3rd Division, and you're grunts for 90 days!" Well, to say the least, I was slightly uncomfortable because I had flunked map reading! I was in the remedial map reading course at infantry training, so I figured I was going to embarrass tanks, and I wouldn't need a map. You know, you just drove over things when you're in tanks. You didn't really need a map.

When I went to my company, the 9th Marines, I'm not sure if they were the 'Walking Dead,' but I was hoping they weren't. For 90 days, I was a Platoon Commander. We were choppered into newly created firebases. We set out a perimeter, which brought in the bulldozers and artillery. We'd set up there for about 30 days while artillery was called into various spaces along the DMZ. I knew we were near the DMZ because we could not shoot at the artillery. The artillery could not shoot due north or due west because that was Laos, and north was North Vietnam. We were shooting basically everything due south and east.

The patrols were great. The first couple of days we were there, we cleared the mountain off, set up the artillery, and then ran patrols. About the fourth or fifth day we were there, the monsoon season started, and I swear it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. We were in foxholes with tarps over them or poncho liners, whatever we could get, and then tried to dry out during the day. It was so overcast and humid that it felt like it was raining the whole time I was there. I don't remember a lot. I didn't have any real action, thank goodness, as a grunt commander.

I took over a very salty platoon and had an excellent Platoon Sergeant. I remember that about halfway through my 90 days of grunt work on a firebase mountaintop, I got a message from the Company Commander, infantry commander, to report to the LZ with my gear at first light, with no other explanation. So, I asked my platoon sergeant, "What's going on?" He said, "I don't know; you must have done something wrong." How could we do anything wrong? So, I followed the orders, and it was kind of neat. I was going up the trail, and it was just first light, and I saw this log going across the trail up to the LZ, and it started moving, and it was a python going across the trail. It must have been four or five inches in diameter and moving slowly. I just let him go by and continued up the trail.

It was pretty rugged terrain, but when I got up to the LZ, the company's First Sergeant met me there and said, "Your mom died. You're going home. You're going on an emergency leave." It was me and four other troopers. The other four guys were going home for a return to the world, and, of course, I was a little shell-shocked. I sat there for about six hours and they couldn't get choppers in because of the cloud cover. Suddenly, we got this radio message that

said they were coming in. You have 30 seconds to get on the chopper because that's the only break in the clouds we have.

It was probably about 1200, maybe 1300, when I got on the chopper, and 26 hours later, after two other stops in Vietnam and a stop in Okinawa, I was on my front porch in Syracuse, New York. And that's how well-prepared the Marine Corps is and how efficient the Marine Corps is when there's a Marine who needs to get something done and needs to get somewhere. It was phenomenal.

When I returned from emergency leave, I was still in the infantry, doing perimeter patrols and perimeter security. For the last month and a half or the last month of my grunt duty, I was at Vandegrift, and we had perimeter security for about 30 days. On January 2, 1969, I got orders to report to Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion in Vin Dai, right on Route 9 between Dong Ha and Khe Sanh.

I kissed the first tank I came in contact with because I was so glad that my grunt time was over. Jay Heffernan, who left for Okinawa with me, was in OCS with me, tank school with me, and basic school with me; he and I were grunt platoon commanders when we got to Vietnam. He spent an extra 30 days there because he was so good at it. And all I can think of is I was not that good at it, so they got me to tank school, and you can't screw that up too bad.

**Tree:** I heard you mention Hank's name. I thought you were in 1st Marines. Is that correct?

**Pete:** No. I went to the 3rd Division, for the infantry assignment and then to the 3rd Tank Battalion for my tank assignment, so I was in the 3rd Division the whole time.

**Tree:** Bravo Company?

**Pete:** Bravo Company, 3rd Tanks. Jay Miller was my CO, and he was perfect. He had been a Platoon Commander in Bravo Company, then was promoted to, I think, XO and then to Company Commander. He was pretty salty. As a result, he entrusted his platoon commanders to do their jobs. If you didn't do it, you would hear about it. He said, "You've got five tanks, usually split into two sections, heavy and light. But, you know, you run it. If you need me, call me. I'm not going to micromanage you." Which I thought was great. It was refreshing to hear that because I was a new guy, I would probably get a lot of scrutiny and needed some help from time to time. He left it up to me to come to ask for it rather than him to meddle, which I thought was great.

The other good thing about the 3rd Platoon was that they had just come back from Khe Sanh. And all of them, all 20, I think we had 23 platoon members then. They all had either a full stint during the siege or a partial stint at the siege. I had at least 35% of those 23 3rd "Platooners" signed up for another six months. I said, "Why are you guys doing this?" And they said, "We got through Khe Sanh. The rest of it will be a piece of cake." So, I got a very salty platoon and was lucky that way too.

## Records and Forgotten Memories

**Tree:** I can appreciate that completely. As a side note, you said 9th Marines. Was it one, two, or three?

**Pete:** I'm looking at my records here, and it says 9th Marines. I'm not sure which one it was. In fact, I have to go back. While we're talking about that, if you haven't gotten your records from St. Louis, I recommend everybody who was in the service get those. That's the only way I remembered half of the stuff that we're going to talk about.

**Tree:** I've had some real difficulty with that, but my intent is to do that. I once wrote away for records and got all my hospital records, so I was pretty sure I knew what happened at that point. Everything else is kind of lost. As a side note, when I got out, my DD-214 showed absolutely nothing other than that I'd been in the Marine Corps and was honorably discharged. That was it. I got one of those 13-month early outs back in 70. They rushed the DD-214 through, and as a result, I have no idea about anything, and my memory is wiped out.

**Pete:** I would not have known to do that except for Bob Peavy, whom I was talking to one time. I can't remember which operation I was on. Much of that was because we were "OpCon" to either a Marine Infantry unit, an Army unit, or an ARVN unit. ARVN units were my least favorite ones. I think I erased the whole infantry assignment because I didn't want to think about it anymore. I had to go back and look at some of those records, and that's where I got my company, 9th Marines. I didn't write down in my notes here what it was: 1, 2, or 3. Who were the Walking Dead?

**Tree:** 1/9.

**Pete:** 1/9, okay. You knew the history.

**Tree:** I did, and I knew most of what I knew was not the pleasant type of thing to know about 1/9. Hell yeah. They had a real running battle with a particular NVA regiment that they just used to knock the crap out of each other whenever they got together. Did you notice any differences between being an infantry platoon leader and a tank platoon leader?

**Pete:** There was a lot more maintenance, and that was par for the course. I was really fortunate. I had a very good maintenance crew at Bravo Company, and this is no lie. I never had a breakdown in the nine-plus months I was in a tank platoon. Now, we hit mines, and we threw track, and we had very bad fenders, but never an oil problem, and never blown an engine. Never a transmission problem, and I think that was one of the things that Harold Rentsch did for us.

Harold was our Maintenance Chief. He made sure that every crew had a mechanic on it, and the driver on my tank, Bravo 3/3, was a "shitfister" (a fond name for tank maintenance). That's short for a tank mechanic. He would, and typically was a driver because the driver was close to the track, gears, brakes, acceleration, and all those other things.

I was really fortunate. I had guys who could tell you, "Hey, you've got an oil leak chief, and here's what we've got to do," or "Here's what we need." We needed three end connectors and a sprocket wrench and that really made a difference. I never had a breakdown, so I give Harold full credit for that because he was all over us about maintenance.

## Leadership

**Tree:** I was in Hank Fuller's platoon. I'm curious about this. What was your primary leadership style or approach when you were in the tank platoon?

**Pete:** I learned early on to trust my NCOs and was very fortunate. I had Jim Jewell. I had Sergeant Soto. He went from Sergeant to Corporal to PFC and back to Sergeant. He was great, and guys like Chris Vargo and Solano, and I've got the names in front of me. Jerry Solano was seasoned. He went through Khe Sanh and helped for another six months.

I picked his tank because it was the most experienced crew. So, he stopped being a tank commander, became the loader, and never said a word about it. I would ask him, Jerry, Sergeant Solano, "What do you want to do? What do you think we ought to do here? Should we really go down this track?" Stuck in a rice paddy, he said, "I don't care what the grunt says. We're not going to get stuck in a rice paddy." Trusting my NCOs was great, and I had very, very good NCOs, and that was the one thing I had been told from the day I enlisted.

My recruiting Staff Sergeant told me, "Look, you're going, and you're doing Marines today. You're going to go to Vietnam. You'll probably be a grunt, so if you don't want to sign up for that, see you later." I said, "I'm signing up for it. I know Marines, and I know what they do, and I want to be the best trained there is for what I've got to do!" and I think that's why, and he said, "Well, then trust your NCOs."

They kept telling me that I was the adult supervision. I said, "No, no." As far as I was concerned, the platoon sergeant and anybody from Sergeant to Lance Corporal who had been through Khe Sanh were guys I was going to quiz before. I said, "Here's what we're going to do, guys."

**Tree:** Did you enter the Corps right after college, or how did that come about?

**Pete:** I graduated on a Saturday in June; the following Monday, I think it was the 3rd of June. On the 5th, I got my draft notice. I had already talked to my Marine career recruiter before because I knew it was coming. I beat the draft and joined the Marines, and the good news, or probably the smartest thing I ever did, and I take no credit for it, sheer luck, I had a three-month wait before I could go to OCS, so I had taken a job with Johnson & Johnson. I told them, "I'm going into the Marines in 90 days." They said that's okay, "Come to work for us."

The good news is when I got out, like you did with an early out in 1970, I called J&J and said, hey, "I'm getting >>

out!" and they said, "We owe you a job though we don't know what we'll do with you."

I went back to making Band-Aids from midnight to 8 a.m. on the midnight shift. I think they were trying to run me off. I had a newborn baby and a wife who was going to stay at home and make sure that little guy was okay. So, working midnights worked out great because I'd come home at 8 a.m., could play with the little guy until nap time, and give my wife a break, so it worked out well.

Still, I felt that if I was going to Vietnam, and it was pretty well, you know, no doubt about it, I wanted to go with the best, train, and the Marines were the best.

### Arrival and Manpower Challenges

**Tree:** Well, you got there about four or five months after I did. I got there in June of '68. I was one of those multiple-wave replacements. At that point, everybody seemed to rotate home, and we brought in 10 for each tank battalion. So, they sent 10 of us down to the 1st Marines and then 10 of us to the 3rd Marines, so it was a fairly large class of 20, and we all just went. Were you ever short-handed?

**Pete:** We ran with a three-man crew, but I think I always had complete crews when I had a heavy section. When we had a light section, we were doing some bridge or Ocean View for 30 days at Ocean View, which was like going to the beach. Later, I was on three-man crews, but I had a four-man crew most of the time, particularly when we had a heavy section.

**Tree:** Right. Bravo Company. I thought Bravo Company was afloat for a while. Is that just an incorrect remembrance?

**Pete:** I tell all my Navy friends that I was only on a boat during infantry training. We had to climb down the rope ladders into the crew boats going ashore, but we never went ashore. We climbed down the rope and climbed up the rope. That was my entire time doing squid stuff. But no, I was never afloat.

In fact, I flew over on a commercial airline. I think it was Continental something. It wasn't the Continental Airlines that we knew and loved. It was Continental International or something like that. There were 450 of us that left San Francisco. We flew over Alaska.

We came out of tank school in khakis and short sleeves, got on a plane to San Francisco, still in short sleeves, refueled in Alaska, and were walking around freezing to death, and then on to Okinawa.

**Tree:** That was the switch, wasn't it?

**Pete:** You heard about it, but it was nothing like going through it and experiencing it. It was the efficiency and the way we got things done. The hurry up and wait, you hear a lot. I think everything moved at a much better pace, and maybe it was because we needed to get where we were going and get some other guys out of there who had been there as long as they had been. But I think I spent maybe three days in Okinawa doing whatever orientation it was.

Basically, it was, get some beer, drink some beer, and then go. Yeah, it was very, very efficient compared to all the stories you heard about it.

**Tree:** We spent three days there. I spent most of it in the shower and ironing the last uniform I wore. I pulled your article from VTA and read through it, so I know you've been on a ton of operations.

Would you like to pick one and describe what it was like? If you can throw a firefight in there or someplace along the lines. But that's up to you.

### Land Clearing and Combat

**Pete:** I spent most of my time on the land clearing operation between Route 9 and the DMZ. This was McNamara's dream, to go put all these sensors in there so we could hear the bad guys come in and get the good guys out there. We had five tanks and three Army APCs. We'd go out with 25 bulldozers alternating between CBs and the Army. We'd go out from Cam Lo up towards Con Tien. We'd send out the bulldozers. We'd send tanks out in five strategic positions, like a perimeter. We had some grunts with us, but not many.

The bulldozers would go out, and they'd just run in a circle, and they'd overlap each other. And they would take down what we would call underbrush. It wasn't jungle, and it wasn't just all elephant grass. It was probably 10 feet high, with very thick hedges and such. They would take it from that to a tilled farmer's field, so you went from 10-foot-high undergrowth to a freshly plowed field where you could see for miles.

You could see 40 yards across where the first bulldozer was. And I did that a lot. I did that for at least two of my nine-and-a-half months with tanks. It was exciting. My tank was sitting there watching the bulldozers go by, looking at the soil and looking around where they had been through. And I see this hand come up out of the dirt, literally moving around, not quite waving, but like it's five fingers and a palm. It comes up straight from the dirt. I jumped out of the tank, stopped the next bulldozer coming by because he was probably going to scrape it off, and said, "I think there's somebody down there."

I put a couple of guys out, and we started digging out, and the other hand comes up. So, I got two hands there, and I know the guy doesn't have anything in his hand, like a grenade or anything. So, we pull him up, and he's an NVA, fully uniformed NVA scout who was in his tunnel, and we caved in his tunnel on him.

We dragged him out of there, and we had an interpreter with us. He said, "There's another guy down there." I said, "Well, hell, we are not digging him out until we see his hands." We got the interpreter to tell him, "Show us your hands, and don't do anything stupid." We got him out. It turned out that they were scouts, and they actually had a full diagram of Cam Lo, where the security was, where

the tank placements were at night, where the machine guns were, and the same diagram for Vin Dai, which was where Bravo Company Third Tanks were.

They knew where the tank placements were. They knew where the machine was and the com shack, they had on there. We got all this G2 that they were taking, and they were probably going to go back and zero in some mortars and stuff on these sites whenever they decided to. But it was just incredible.

We blindfolded them, put them on choppers, and Jerry Solano, who was, again, my tank commander on 33, said, "Hey, Lieutenant, there's an AK-47 and a Luger pistol in his gear." I said, "Well, Sergeant Solano, what do you think we ought to abscond with it." I said, "Okay, go put it in the tank."

We put the two Gooks on the chopper, and they took off. They had all their other gear with them. And I get a radio message from my company commander. He asked, "Do these guys have any weapons?" I said, "Well, I thought I saw an AK and a pistol." He asked, "Where are they?"

"I said, "Skipper, I'll find them." I went to Solano and said, "They know what's missing. We've got to take them in."

I said, "All right, you boogie back to Vin Dai, take this in, tell them they were just, you know, we missed getting them on the chopper and keep us out of trouble." So, he did, and to this day, Jay Miller says, I had to coax you in there to get that gear back from you. I said it would go to some pogue, and sure enough, it did. He said, "We'll tag him for you." I said no and never saw him again.

That was part of the land-clearing thing. And I swear, you could see, when we got done over probably a period of two or three weeks, you could see for a mile and a half, two miles across, almost to Con Tien, which was raised a little bit above ground. There weren't many heights out there, but it was probably at 400 feet, and we were at sea level, so it looked like a pretty good mound.

### The First Real Firefight

**Tree:** So, you worked on the trace?

**Pete:** Yes, and I never knew if they put sensors in, but that was what we were told. And when my first real firefight was there, I was in another very small one when I first got to tanks, but it was a turkey shoot on our part. We were going through a patrol with Marine infantry, and we were patrolling north of this particular road—I don't think it was Route 9—while the ARVN were patrolling south of it.

We went on our patrols and didn't find a thing—I mean, not a trail, not a footprint, no action. One day, the ARVN were doing something else, and I asked the Army Major in charge if we could go south instead of north of the highway this time. He said, "Yeah, go ahead." We didn't go out, well, maybe a meter, a click. And we see this smoke in this tree line. So, we sent up grunts across the open field, and they started taking some small arms.

Then, like a training film, we come out of the tree line, we're guiding the tanks in, pull up, traverse around, we do flechette and buckshot rounds, and all of a sudden, the small arms fire ceases. So, we went in, and what we did was we caught a small group, probably five or six NVAs, heading south; we thought they were safe because they were in the ARVN territory of patrolling. We got their gear, and then the infantry Platoon Commander called me on the radio and said, put the bodies on the fenders of the tank and bring them in. The little village, the nearest village, was Mai Loc.

We get to Mai Loc with them, and he says, "Take them off and lay them out next to the little village here." I said, "Skipper, why are we doing that?" He said, "We got the gear and whatever it was; if there's any intelligence, you know, you've got it. Your Platoon Commander has it." He said, "Just lay them out there." Sure enough, the next morning, the whole village came out, all 200 villagers, mostly old men and women and small kids. And they were looking at the bodies, and the bodies were not pretty. I mean, we were shooting flechette. We had one guy that was basically stuck to a tree. No offense, Tree, but he was stuck to a tree.

**Tree:** I understand. I appreciate that.

**Pete:** And sure enough, one of the mama san's fell on her knees and started hugging the body, and that was her son. And the interpreter there said that's her son. I said, oh, shit.

The very next day, we come out and do the road sweep out of the village. There's not a kid on the side of the road. The villagers are nowhere to be seen, and we find a mine. The road sweep finds a mine. We knew the village was probably a VC supporter, NVA supporter. I should have known it. The minute there wasn't a kid on the side of the road, I should have said, "Guys, wait, hang on, get the sweep out there." And they found it anyway, thank goodness. But if we had just run down there without a sweep, we would have hit it.

**Tree:** I was going to say we were out on Mai Loc. later, I think, April of '69, someplace, April, May of '69, someplace like that, sometime like that. That was a hot spot. Was that north of the free fire zone?

**Pete:** Barely.

**Tree:** Barely, yeah.

**Pete:** It was probably so close to the borderline that we didn't pay well. We took small incoming with the small arms first, so we had permission to shoot. But I think it was right on the cusp of being in that, you know, get permission before you open up.

I was really fortunate, too. Other than that, Mai Loc, Lang Vei, and all the rest of them were north of Route 9, between Route 9 and the DMZ.

Ambush and Ollie North

**Tree:** To backtrack for just a second when you were with the Grunts, and you were out north of Khe Sanh, Rockpile, that area?

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**Pete:** I had no idea where we were until I found out that I was with my company. I just knew that we couldn't fire west and north. I assumed we were probably west of Khe Sahn, but we had to be right on the ocean border. We had a special forces encampment that was not far away, right? We could see them, but we had no interaction with them, and I saw one of them. I think he was coming by to go down the road. They had an airstrip there, too. He said, "I'd invite you guys over, but the Montagnards are protecting us, and everybody else is bad. I can tell you guys are Marines, and your good guys." And he said, "We got wire for the NVA and the VC, and then we got wire in case the Montagnards get pissed off and come after us." He said, "Forget it, Skipper. Enjoy your stay in that bunker." But it was incredible.

**Tree:** If I remember correctly, that was the special forces camp that was overrun at one point, and I cannot think of the name.

**Pete:** I think it was Hill 155. Just west of Khe Sanh. While you were out there, you were right on the border, and you knew the Ho Chi Minh Trail was not two clicks away, maybe a click away. You could hear the trucks at night. That was probably my first experience shooting at anything.

But back to the land clearing. We had just finished the trace and had pulled into our burned-up area where the bulldozers parked at night. We were getting ready for our maintenance. There was a bird dog out flying over us. And he said, "Hey, two clicks away over the next hill, there's a bunch of little guys, bad guys, going down the trail. It's so clear because you guys had cleared it. You get up to that ridge; it'd be like shooting fish in a barrel." I had two tanks, two APCs take off, and a grunt platoon. We got into this narrow spot before we got up to that next hill, and we stopped before going into it.

I said, "I don't like narrowing down and going single file, guys." And the bird dog comes back and says, "You just come up down through that little gully and get up on that hill, and you're still just walking down there like going through a park." So, I got in the lead, two APCs, and a second tank. We got barely through that little gully and took small arms and 50 cal. They hit the driver of the APC that was right behind me. And so, I did a U-turn.

I cleared the ambush site, turned around, and went back in. The infantry platoon commander stood on my fender on his radio, pointing and telling people to do this. I think he was calling an airstrike. I rotated the 90-millimeter around and knocked him off the fender. I proceeded to put some buckshot into where the small arms were coming from. So, we got done with that and quelled the ambush. There was an infantry grunt who was killed. We got him out, a couple of wounded guys. We got them medevac'd out. And then we backed off to the top of where our bulldozers were.

They brought in an airstrike. And I said, "Good thing we didn't linger down there." I got chewed out by the battalion commanders. "You left the site!" And I said, "Sir, they

were going to bomb us." The infantry guy called in the artillery and the planes before I could even get on the hook. And sure enough, they did. They strafed it, and then they dropped some napalm.

The grunt platoon commander comes up, holding his ribs. I said, "You all, right?" He said, "Oh, shit, he hit me with a barrel." I think he had broken ribs. So, we medevac'd him. And his code name was Blue. And I just called him Blue, and he called me Bravo 3. It turned out he was Ollie North. And he was on the fender. I ended up being named in his book where he got knocked off the fender of a tank like a baseball. That was my claim to fame with Ollie North. But he was in the way, and he wasn't doing us a lot of good standing under giving directions.

**Tree:** Let me say that Lieutenant North was with us the night that Mike Wunsch was killed.

**Pete:** Is that right? Oh, my gosh.

**Tree:** We're in that same book. Wow. It's an area where he talks about his machine gunner. His machine gunner was behind me. We got chewed up pretty badly, but I had nobody killed. And I melted a barrel on a 30, and we ran out of ammo. I'm going to toot my horn just slightly here; he credited us with keeping the place from being overrun.

**Pete:** Oh, I'll bet.

**Tree:** I mean, we just, I was so pissed off.

**Pete:** Oh, yeah. I don't blame you.

**Tree:** He got around, I guess, huh?

**Pete:** I don't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. I could see some Company Commander saying, this guy's out of control, you know, I'm going to go. I'm shifting him over. Next time I get a Lieutenant slot in another platoon other than our company, I got to get him out here. But these guys loved him. They were pretty salty. This was after Mike Wunsch was killed. It was February of '69.

**Tree:** No, that was before.

**Pete:** That was before? Okay.

**Tree:** It was August of '69. I'm sorry. I can tell you exactly that on July 27th at about 3:45 in the morning; he was the first one hit. They must have known who he was. He took an RPG to the head.

**Pete:** Oh, my gosh.

**Tree:** He was beloved by pretty much everybody in the company.

**Pete:** Oh, yeah, he was.

**Tree:** We still talk about that. That was a real blow for us.

**Pete:** Did you meet his sister at the reunion that she came to?

**Tree:** Yeah. I had talked with her earlier and invited her to the reunion.

**Pete:** Oh, that's great.

**Tree:** She and her husband will be interviewed, and two interviews after this one, the entire family will be interviewed. Two sisters and a brother, they're going to sit

around a coffee table, and we're just going to talk for a little while. She's a neat, neat lady.

**Pete:** Oh, yeah. Very impressive.

**Tree:** Absolutely. We've become friends. And to be honest with you, I can tell you what she does. We email back and forth probably a dozen, maybe two dozen times a year. I call her little sis, and she calls me little bro.

### Preserving History and Memories

**Pete:** That's great, and that's what is so good about your writing classes and the blogs and interviews we do. We're meeting all of these family members, kids, and grandkids who want to know, who, you know, they had never talked about it, and who want to know. And then you get them, like, you get enthusiastic folks like her and her family. They'll be worth the price of admission. You'll want to listen and hear them out. I hope that encourages folks to do more of what you're doing. Getting it out there and making sure everybody knows.

**Tree:** Well, you know, that's a wonderful segue right into your involvement with the VTA. Talk a little bit because you are quite instrumental, perhaps behind the scenes. Still, you are quite instrumental in pulling all of this information into a coherent group of outputs, I guess I would say, or, I mean, because you're involved in interviews and all kinds of stuff. Could you talk about it?

**Pete:** It started probably in 2000; I'm going to say 2004 before I joined the Tanker Association. Our local library in Huntsville, Alabama, ran it in the paper that the Library of Congress was running and set up a program called the World War II Veterans History Project. And they were trying to capture all the stories of the World War II vets because they were going to that big parade field in the sky, you know, left and right. So, I said, boy, that would be something neat to do. And, you know, having been in the military, I think I might be able to relate to it a little bit.

I can talk to them, video them, and so forth. So, I started doing that with them. And it was fascinating. It was absolutely phenomenal. They were very similar to the Vietnam veterans in one way. They went and did what they had to do, came home, started families, went to work, became teachers, became engineers, and became whatever they had to do. They just went on to life like, "Okay, I did my time, and I'm back, and I'm going to be a good citizen and do things." And be an adder to society. And, of course, they got a hero's welcome.

That's the difference. Our guys, Vietnam veterans, did the things they had to do, lived up to whatever expectations we had of each other, getting things done together, probably with some, you know, obviously without the social concerns that were going on and some of the leadership in Washington. We could have probably been in Hanoi and taken it over if we really had to.

That's not how it went. That's the biggest difference.

They came home, welcomed, but they got on with life, got productive, and so on. We came home, and I didn't have a bad experience when I came home. But I know a lot of guys that did. Most of the guys in the DTA went on, became teachers, engineers, managers, and supervisors, started their own companies, and moved on. Yeah, we all had some baggage. But when you get a wife and two kids, you can't be feeling sorry for yourself for very long.

In interviewing those World War II vets, I got to thinking. I said, "We ought to do this for the VTA." I just stole all the material from the Library of Congress, figured out how they did it, and got a free group called Witness to War that's in there. In fact, I think you interviewed with them in St. Louis.

**Tree:** Yes.

**Pete:** We got videographers who came in and did this stuff, and they did a good job and so forth. And we have 72, I'm serious, 75 interviews, probably all on the website. And probably a third of those are two-on-two, three-on-three interviews with guys who were in the same incident but saw it from a different perspective. You know, the gunner saw it this way. The driver saw something else that he had to contend with. The TC was doing all the stuff that a TC does during a hotspot. So, the stories have been very good and very well-received. And it's a labor of love.

Now that there are no more tanks or track vehicles in the Marine Corps, we've got to capture this stuff. It is truly a labor of love, but it all started with me talking to World War II vets. I think our vets in the VTA have responded nicely. There are a lot of things they don't want to talk about, don't want to be bothered with, or think wasn't important or wasn't something that you should either write down or talk about on a blog or in an interview. But everybody's good.

I don't know a Marine in this world without a story. So, tell us your story, and do it on a blog like Tree's, do it through his writing program, or let us phone in and interview you. Whatever you want to do with it, we can do it.

So that's how I got started. And then the offshoot of that was it's very easy to take the sponson box articles that a lot of our guys have written and convert those to the Forgotten Tracks books, which are basically like a coffee table book with pictures and stories that are from our members primarily and are well done. My graphics designer who does the sponson box can pull a story out of there and plug it into a Forgotten Tracks book, make it look a lot classier than I would, put pictures around it, and we've got basically a book that you can put out on your coffee table, and I think a lot of guys do.

Instead of having a stack of Sponson Box that we've got to plow through and find something, every now and then you can pull that up and go to page 73, and there's Tree's story about something that he did or that he'd like to do or something that he thinks we should know about on page 76. >>

**Tree:** It's a pleasure. I want to toot your horn a little bit because I function under your guise, and it's nice to have. Your management style is; turn them loose and let them do what they want to do and as long as they don't screw up too badly, you get free reign. So, you say grace over a lot of oral and written history, tradition, that sort of thing. From my vantage point, I agree with you. If we don't, we will lose it all, especially now that tanks are being obsoleted or decommissioned, or however you want to say that.

**Pete:** Yeah, and I agree with that. I think, with what you're doing and what I'm doing, this is a team effort. And I think we'll get, I certainly hope we'll get a reaction to them.

Things I've been reading for a couple of days now in a row tell me that the Marine Corps is probably going to have some dramatic changes besides the track vehicle issues. But I think you're absolutely right. And the more ways we can make the Commandant's decision to take the track vehicles off the weaponry list for the Marine Corps. Skin this cat, like with blogs or others. That's my problem.

I'm technology-challenged, but I would be open to some of the other modes of media that we could use and do things with. And like you are in the blogs; I think that's a great idea.

I asked our videographer guy who will shoot or do the interviews for us in Providence. I asked if you could convert an oral interview, like a blog or, you know, just an audio that we had, to a written Word document. And he's researching that for me. He said, if we could do that, we could take a phone interview, your tape recorder and have it in a written form and put it in the sponsor box or put it in Forgotten Tracks or send it to the local newspaper or whatever you want to do.

**Tree:** Well, let me give you a surprise. We're doing that. I've already got; I've got the first one transcribed. I started to research it a little bit. And I went all over creation looking for something. And it was sitting in my backyard all along.

But of course, with that comes all the updates and some added features like this. It's neat. It's a little bit of work. It's an artificial intelligence type as opposed to a voice or vocal type recognition. It's not quite as efficient, but it's close enough. When I ran through the first one, I had to change some words.

**Pete:** That's great. I'm glad to hear that because I knew there had to be something out there. I had heard and known about a software called Dragon, but I think that was limited to the finance fields. You could convert it, but if it's not in tables and charts, it's not going to do much good.

**Tree:** I spent about 30 years in data processing, and I've been a programmer and all kinds of stuff. But my wife has MS. So, I don't know, 10 or 15 years ago, I was looking for something where she could dictate rather than type. And it was at that time that Dragon was just in its infancy. It wasn't good. You had to do too much editing. I let it slide

until this came up. To be honest with you, I think this is a brilliant idea. If nothing else, the folks who provide the interviews can just grab a copy of the transcript and hand it out to their family if they want.

Believe it or not, all this came from your interviews. I thought, "Suppose somebody doesn't want to be on film." But not because they don't want to be. Not everybody is comfortable standing in front of an audience or talking to a group. This one is just as we're doing right now, just having an interview. So, you can be at home and, you know, have a cup of coffee and a donut or whatever and just chat. But it all came from your stuff. I'm grateful, really truly grateful for that. That was the spark.

**Pete:** You're helping me take it to the next level, which is great. I think we'll get a very good response to your ability to do just what you described. It's a very relaxed, conversational event. You can take it home, give it to the grandkids, and show it to your kids, and I appreciate that.

I was looking high and low. And I'm not the media guy, so I'm the worst guy. You weren't fooling around with media, but I figured there had to be something out there. And, of course, you knew right away. I didn't have to say very much.

**Tree:** No. Again, this was not my idea. This was your idea. I have a technology background. Most of my work was in schools, dealing with attendance, finance, and those things. But from time to time, I would come across educational technology people because, at the time I was there, they didn't have any.

We kind of served as both. So, I got involved in some of the ed tech things like word processing and graphs and charts and that sort of thing. I still have ties back in. And so, if I can't find something, if you need something, if I can't find it, then I know a couple of people who can. So, by all means, you've got these guys who do the videography and are terrific.

**Pete:** You know, they're both young guys, relatively young guys. They are so in tune with, you know, they'll never be in the military because they've got good careers. Maybe they would, but they think the VTA walks on water. The two of them will say, "Boy, I didn't realize that!" Those guys are so cool.

He said, "I didn't want to stop. I didn't want to tell you the time was coming up." I said, "You guys are great." I'll call them on some little topic that I'm working on, and they'll go around the world for me to find out what I need. I said, "What's the hot button for getting people to interview?" Both of them came back and said, "Find a family member. Make it family-related." Make it to leaving it to your legacy. Make it something that they just can't say no to. Make it something where they just say, "Yeah, I think my kids would like to hear that from me." They came back with that, and I asked myself, why didn't I think of that?

**Tree:** Yeah. My dad was in the Corps, and he never,

ever, and I asked him a couple of times. He just didn't talk about it. I only learned that he filled in the foxholes after everybody left the beach. That's what he said. So, that was it. Then he just changed the subject.

This is such a valuable thing that you've started this, and it is just such a valuable thing to be able to pass it on to not just our kids but to the generations that will follow. I don't know if you've done any of the meetings of classes and that sort of thing, but they think that Vietnam happened sometime just after the Peloponnesian Wars.

**Pete:** No. You know, history will never be the same. It's incredible. Everything has got to be instantaneous for a lot of the generation we're dealing with. Don't get me started, but, you know, instantaneous gratification helps everything.

### Lessons from Vietnam

**Tree:** You're absolutely right. I'd like to ask you one last question. Can you share with the audience how your Vietnam experiences continue to shape your life and the impact that that might have had on your family and friends?

**Pete:** I think it's more of basic Marine Corps training. Trust your people. Delegate as much as you can. Be specific. Sometimes you've got to tell a guy twice, you know, don't go left, go right, but to utilize the individual's capabilities to the best of their ability. Give them as much rope as they can handle. Reel them in. Teach them. Don't scold them. Teach them.

I just used that with my kids. I had probably a 15-person human resources group I worked with, and they're all very talented people. Still, every now and then, you need to make sure they're in the right direction. It goes right back to "Use your NCOs." Use the people who've been there and done that. Trust that experience. If they've had a good experience with something, they'll probably have a good experience doing it again or doing it in a little different fashion.

I think everything from leadership to listening to understanding other people's perspectives, all of those types of things, which you have to do if you're, you know if you're in a squad or you're in a tank with crewmen, boy, you've got to trust that gunner. And you've got to hope that the driver knows where he's going. Those trust factors just have to be there. I think that you can translate that to any field and be successful with it.

**Tree:** I would agree with you. And, you know, it's interesting. You know, it's got to be the training. You and Hank talk and think an awful lot alike, Lieutenant Fuller. It's amazing how efficient the training is and how effective it is.

**Pete:** You hear all the horror stories about boot camp and so forth. The process is designed to make you more capable, understand that it's a team effort, and make you trust and all these other good things. You probably went through some of the team-building exercises that they start-

ed doing in corporate life. We were doing that at 18 years old in the Marine Corps. You had better know who's on your left and on your right, trust them, and then cover them. It's just pretty basic stuff, but seeing it in action is very rewarding. When you get that trooper who gets an extra stripe or gets a medal or gets a pat on the back, gets a certificate. It makes you feel pretty good that maybe we did things right.

**Tree:** I agree with you. I always looked for someone who could take my place and trained them accordingly. That's important. You've been in personnel, so I'm sure you've come across this. They are two-thirds to three-fourths of your budget, and a lot of people don't realize that, but therein lies your budget. If you're not paying attention to the people, you're not paying attention to your budget either.

### Family and Friendship

**Tree:** How about your family and friends?

**Pete:** You know, I've been really fortunate. The kids were a pleasure growing up. I mean, you know, I did mess up one night where I said, look, if you're going out with your gang, give somebody else the keys. I don't want you driving but just do it. Sure enough, I got a phone call and said, your son's over at our house. I don't think you should drive home. I always told him, "I'll come get you. Just don't get behind the wheel."

And I couldn't resist. I'm driving him home. I said, "Doggone it, how many times?" He said, "I thought you weren't going to yell at me." And I said,

"You're right." He corrected me on the spot. That was a lesson learned. But very good kids, you know, little or no trouble in school and after school and everything else.

Four kids with my son's family and two kids with my daughter's family. It's really rock solid. The twins graduated this June. They were going off to school. One was on a baseball scholarship, and he got scholarships to play some ball and get some education. So, they're good and they're flexible. They've got a really good foundation. I think that starts at home. You know, you have parents that were interested. Parents that were education-first drivers. "Get to work. Go cut lawns. Go caddy at the golf course. Go work at the gas station. But your allowance is over. You're 16. Go do something that and earn your keep." A lot of that basic stuff, I think, that we got growing up still works today.

If we could ever get them off their handheld machines, then we will be ahead of the curve. But pretty strict rules. No, they don't come to the dinner table. And they aren't there, you know, from 6 p.m. until 8 p.m. You know, just put them away. You'll live without them.

**Tree:** Yeah, you're right. Absolutely right. I'm going to back you up just a second. Were you married? Did I hear you say that you were married when you went overseas?

**Pete:** Yeah, my young bride. I was in infantry training and basic school. I proposed to her, and she said >>

OKAY. Two weeks later, she said, "Nah, I don't think so. Here's your ring back." And I said OKAY. Then I finished that, and I got orders to California. One of her girlfriends was dating one of my friends at Quantico. I saw her and said, "Marcia, I'm going to Camp Pendleton in California for six weeks."

She went home and told my ex-fiancé that I was going to California. She came back down the next weekend and said, "I'll take that ring back." She came out to Camp Pendleton. We got married. She came to Camp Pendleton with me, then flew home to Connecticut to stay with her parents while I went overseas. That was that. She tells everybody, "Yeah, I married him because he was going to California."

**Tree:** What was it like to receive a letter on any given day as opposed to the days when you didn't receive a letter while you were in Vietnam?

**Pete:** It was almost as important as ammo and food. And if you could get some, even if it was, "Hey, I'm doing good." It's a true story. My niece tripped over the dog and broke his leg, so the dog had a cast on. This is trivial stuff that, at home, I would have probably said, "Oh, honey, don't worry about it." I thought, "Oh, the poor dog. We had to rush to the vet."

The letters from home were so critical and important. I always felt horrible when the Dear John letters arrived. Because you knew the minute the trooper got a Dear John letter, you had to keep an eye on them. Fortunately, not too many of those.

**Tree:** That was my experience as well. It was just an opportunity to break from what were otherwise, in a good way, pretty dreary conditions.

**Pete:** You can help me with this one. I thought my whole experience was 90% boredom and routine and 10% sheer terror.

**Tree:** I agree. Absolutely. It's hard to describe other than that. But sheer terror certainly comes close.

**Pete:** One guy said to me, how did you handle all that? And I said I woke up every morning knowing that somebody was trying to kill me. And that's when I shook out my boots for scorpions, carried my flak jacket, checked the ammo bins, and greased the grease gun. And he said, "It's a terrible thing to have to think about, but the minute you got lax or got lazy or didn't pay attention to something, you were probably going to get in trouble."

**Tree:** I tend to believe that that experience, that 13-plus months experience has become the foundation of the rest of my life. So, I still have a lot of those quirky kinds of things, you know. You sleep with one eye open and, you know, you're always looking when you're walking. You're always looking all over everywhere just to make sure that things are safe. And, yeah, I know exactly what you mean.

**Pete:** I was just going to say you've done very well for yourself. The fact that you can communicate to people that writing is good. It's not hard to do, but once you sit down and start putting pen to paper, you'll be amazed by how it comes out. We've got a whole bunch of horses we've got to get to the trough and get them drinking.

That type of encouragement, and then they've done that. I mean, you know, they'll look at the things you've written, the things you've done, both in civilian life and in the Marine Corps, and say, you know, he's got something that I could probably have somewhere deep in my soul and in my heart, and I've just got to let it out. I've got to be open about it.

I see that with you. When you're with the cadre that you hang with at the reunions, you've got some characters that you keep. Some guys, particularly Blues, said, "If it wasn't for Tree, I'd be a mess." I look at him like, really? He said, "Oh, yeah. I'd be really squirrely!"

**Tree:** That's very kind of him to say that. There's this mutual support group that he's bailed me out a couple of times at an airport where TSA and I were going nose-to-nose, for example. That's the only place with you guys that I feel safe. My guard drops considerably when I'm with VTA. I so look forward to that time.

**Pete:** I agree with you. There's something special, and people who haven't been through it will never understand it.

**Tree:** It's a great group of people, and I have not been disappointed by any of those guys in any way, shape, or form.

**Pete:** No, I know it. It's a remarkable crew.

**Tree:** On that note, my friends, we will close this edition. Come back in a couple of weeks for a new interview, and let's get together to explore tanks in Vietnam.

Mr. and Mrs. Bruce VanApeldoorn will be my guests, and we should get a closer look at the relationships between a Vietnam tanker and his girlfriend and then-wife. It should be absolutely fascinating. Until then, Pete, would you like to add anything in closing?

**Pete:** No, Tree, other than I respect and am thankful for all that you're doing to help with this very important task. I love you being on a team and being a team leader because it's going to make a difference, and we're going in the right direction. I can't wait to listen to the blog, and I want to hear about the VanApeldoorns. That'll be interesting.

**Tree:** I'm really excited about that one. Okay, we'll wrap it up and say, "And so it goes."

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Editor's Note: As a reminder, Pete Ritch was PCS to "The Great Tank Park in the Sky" on September 12, 2021. He continues to be greatly missed by both his loving family and the USMC VTA. ■

Editor's Note: I was looking at some old emails from 2013 and noted that the below story had not yet been published in our magazine. And then I remembered that "Lurch" had passed away in 2018.

God bless him.

## Two Peas in a Pod

BY LURCH LOCKRIDGE

The following is a true story. I've known both of these men for over fifteen years, but I have changed their names and dates to protect their privacy.

In early 1970, SGT Douglas Allen, USA Special Forces (SP) arrived in Vietnam. He was transferred to SF Det. 6 (Special Forces Detachment 6) which was at that time operating in Quang Ngai Province in a place called Tra Bong.

Tra Bong is 45 miles Southwest from Chu Lai, 26 miles Northwest from Ba Gia, 55 miles South from Tam Ky, and about 50 miles West to Laos and Route 14. The SF base was small and surrounded on three sides by mountains. The base itself is triangular in shape. SF had three 81mm mortars located at each point of the triangle with each base plate cemented in, making them difficult for the VC/NVA to remove them if they (SF) got overrun.

The airfield was extremely short and was made out of dirt. The only aircraft able to get in were helicopters, Caribou, and STOL (Short Take Off and Landing) aircraft like the Air America Pilatus Porters (a single turboprop Swiss-built STOL plane). "Porters" were designed to land on ice floes and other very short runways. They were a favorite aircraft for Air America back then.

In 1967, I made several trips on a "Porter" flying into Tra Bong. Normally, I sat in the co-pilots seat. First time out when I saw the Tra Bong runway I said to myself: "How in the hell are we going land down there?" My pilot simply spiraled down in cork-screw fashion. We hit the runway with the engine then put into full reverse, and abruptly stopped. I couldn't believe it. The corkscrew spiral was necessary because the VC/NVC sometimes shot at planes if they attempted a conventional landing.

When SGT Allen arrived in 1970, Tra Bong was manned by a small SF unit, the 5th CIDG Det. A-107 (Civilian Irregular Defense Group), and a bunch Chinese Nungs, mercenary soldiers of mostly Chinese ancestry and trained by the US. Nungs were tuff characters to fight against. They scarred the shit out of the VC/NVA. Nungs were also "prodigious guzzlers of beer" and stated that any group party they held that did not go on for at least 5 hours and include a 10-course meal was deemed a failure. Any male Nung was supposed to be at least 2nd generation military. In 1966-67 Nung riflemen received about \$43 dollars US per month with some extra cash too as a family allowance.

In 1967, their long-range patrols from Tra Bong encountered not only VC, NVA, but an estimated company of North Koreans who were operating near the Laotian border.

This was the base that SGT Douglas Allen was assigned to in 1970. SGT Allen was tall but somewhat skinny and because of size to became a "tunnel rat". Armed with 45 cal pistol and flashlight he ventured into many enemy tunnels to get the "bad" guys or blow-up their supplies that he found. Eventually he was assigned to a long-range patrol that consisted of four SF people, some CIDG personnel and two squads of Nungs. They left Tra Bong in the early morning hours before first light on a hot summer day and headed west toward the Laotian border and Route 14.

Moving over the mountains to the west they came to a plain that was dotted with several Vietnamese hamlets, rice paddies and tree lines. As

they began to cross an open paddy, they came under intense enemy automatic and mortar fire.

SGT Allen quickly moved forward toward a paddy dike when an enemy mortar round landed close to him. The round went off and SGT Allen was gravely wounded and rendered unconscious. The Nungs who followed him were wounded or killed. The other three SF soldiers pulled back to the small group of CIDG men and attempted to gather their wounded, but enemy fire was too intense to get them all out. SGT Allen was left on the battlefield.

As the remaining SF soldiers, CIDG, and a few Nungs retreated they simply could not recover their wounded or dead SGT Allen. NVA troops moved out from the tree line firing at them and driving them back.

When the NVA overran SGT Allen's position, they executed the wounded Nung soldiers. Coming upon SGT Allen, they thought he was dead, and stripped him of his weapon, ammo pouches, and boots. Then the NVA left the area. SGT Allen, who the NVA had thought was dead, was simply unconscious and flat on his back, but seriously wounded in the dry rice paddy.

A couple of hours after the engagement a young Vietnamese girl by the name of Tam Le came out from her small hamlet to look over what had happened. As she walked along a paddy dike she came upon SGT Allen. She had never seen American before. He was critically wounded and bleeding. She stopped and poked him. Allen made a small movement that startled her. SGT Allen made a small >>

moaning sound. Tam Le watched and then suddenly felt sorry for this wounded American soldier. At one time she had had rudimentary nursing training, but I don't know where. She lived in a VC controlled zone.

Tam Le, who was only about 5' tall if that, began to drag Allen back toward her hamlet. Yard by yard she finally dragged him to her family's hut. Her parents were very upset, that if the VC found out she helped an American, she and all of her family would be killed. Tam Le told them to be quiet because she was going to hide him and fix his wounds; and then, somehow return him to his own people. Tam Le insisted that if they kept quiet it would be alright. Her mother asked her why? Tam Le told her mother that there was something about this man that she felt—something deep within her self and soul, something that she had never ever felt nor experienced before...this man was special in her mind. Reluctantly they agreed.

The family pulled Allen down into their Family bunker. Toward the end of the small bunker there were several large rice storage jars. Behind these jars was a fake wall that led into a tunnel. At the end of the tunnel there was another room. They placed him on a mat. Light consisted of candles. A small ventilation hole went up through the top of the room. At its exit point above ground, it was camouflaged.

Tam Le gathered her simple medical kit that also included some vials of penicillin and syringes and administered to SGT Allen. She stripped him of his BDUs (Battle Dress Uniform), washed his wounds and dressed them. With Chop-sticks she pulled out bits of surface shrapnel and again covered them with dressing. Deeper wounds she could only cover and hope that they would not become infected. To help guard against infection, she injected him with penicillin. She gave him some tea and covered him with a blanket. She stayed by his side that first night holding his hand.

Days passed and Tam Le kept vigil

on Allen day and night. She began to feed him rice, soup and tea. She cleansed his body everyday, and took his stools out and buried them behind her house by a fence.

After about one week the hamlet bamboo warning chime was sounded. VC were coming in to collect taxes and rice, and to gather any information of importance.

As in the past, the VC entered the hamlet and told the people to gather rice for them so they could take back to their comrades who were stationed in the nearby mountains. The VC political cadre began their usual political lessons against the RVN (Republic of Vietnam) government and their American cronies. They asked if any of them had seen any enemy forces in and around their hamlet. No one spoke. There was complete silence from the hamlet residents. After the rice was collected along with other food items the VC moved on to the next hamlet.

Tam Le was most thankful that none of her family members or anyone else in their hamlet said anything about the American that she was tending to.

SGT Allen's small wounds were healing well, but two larger wounds on his right side began to turn a little blue and black on the edges and had puss coming out. Tam Le began to cut into them slowly and was able to remove more shrapnel that was deeper inside. She sutured them up as well as she could, and covered them with a Vietnamese healing paste that her grandmother had given to her, along with leaves to be placed on top of the wounds. Then, she bound them so they would stay in place. Another penicillin injection was given to Allen as well.

Two weeks later, SGT Allen became conscious and was able to open his eyes. He saw Tam Le next to him, but could not understand what she was trying to say to him. He just lay on his mat. But, when Tam Le bent over him to feed him or tend to his wounds their eyes would meet. Allen's thoughts swept through his mind that this woman was very special. It was as if God told him

not to worry for she would take care of him—always. He fell asleep dreaming of her while she held his hand.

The candle light dimmed in the tunnel as another day was about to begin. Tam Le moved her hand over to his face to comfort him. Allen reached out and took her hand to his face and kissed it. In the candle light their eyes met again. Tam Le stared wide-eyed as did Allen. Their cultural differences and the fact that they met in such a violent encounter, seemed to dissolve. It was the start of an emotional bonding between the two. Tam Le moved and held Allen. Their hearts bonded in the stillness of predawn light and they felt they would never be separated. Something that neither of them ever expected formed that night between them. All this happened in a small candle lit tunnel in a little hamlet in South Vietnam.

Weeks and months passed, and Allen became stronger. So too did their love become stronger every day. Slowly he began to move his legs and with Tam Le constantly watching over him, he regained the strength to walk again. As Allen grew stronger, Tam Le, with the help of her father and mother, would lift him up and slowly take him outside their hooch at night. Then Tam Le and Allen would lie on the ground and watch the moon and stars.

Yes, the VC came back several times to the hamlet for payments of rice and other food. But, no one ever said anything about the young wounded American who lived below ground in a tunnel.

After three months SGT Douglas Allen began to walk. It became time to bring him back to his own lines. So, one night Tam Le and her family helped Allen out of the tunnel. They told him it was time to go, but that Tam Le would go with him to assure of his safety.

They packed up some supplies like water and rice cakes, and gave Allen a walking stick cane to help him walk. So, the two of them left the little hamlet bound for Tra Bong, some 30-miles

away to the northeast. They moved primarily at night and in the early morning hours. Then they hid during the day, evading VC and NVA patrols.

After six days of travel over the mountains, they came to Tra Bong. SF and Nungs watched their descent into the base, and went out to greet them.

SGT Douglas Allen was welcomed back to his old unit. The SF base CAPT and a Medic looked over Allen. It was determined that he had to be Medivac'd out immediately. Allen said he would not go unless Tam Le came with him. He said that she had saved his life. The CAPT said: "Well, what the hell, OK".

Later, that afternoon a Medivac helicopter came in and lifted both of them out to Chu Lai.

At Chu Lai, the base SF Commander told SGT Allen that he would have to be evacuated to Japan. Once again Allen refused unless Tam Le could go with him. The Commander said, "What the hell is wrong with you son—you got to go now!" Allen said: "Sir, this woman saved my ass. For the last three months she took care of me and brought me back from the brink of death... I want to marry her and that's all I'll say about that". The SF Commander finally relented and said: "OK, but I can't believe this story". Allen said: "I do, I was there, Sir". So, Tam Le went off to Japan with Douglas.

A couple of months later SGT Douglas Allen and Tam Le flew to the United States.

Douglas and Tam Le were eventually married. Today, whenever Tam Le now called "Tammy" and Douglas go anywhere they always go together as if they were "Two Peas in a Pod".

So, now you know their story. As a Vietnam vet their story is most meaningful to me since it proves that love has no boundary. And despite the violence and horrors of war, some bright spots shine through and make it all "count" for those of us who were there...

Simper Fi,

LtCol Willard "Bill" Lochridge,  
USMC (NYNM) Ret

Editor's Note: Several years ago, Kent sent me a very long document detailing his time in the USMC. It was amazing to me how much detail that Kent had remembered. The document was so long that I did not know how to present it here. I finally pulled my head out of my butt and here is the first chapter. The second chapter of Kent's story will follow the next issue of our magazine.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Chronology of My U.S. Marine Corps Service

BY KENT S. HUGHES

### May or June 1967

As graduation approached, I telephoned the Army R.O.T.C. program at Princeton and asked a sergeant first class, "If I go to Army O.C.S., will I go to Vietnam?" He answered, "Oh, you might, but you might go to West Germany or ....." (and he named some other distant but peaceful, touristy locations). I then telephoned the Marine Option part of the Navy R.O.T.C. program and asked a Marine Corps gunnery sergeant the counterpart question, "If I go to Marine Corps O.C.S., will I go to Vietnam? He answered, "Buddy, if you want to go to Vietnam, you're talking to the right people" I initiated the application the following day.

I was one of 14 people (approximately 1.8%) that I know of in the Class of 1967 at Princeton (which had 770 in the graduating class) who went into the Marine Corps. In an alumni survey of my Princeton class conducted in 1998 to which about half the class responded, it was reported that about 46% served in the armed forces, including approximately 19% in the Army, 16% in the Navy, 5% in the Air Force, 3% in the Marine Corps, and less than 1% in the Coast Guard. 17% of respondents said that they served in Vietnam.

Two good friends and members of my eating club in the Class of 1968 at Princeton later served in combat in Vietnam. Robert "Robin" T. Johnson

II, a philosophy major, served as a Marine officer in the 1st Military Police Battalion, first as a platoon commander, then as S-2 (Intelligence Officer) and liaison to the Vietnamese National Police and representative to the U.S. intelligence community. He then became Assistant S-2 and S-3 of a Combined Action Group, then C.O. of a Combined Action Company. During my tour in Vietnam, I visited with Robin when he was with 1st MP's.. Bill Bennett, who had deliberately not disclosed a health problem so that he could become an Army officer and get into the war, served as an advisor in the 318th Land Clearance Company, a South Vietnamese Army combat engineering unit that operated >>

with the U.S. 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and the South Vietnamese 16th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

On November 29, 1967, I arrived at Officer Candidates School, Marine Corps Base, Quantico, VA., as a member of the 3rd Platoon, Company B, 48th Officer Candidates Course. Capt. J.M. Sims was Platoon Commander, SSgt. R.L. McElyea was Platoon Sergeant, and Sgt. J.T. Turner was Sergeant Instructor. Among my classmates were Lewis Puller, Jr., son of the famed retired Lt. General "Chesty" Puller, the most highly decorated Marine in history, and Ronald McLean, step-son of Jimmy Stewart, the movie actor and Princeton alumnus. Lew Puller lost both legs and a hand in 1968 when he stepped on a land mine. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and two years later committed suicide. Ron McLean was to be killed in action in June 1969 as a member of 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion when his recon team of five Marines ("American Beauty") was ambushed by the North Vietnamese Army ("NVA"). My first bunkmate at O.C.S., Duncan Sleigh, a Dartmouth graduate and Latin major from Marblehead, MA, the first in our platoon and in our Basic School class to die in combat, was to be killed in action in November 1968 while south of Hill 55 with the 3rd Battalion 7th Marines. Out of the 35 members of my O.C.S. platoon who eventually graduated, four (Vasilios "Bill" Demetris, Mike O'Connor, Ken Shelleman, and Duncan Sleigh) were to be KIA in Vietnam.

Emphasis at O.C.S. was on physical training and such other training as there was in tactics, small arms, drill, uniforms and equipment, etc. as a way of screening out candidates who were insufficiently motivated or who were otherwise not qualified to be officers. Officer Candidates were supposed to step on any of their fellow Candidates who fell down on hikes, and, because most of the hikes were in snow and the snow often turned to ice as we walked

over it, people fell down frequently, particularly going up and down hills. Although the weather was cold, we were not permitted to wear liners in our field jackets. I pulled a groin muscle and was miserable for a number of weeks.

### February-June 1968

On February 2, I graduated from O.C.S., was commissioned a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, and reported to The Basic School, Marine Corps Base, Quantico, VA as a member of 2d Platoon, Company H, Basic Class 8-68. Capt. J.F. Berglund was my Platoon Commander.

T.B.S. trained us in various skills necessary to become rifle platoon leaders, such as company, platoon, and squad tactics; scouting and patrolling; land navigation; supply and logistics; Marine Corps history; Code of Conduct; leadership; rank and insignia; discipline and courtesy; interior guard; drill; small arms, including the M14 rifle and M1911A1 .45 caliber pistol; hand and rifle grenades; weapons, including the M60 7.62 mm machine gun, M72 LAW antitank rocket, 3.5 inch rocket launcher, M79 40 mm grenade launcher, M19 60 mm mortar, 81 mm mortar, and 106 mm recoilless rifle; supporting arms, including artillery, air, and naval gunfire; tracked vehicles, including tanks, LVTP-5 amphibian tractors ("amtracs"), and the M-50A1 Ontos; first aid; physical training; marksmanship (with the M14 rifle and .45 caliber pistol); uniforms and equipment; demolitions and mine warfare; combat in a built-up area; amphibious operations; assault on a fortified position; communications; protective measures, including entrenchments, camouflage, and obstacles; the bayonet; nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare; legal affairs; field sanitation and hygiene; administration; and techniques of military instruction. While the M16 5.56 mm rifle had replaced the M14 as the service rifle in Vietnam, we formally qualified

with the M14, only conducting familiarization firing of the M16 and firing the M16 at pop-up targets.

Initially, my roommate was Capt. Kim, a South Korean Marine, a veteran of combat in Vietnam who had been personally decorated by the President of South Korea and who read German literature for recreation. Later my roommate was Lt. Chuck Hucknall, a graduate of the Enlisted Commissioning Program.

On quite a few weekends, I took liberty, flying from Washington to Philadelphia on Military Standby at half the coach fare in uniform, and returning from Philadelphia on the Pennsylvania Railroad to Washington and changing there to the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad for the short trip to Quantico. On the "Pennsy," I would spend the 3-hour trip having an extended dinner in the dining car. On quite a few of my flights home, I flew in a seat next to Dave Skaggs, a Marine Corps lawyer with an upper-class accent who had graduated from Wesleyan and Yale Law School. Years later, he became a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Colorado.

One weekend in April, I flew home from Washington National Airport after arranging with one of my T.B.S. classmates, John Forman, to ride with him at the end of the weekend on his return by car from New Jersey to Quantico. At the appointed hour on Sunday, Dad drove me to the agreed upon pickup point at a rest stop on the NJ Turnpike. After we waited an hour or two and my classmate did not show up, Dad drove me to the train, and I returned to Quantico. Upon my return I learned that my classmate, a nice guy, had been killed after leaving the road and colliding with a tree in a drunk driving accident in Toms River, NJ, apparently on the way to pick me up.

On another weekend, I flew home in my dress whites. I was seated beside two Army enlisted men. After quite a while had passed with the soldiers whispering to one another, one of

them cautiously asked me, "Sir, are you an American?"

In June, my class went aboard the U.S.S. Mountrail, APA 213, in an LCM-8 (an open landing craft with bow ramp) at Quantico and sailed to the waters off the Naval Amphibious Base, Little Creek, VA, where we climbed down cargo nets and into LCVP "papa boats" for an amphibious landing on Anzio Beach-the only one I ever made by boat.

Also in June, during the night following our Mess Night, a very tradition-laden formal dinner, two of my Basic School classmates, 2d Lt. Bill King and 2d Lt. Thad Lesnick, were murdered in their dress white uniforms and one classmate was wounded by gunmen in a Little Tavern hamburger restaurant in Washington, D.C. 2nd Lt. Bill King had gone out to dinner with two other officer candidates and me while we were at O.C.S. and had driven me to the airport on one occasion while we were at The Basic School. The murderers, reportedly hired by the Communist Party as agitators to stir up trouble at Resurrection City (a protestor encampment in Washington, D. C.), had been ejected by the leaders of that encampment and apparently had been planning to stick up the Little Tavern when their paths crossed with those of our classmates. They were eventually apprehended and tried.

### July 1968

On July 12, I graduated from The Basic School as one of 219 Americans and 21 Foreign Military Trainees in the class. Of the 219 Americans, I know of two who died in a single car accident after T.B.S. and 11 who were KIA in Vietnam. The K.I.A. were Robert E. Castle, Vasilios Demetris, Ronald W. McLean, Terry Pensoneau, Michael M. O'Connor, Charles H. Schaefer, Kenneth H. Shelleman, John M. Shinault, Duncan B. Sleigh, James G. Upchurch, and Carl R. Wilson, Jr.

### August-September 1968

From August 13 to September 27, I was a student in the Tank Section at Tank/Amphibious Vehicle Officers Course, Tracked Vehicle School, Schools Battalion, Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, CA. The other officer students jokingly nicknamed me "Rommel" because of my enthusiasm for tanks. I lived off base at The Tides, an apartment building at 121 S. Pacific, in Oceanside, CA with Lt. Frank Marasco, who had been with the two members of my Basic School class murdered in Washington during the shooting but who had not been hit.

Our training consisted of classroom instruction and fieldwork, including gunnery, driving, tactics, maintenance, and tank recovery. While focus was on the M48A3 90 mm gun tank, some time was devoted to the M67A2 flame tank, the M51 tank retriever, and the M103A2 120 mm gun tank. When operating tanks, each of us officer students rotated through the positions of tank commander, gunner, driver, and loader. One day, as we were moving to the tank gunnery ranges, I happened to be the "TC" of one tank in a column. As we crossed a civilian road that passed through Camp Pendleton, two of my fellow officer students on the lead tank dismounted to serve as road guards, standing at parade rest to block traffic at the crossing point. For fun, in connection with my nickname "Rommel," as my tank crossed the road, the road guards came to attention, gave me the straight-armed Fascist salute, and loudly called out "Rommel," no doubt upsetting the uncomprehending civilian families sitting there in their station wagons. We all got a great laugh.

As my course was ending, I took a weekend leave and flew home to Philadelphia. When Dad saw me off at the airport for my return to California, he saluted me as I got aboard, a sight that I will always remember.

### October-December 1968

A number of us who had graduated from tank school rode in a convertible to Los Angeles Airport to begin our journeys to the Western Pacific. The car was dusty, and one member of our group had written with his fingers in the dust in large letters the words "Vietnam or bust." From Los Angeles we flew to San Francisco, then got ground transportation to Travis Air Force Base, in Fairfield, CA. We flew by military charter flight from Travis to Kadena Air Force Base, Koza, Okinawa, in a 22-hour flight including stops in Anchorage, Alaska and Yakota, Japan. I was transported north to Camp Hansen by bus, then north to Camp Schwab and assigned as S-3a (Assistant Operations & Training Officer), RLT-26 (Rear).

My first regimental commander was very briefly a Lt. Col. Erwin, and then a Maj. Anderson, and the S-3 that I worked for was Lt. Bert Black, who had attended Haverford College, later succeeded by Lt. Tom Fuller, a graduate of Choate and Denison. The Assistant S-1 (Administrative Officer) was 1st Lt. Rich McConnell, Princeton '66.

I lived in the BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters) at Camp Schwab. A friend was Lt. Chris Beam, a Williams College alumnus whose father taught at Bowdoin who was Executive Officer of the motor transport company. I also became friendly with and went out drinking one night with a Maj. Bracken, a Hawk missile specialist, whom I had originally met many months before at Washington National Airport when I was at The Basic School. I became friendly with Capt. R. G. Jones, a Brown alumnus who was the amtrac company commander. He gave me a water ride in one of his tractors one day and let me drive. I briefly served as escort officer for two visiting South Vietnamese Marine officers, a captain and a lieutenant.

At breakfast every morning, we read "Stars and Stripes," the armed forces newspaper, which, in addition to providing news articles, listed >>

those U. S. Marines, soldiers, and sailors killed in action in Vietnam. When I later got to Vietnam, I noticed that the "Stars and Stripes" issued there did not list KIA.

As part of my duties as S-3a, I worked on rewriting a contingency plan for guarding various points on Okinawa in the event of a civilian protest or rebellion.

During October on a weekend, Maj. Anderson and two other lieutenants (one of whom was 1st Lt. Rich McConnell) and I participated in a festival of games and races for children at the Nago Catholic Mission, an orphanage, as guests of Father Jose, the heavy drinking, Spanish, Roman Catholic priest, who ran the mission. One day in the Officers' Club at Camp Schwab I pooled a small amount of my money with that of Father Jose to play the slot machines with him.

In November, I served as Trial Counsel (prosecutor) in the special court-martial of a corporal and won the case after convincing the non-lawyer Defense Counsel to have the accused plead guilty, although the decision of the court was later reversed on appeal based on indications that the accused had entered an improvident plea.

On November 10, I served as one of the cake escorts for our Marine Corps Birthday ceremony.

At Schwab I was friendly with 1st Lt. Dennis "Madman" Murphy, a tank officer who had returned from BLT 2/26 in Vietnam with the Silver Star and who had deliberately run over a number of NVA infantrymen with his tank while leading his platoon in combat in sand dunes.

In December, I assumed duties as Legal Officer and S-1a, RLT-26 (Rear) under my new C. O., Lt. Col. R. De la Cruz. My Legal Chief was Cpl. Albin.

From December 24-28, I was assigned Temporary Additional Duty as courier for the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade to units in the I Corps Area of South Vietnam. I was accompanied by a corporal, who carried a bag of classified mail. We

flew from Marine Corps Air Facility, Futema, Okinawa on a Marine Corps C-130 to Da Nang Airbase. I visited BLT 2/26 on the U.S.S. Okinawa, LPH 3, flying aboard in a Marine CH-34 helicopter from HMM-362, the penultimate CH-34 squadron in Vietnam. I had Christmas Eve dinner aboard her in Da Nang Harbor sitting among some of the squadron's pilots in the wardroom. I also visited HQ, III Marine Amphibious Force and Task Group 79.5. At III MAF (the Third Marine Amphibious Force), where I spent the night of Christmas Eve, I went to the Officers' Club, the entrance of which was guarded by two South Korean marines. There, with a Marine captain (a Captain Manilla, previously wounded while serving as a rifle company commander with the 4th Marines) and two Marine colonels, I rolled dice for drinks on the veranda overlooking the Song Han, the river along which Da Nang sits, while a boat with rigging decorated with lights to resemble a Christmas tree moved past and unseen riflemen in the distance fired tracer ammunition up in the air over the city in celebration. Having slept at III MAF, I awoke the next morning to the music of a small Marine marching band playing Christmas carols.

The corporal and I flew north along with Captain Manilla on a UH-1E "Huey" carrying a load of blood to Quang Tri, where we visited HQ, 3rd Battalion 4th Marines and spent the night. The following morning, we hitchhiked to Dong Ha, where we visited HQ, 5th 155 Gun Battery (Self-Propelled) (Reinforced). After flying back to Da Nang on a C-130, we visited HQ, 2d Battalion 7th Marines; HQ, 26th Marines; HQ, 1st Battalion 13th Marines; HQ, 1st Battalion 26th Marines; HQ, 1st Marine Division; and a helicopter squadron, HMM165, at Marble Mountain. At HQ, 1st Marine Air Wing, I met Capt. John "J.C." Reynolds, a lawyer from my T.B.S. class, who let me sleep in his office on a cot that he kept there. I also met Capt.

Mike Hoblock, also a lawyer from my T.B.S. class, and he, Capt. Reynolds, and I went to their Officers' Club for the evening. The following morning, I flew back to Okinawa.

### January-February 1969

In January, I was sent on Temporary Additional Duty for a week to Camp Hansen for WestPac Career Planning School. In February, I requested transfer to a 9th MAB unit in South Vietnam under provision of a 9th MAB order which, in order to lend some personnel stability to units based on Okinawa, permitted such requests only after four months had been served on Okinawa.

Two weeks later, because I was friendly with our personnel officer, Lt. Moe, a former gunnery sergeant in the infantry, I received orders to replace Lt. Dave Gee, the Platoon Commander of the Tank Platoon of BLT 3/26 (also known as 2d Platoon ((later re-designated 3rd Platoon)), Company A, 5th Tank Battalion). The BLT was "OpCon to" (under the operational control of) the 1st Marine Division while in Vietnam. The 1st Marine Division was a part of the Third Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), which also consisted of the 3rd Marine Division, 1st Marine Air Wing, Force Logistics Command, and the U.S. Army's XXIV Corps (which included the 101st Airborne Division ((Airmobile)), 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized)), and the 23rd Infantry ((Americal)) Division). The mission of the 1st Marine Division has been described as follows: "to destroy enemy forces throughout the tactical zone, to destroy enemy bases, and to protect major population centers and main lines of communications (i.e., roads and the railroad)."

On February 25, I flew by government-chartered commercial Boeing 727 for 3¼ hours to Da Nang Airbase,

Da Nang, South Vietnam, where I checked in at III MAF Transit Facility. (Two other lieutenants also from the 9th MAB and destined for BLT 3/26 arrived with me. As the three of us passed a Marine Corps chapel while walking around, one of the two, 2d Lt. Ron Rossini, stepped inside to say a brief prayer. Later in my tour, I heard that he had been killed in action by friendly fire, while the other had been medevacked to the States because of serious injuries incurred in an accident cooking his C-rations without properly ventilating the can.)

After getting a ride to Freedom Hill Rest & Recreation Center, I called Capt. John Reynolds, who drove over to pick me up and take me to Marine Air Group 11's (MAG 11's) Officers' Club, where we had beer and pizza and watched the end of a movie. Once again, I spent the night in the spare rack in his air-conditioned legal office. I returned to III MAF Transit and, after missing the first ride to An Hoa, where BLT 3/26 was located, went back to 1st MAW. I introduced myself to Boeing Vertol's representative there, telling him that I was Ralston Hughes' son, as Dad worked for Boeing Vertol, which manufactured the CH-46 and CH-47 helicopters. I spent the nights of February 26 and 27 at HQ, 1st Marine Division (Rear) on Hill 327 in the 11th Motor Transport Battalion compound after spending both days waiting in vain for a helicopter to An Hoa. On one of those days, at III MAF Transit Facility, I met a lieutenant from Camp Hansen who was on his way back to Okinawa after a courier run. He was quite friendly and gave me his flak jacket and two fragmentation grenades, then traded some martini mix to someone for three NVA packs and gave one of them to me. (The pack, which appeared to have some blood stains and shrapnel holes in it, was later stolen from me when I naively turned it in to the ship's laundry while aboard the Alamo a couple of months later.)

On February 28, I was transported by CH-46 helicopter from the pad at

HQ, 26th Marines, to the An Hoa Combat Base (hereinafter referred to as "An Hoa"), Quang Nam Province (about 25 miles southwest of Da Nang and northeast of enemy Base Area 112) where BLT 3/26 (Rear) was located and where my tank platoon was under operational control of the 5th Marines (the 5th Marine Regiment), commanded by Col James B. Ord. An Hoa was located in what was referred to as the An Hoa Basin at the eastern end of the Thuong Duc Corridor. The corridor served as an enemy avenue of approach running from the Laotian border east onto a plain bordered by mountains and rivers. The plain contained many villages and hamlets surrounded by rice paddies. An Hoa included a 3,000-foot airstrip, a helicopter landing pad, an artillery cantonment that contained such weapons as M109 155 mm self-propelled howitzers and M107 175 mm self-propelled guns, a logistical support area, and many "hootches" and other types of huts.

BLT 3/26, an infantry battalion (3rd Battalion 26th Marines) reinforced with a tank platoon, 105 mm (towed) howitzer artillery battery, 4.2-inch mortar artillery battery, amphibian tractor ("amtrac") platoon, antitank (Ontos) platoon, reconnaissance platoon, engineer platoon, motor transport platoon, shore party platoon, medical platoon and assorted other units, had approximately 1,800 personnel. The infantry battalion consisted of a headquarters & service company and four rifle companies (Companies I, K, L, and M, known as India Company, Kilo Company, Lima Company, and Mike Company). At battalion level (normally comprising a weapons company in an infantry battalion but not, as I recall, in our battalion) were the following weapons: 81 mm mortars, .50 caliber machineguns, 106 mm recoilless rifles, and flamethrowers. Each rifle company consisted of a headquarters platoon, a weapons platoon, and three rifle platoons. The weapons platoon

included 60 mm mortars, 3.5 in. rocket launchers, M72 LAW's (Light Anti-tank Weapons) and M60 (7.62 mm) machine guns. Each rifle platoon consisted of a platoon headquarters and three squads. Each squad consisted of a squad leader armed with an M16 rifle, a grenadier (armed with an M79 40 mm grenade launcher, known as a "blooper"), and three fire teams. Each fire team consisted of a fire team leader armed with an M16 rifle and three riflemen armed with M16 rifles. Although all of the M16's were capable of automatic and semi-automatic fire, only one member of each fire team was designated the automatic rifleman.

When I reported aboard, the C.O. of BLT 3/26 was Lt. Col. J.W.P. Robertson. After talking to the other officer who checked in with me, Lt. Col. Robertson said in a southern drawl, "I see you're a Yankee, too." I said that yes, I was from Philadelphia. "A Main Liner?" he asked. "Yes sir," I admitted. Years later, I learned that Lt. Col. Robertson had enjoyed a terrible reputation as a leader among many of his officers, so I must have been fortunate not to serve under him for more than a few days.

### March 1969

Lt. Col. Edward W. Snelling, a courtly and soft-spoken southern gentleman, became Battalion Commander on March 4 as Operation Taylor Common was coming to an end and remained my C.O. for virtually my entire tour. He came to enjoy great respect as a combat leader.

My platoon was one of three tank platoons based at An Hoa and was split for a period of time between that base (See Dai Loc map sheet 6640 IV, coordinates AT 878473) and the position about seven miles north at Phu Lac (6) (See Dai Loc map sheet, coordinates AT 925529), a fire support base overlooking Liberty Bridge (which crossed the Song Thu Bon but had been destroyed earlier by the enemy) from the south. The >>

two other tank platoons were the 2d and 4th Platoons of Bravo Company, 1st Tank Battalion, led by Lieutenants Ron Knight and Allen Cohen, respectively, who had been in my class at Tracked Vehicle School and became friends of mine. The staff NCO's and officers of our three platoons lived in one "hootch" with a refrigerator and a fan. Such electrical equipment was powered by one of the combat base's electrical generators. "Hootch" was the term applied to a General-Purpose tent placed over a wood frame above a slightly elevated wooden floor.

My platoon consisted of five M48A3 (Mod B) tanks, one M151A1 radio jeep with trailer, one M54A2 5-ton truck with trailer, and 32 men. (The number varied from 22 to 39 Marines and one Navy Corpsman during the course of my tour.) We provided direct support of infantry in the assault, perimeter defense, mine sweep security, and security for the convoys run twice daily on the road between An Hoa and Liberty Bridge at Phu Lac (6), where the Navy Seabees operated a pontoon ferry while the bridge was reconstructed.

In addition to my Platoon Sergeant, SSgt. Avery I. McCabe, and tank crewmen, my platoon consisted of two tank mechanics, two truck drivers, a communications technician, a radio operator, and a Navy Corpsman. Each tank had a crew of four (tank commander, gunner, loader, and driver) and was equipped with a 90 mm main gun, either an M1919A4 or M37 .30 caliber machinegun mounted coaxially with the main gun, an M2HB .50 caliber heavy barrel machinegun "sky-mounted" on the cupola and used by the tank commander, and an M3A1 .45 caliber submachinegun carried on a bracket on the inside wall of the turret.

Tactical numbers of the tanks were A21 (my own tank, the oldest), A22, A23, A24, and A25. USMC numbers of the tanks were 202044, 201921, 217798, 201911, and 217782, respectively. Names of the tanks

(painted on the gun tubes) at various times included "Dude," "To Cong with Love" (A24), "Rumble," "Warrior II" (A25) and "FUJIMO" (meaning "F\_\_\_ You Joe, I'm Movin' On" (A22). My own tank had no name but had previously been called "The Judge." Tank commanders were Cpl.D. Ramirez (later LCpl. R. J. Millerbis) on A21, Cpl L.D. Cryts (later Cpl. J.L. Raasch) on A22, Cpl. P. M. Robinson (later Sgt. N. V. Mundy) on A23, Sgt. R. Lynch (later LCpl. G. Araujo, later Cpl. G. C. Bowen) on A24, and Cpl. (later Sgt.) S. W. Price (later LCpl. R. M. Martinez) on A25.

When I was on A21, I was its tank commander, the tank's normal loader was kicked off the tank, Cpl. Ramirez (the normal TC on the tank) became loader, LCpl. Millerbis (part Eel River American Indian from California) was gunner, and PFC E. L. Harlan II was driver. The average age of Marines in my platoon was 20 1/2.

The official "basic load" of each tank was 30 HE (high explosive), 10 canister, 12 "beehive," six "Willy Peter" (white phosphorous), and four HEAT (high explosive anti-tank) main gun rounds (although bent ammo racks meant that not all tanks carried that full load); 5,900 .30 cal. machinegun rounds; and 500 .50 cal. machinegun rounds.

**My Tank Platoon in South Vietnam**  
2d Platoon, later re-designated 3rd Platoon, Company A, 5th Tank Battalion a.k.a. Tank Platoon, BLT 3/26, later re-designated 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines (Reinforced).

**Here are names and service numbers from my hand-written notebooks:**

The platoon when I assumed command:

- ◇ Araujo, G. 2425167 (Later) Tank Commander on A24
- ◇ Barnes, J.F. 1913438 Radio technician
- ◇ Barr, H.T. 2434602
- ◇ Beaver, D. L. 2420763
- ◇ Bowen, G.C. 2416667 (Earlier) Driver on A22; (later) Tank Commander on A24

- ◇ Brown, T.H. 2417441
- ◇ Castillo, W. 2423807
- ◇ Cody, J.M., Jr. 2422496
- ◇ Cryts, L.D. 1850771 (Earlier) Tank Commander on A22
- ◇ Dale, I.L., Jr. 2439168 (Earlier) Jeep driver Daughtry, J.L., Jr. 2410729 5-ton truck driver
- ◇ Elledge, J.J. 2386566 Radio operator
- ◇ Evans, D. R. 2416968
- ◇ Guyton, W.A. 2390999
- ◇ Hamilton, D.A. 2441157 Driver on A25
- ◇ Harlan, E.L., II 2436247 Driver on my tank, A21
- ◇ Hathcock, R.C. 2460402
- ◇ Hill, T.L.P. 2441164
- ◇ Hill, J.W. 2383806 Tank mechanic
- ◇ Kozak, N. 2415484 Tank mechanic, crewed on A22 when on op with 3/1
- ◇ Leslie, P.D. B385484 Navy Hospital Corpsman early in my tour
- ◇ Lynch, R.L. 1661778 (Earlier) Tank Commander on A24
- ◇ Martinez, R.M. 2412471 (Later) Tank Commander on A25
- ◇ McCabe, Avery I. 1662107 Staff Sergeant; Platoon Sergeant most of my tour
- ◇ Millerbis, R.J. 2387817 (Earlier) Gunner (later) Tank Commander on my tank, A21
- ◇ Parson, E. 2406667
- ◇ Patrick, A.R. 2092842
- ◇ Price, S.W. 2278556 (Earlier) Tank Commander on A25
- ◇ Raasch, J.L. 2433978 (Earlier) crewman, A22: (later) Tank Commander on A22
- ◇ Ramirez, D. 2119651 (Earlier) Tank Commander on my tank, A21 and loader when I was on my tank
- ◇ Robinson, P.M. 2366488 (Earlier) Tank Commander on A23
- ◇ Walsh, E.J. 2435799
- ◇ Woodard, E.H., Jr. 2404662

**Subsequently joined the platoon (listed in the order in which I added them to my records)**

- ◇ Mundy, N.V. 1933338 - (Later) Tank Commander A23

- ◇ Hankins, J.R. 2420632
- ◇ Lee, V.L. 2420641
- ◇ Wyatt, Michael A. 2498010
- ◇ Boucher, K.E. 2497749
- ◇ Tatum, Marvin L. 2491848
- ◇ Thompson, Robert B. B322957- (Later) Navy Hospital Corpsman
- ◇ Andersen, D.E. 2558627
- ◇ Bartlett, P.E. 2402093
- ◇ Binion, Peter E. 2535984- (Later) Jeep driver
- ◇ Covington, P.R. 2495889
- ◇ Ferguson
- ◇ Hyson, J.R. 2413251
- ◇ Kimball, W.K. 2438408
- ◇ Kingman, G.H. 2423795
- ◇ Lee, V.L. 2420632
- ◇ Midkiff, J.D. 2371543
- ◇ Morrisson, L.L. 1648296- (Later) Platoon Sergeant
- ◇ Prickett, L.G. 2472731
- ◇ Ramirez, F. 2496055
- ◇ Rosenberg, R.R. 2255566
- ◇ Schussler, D.G. 2505196
- ◇ Smith, T.L. 2425572
- ◇ Stewart, G.E. 2425726
- ◇ Swartz, R.A., Jr. 2498346
- ◇ Wexler, L. 2463595
- ◇ Wilson, J.L. 2514854
- ◇ Wood, G.L. 2481999

**Vehicle USMC Nos.**

- ◇ A21/A31 202044, replaced in Sept. 1969 with 202005. Playboy bunny on searchlight cover
- ◇ A22/A32 201921 "FUJIMO"
- ◇ A23/A33 217798
- ◇ A24/A34 201911 "To Cong with Love"
- ◇ A25/A35 217782 "Warrior II"
- ◇ Jeep M151A1-357735 & trailer. Jeep outfitted as radio jeep
- ◇ 5-ton truck M-54A2-331814 & trailer Distinctive tape "peace symbols" on headlights

**Basic load:**

- ◇ 30 HE (M71)
- ◇ 10 Canister (M336)
- ◇ 12 APERS "Beehive"
- ◇ 6 WP
- ◇ 4 HEAT-T (T300E59)
- ◇ Total 62 main gun rounds, reduced when ammo racks were

broken (see below)  
6,000 .30 cal. link  
1,500 .50 cal. link

**Main gun rounds:**

- ◇ A21-54 rds. A31-62 rds.
- ◇ A22-60 rds. A32-58 rds.
- ◇ A23-52 rds. A33-52 rds.
- ◇ A24-58 rds. A34-58 rds.
- ◇ A25-58 rds. A35-58 rds.
- Total: 282 rds. 287 rds.

While each of us tankers rated an M1911A1 Colt .45 caliber semiautomatic pistol carried in a shoulder holster, and that is what I carried, a number of my people carried their .45's in ordinary, belt-mounted holsters or in shoulder holsters that they had re-rigged to hang from the waist. Additionally, certain members of the platoon carried non-issue weapons that they had obtained. For instance, LCpl. Millerbis, my gunner (and later in my tour tank commander on my tank when I was not on it), carried a French MAT-49 9 mm submachinegun, and LCpl. J. L. Daughtry, Jr., my 5-ton truck driver, carried a Smith & Wesson .457 Magnum revolver in a shoulder holster.

On March 2, I went with Lt. Dave Gee, the departing tank platoon commander (my predecessor) to HQ, 1st Tank Battalion outside Da Nang by jeep in a convoy escorted by two tanks. After getting him manifested on a flight and signing for my platoon equipment, I returned in a convoy to An Hoa over Liberty Road. Our trip from Phu Lac (6) to An Hoa was escorted by two of my other tanks and a Marine Corps OV-10 Bronco flying overhead.

My radio callsign was "Speedy Admiral 6." Usually, a callsign for a platoon leader in the infantry of, say, the 2d Platoon, A Co., 3rd Bn, 26th Marines, would be "Gray Rebel Alpha 2." His Company Commander would be "Gray Rebel Alpha 6," and his Battalion Commander would be

"Gray Rebel 6." To an infantryman, my callsign, which included a "6" without a letter preceding it, appeared to be that of a battalion commander.

As I crossed the Song Thu Bon on the ferry in my jeep, Cpl. Cryts, tank commander on A22, radioed the S-3 of 1st Bn, 5th Marines, requesting permission to provide an armored escort for Speedy Admiral 6. The infantry, undoubtedly curious about the identity of the seemingly senior officer who was about to pass through their position and proceed under armored escort to An Hoa, granted permission but asked that Cpl. Cryts request that Speedy Admiral 6 please visit their Combat Operations Center bunker as he passed through. When I got out of my jeep and entered the C.O.C. bunker, I could immediately sense the disappointment of the majors there at the arrival of a mere second lieutenant!

At the time, one of my tanks flew the flag of the state of Maine, and another a South Vietnamese flag. My own tank, normally commanded by Cpl. Ramirez, a Californian, flew the California state flag. In early March, the crew of my tank attached a small parachute from an illumination flare to the rear of the tank. As my tank was already canted forward because of one or two broken front torsion bars, the parachute trailing in the air mockingly gave it the appearance of a dragster. Our tanks had symbols painted on the right front side of the turrets indicating the number of mines hit and the number of enemy troops killed.

Two days after I took over my platoon, A25, commanded by Cpl. Price and providing perimeter security at the end of the airstrip, was hit by three RPG's (rocket propelled grenades) fired from the edge of a crater outside the wire which had been left by the explosion of the ammunition dump on February 23, prior to my arrival at An Hoa. The first RPG round hit the right front of the hull, making a hole but causing no further damage. The >>

second round, coming directly at the turret, was ignited by the track blocks attached to the right side of the turret, and skimmed along the side of the turret, damaging the track blocks and making pock marks on the surface of the turret. Fortunately, it was night, and the tank was parked at an angle to its normal position. Rather than hitting the front of the tank—the likely target—the third rocket penetrated one of the final drives at the rear side of the tank, immobilizing the vehicle but not hitting any crewmen. Cpl. Price and his crew rocked the tank back and forth, broke the final drive loose and hobbled back to their tent after sunrise.

Additionally, when a VC threw a "Chicom" onto the roof of A25's turret, Cpl. Price pulled his TC hatch closed. After the grenade exploded Cpl. Price emerged from his hatch and shot the VC with his .45. Also, in the course of the night A25 had fired several canister rounds as enemy sappers overran the tank's position during the night. The crew knew they had killed several sappers but were amazed when they returned to the area after sunrise that no bodies remained, as the VC had hauled off all of their dead.

For two weeks of my time at An Hoa, we were rocketed and mortared daily by the North Vietnamese Army from positions in the mountains to the southeast. During one of these attacks, which occurred in the afternoon, I ran to our bunker located between the "hootches" and the tank park, only to realize that certain people required to take cover in the bunker were not there. I ran out to our "hootches" to get people out of them. On my way back, as I ran behind my jeep driver from his "hootch" to the bunker, a rocket hit the ground between the bunker and me, exploding, knocking off my helmet and blowing me backwards. I picked pieces of shrapnel up off the ground from this Russian-made

(probably 122 mm) rocket and have kept them as souvenirs.

I received from Dad a package including English water crackers and pate de fois gras de Strasbourg, which Lieutenants Cohen and Knight and Staff Sergeants McCabe, Hoover, and Moore and I spread on the crackers with a Kay-Bar combat knife and ate. Some of us drank it down with Royal Crown Cola, and some drank Carling Black Label beer.

Throughout this period, an Air Force C-130, one wing of which had been shot off before my arrival by a mortar attack, sat on the airstrip at An Hoa awaiting arrival of a replacement wing from Da Nang. (Previously, its other wing had been shot off and then replaced, only to have an enemy mortar attack shoot off the other wing before it could take off. Perhaps the enemy had a sense of humor.) Finally one day, the new wing arrived by convoy, and personnel spent a day or two attaching it to the fuselage. Without incident, the plane then took off for Da Nang to cheers from troops on the ground. The Bay City crane which had been used to lift the wing into position belonged to a Mr. Khan (I am uncertain of the spelling), a local South Vietnamese warlord with a private army who was reputed to pay taxes to both the South Vietnamese government and the Viet Cong.

One day, I saw that my troops were roasting steaks over a fire at dinnertime. As we did not normally have access to such food, I asked about the source and was politely told not to ask. Then my Corpsman, P D. "Doc" Leslie, appeared with cuts and bruises all over him. I later learned that, upon learning that one of the other units at An Hoa had received frozen steaks, Doc had stolen a case of the steaks, thrown the case on an M274 Mechanical Mule light weapons carrier which he had stolen, and driven away toward our area, only to overturn the vehicle on top of some barbed wire. What a resourceful platoon member! A few weeks later

when his father died, Doc Leslie was transferred to the States, and our Corpsman became R. B. "Doc" Thompson.

Col. Albert E. Coffeen, C.O. of Special Landing Force Bravo, consisting of BLT 3/26 and its supporting helicopter squadron, interviewed me at An Hoa to obtain my equipment rehabilitation requests. To my delight, his S-3a and note taker, hanging on my every word, was Maj. O.J. Butler, who, as my Regimental Executive Officer on Okinawa, had repeatedly given me and other junior officers a hard time.

Each evening at 1730, the other tank platoon commanders and I would go to the large CO.C. (Combat Operations Center) bunker to attend a meeting with Col. Ord, his staff officers, and various commanders and other personnel supporting the 5th Marines. At those meetings the Colonel was briefed on intelligence, base defense, artillery and air, reconnaissance, tanks, amtracs, and operations. On one such night, after everyone had reported on the day's activities, Col. Ord gave a pep talk somewhat in the manner of a football coach in which he concluded by saying in a loud voice, "I want tons of meat in the wire— all of it gook!" Everyone cheered, albeit with some exchanged glances.

During another such meeting, a warrant officer in EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) reported that his fellow member of the two-person EOD team at An Hoa had, earlier that day, been attempting to disarm an unstable 175 mm gun round when it exploded. So great had been the force of the explosion and so close had it been to his teammate that no pieces of his teammate had been found. As the warrant officer told this in front of all of us, he began to cry.

Mention of the derogatory term "gook" reminds me to note that I normally heard this term used (and used it myself) to refer only to North Vietnamese troops and Viet >>

Cong, not as an ethnic slur for all Vietnamese.

On March 19, A23 and A24 under Sgt. Lynch were in perimeter positions at Phu Lac (6) south of Liberty Bridge along the Song Thu Bon in support of 1st Bn 5th Marines, when the position, which also included Delta Battery, 2d Battalion 11th Marines, consisting of six 105 mm howitzers, was attacked by an estimated North Vietnamese Army battalion in a night ground assault under cover of rocket and mortar attack at about 0200–0300. NVA columns led by Viet Cong guides breached the wire in seven places (principally in front of observation bunkers), marked the breaches with white tape, overran the position, brought in two flame throwers, and threw satchel charges under the "hootches" but were ultimately repelled. Sgt. Lynch's tank, A24, initially fired canister rounds with the main gun outboard into the wire to repel NVA infantry and sappers and then, as the position was overrun, moved through the compound firing at NVA with its .30 cal. coaxial machine gun. Illumination was provided only by parachute flares fired by 1/5's 81 mm mortars.

Sgt Lynch, using his .45 caliber pistol from the cupola of his tank, killed an NVA officer, while tank driver LCpl. Bowen killed another NVA soldier with his ".45." The short maximum effective range of this pistol is testament to the proximity of the NVA to the tank. (Sgt. Lynch told me later that he believed that he must have used two magazines of ammunition to get the officer.)

After killing the entire gun crew of one of the howitzers, NVA troops placed a North Vietnamese flag down the tube of the howitzer. Sgt. Lynch's tank killed them all using its .30 caliber coaxial machine gun. His tank was credited with killing 13 NVA out of a total of more than 75 enemy KIA in this battle. My troops later described the NVA dead being

stacked like cord wood the following morning. It was also believed that many bodies of NVA had been dragged away by the NVA. Delta Battery reportedly suffered 12 KIA, while 1/5 had 3 KIA.

Sgt. Lynch kept as souvenirs the NVA rank insignia and belt buckle of the officer he killed, his money, his (Chinese Type 51 or Russian Tokarev TT-33) 7.62 mm semiautomatic pistol, which had a communist star on the hand grip, and his binoculars, which had a reticle for adjustment of artillery fire. Sgt. Lynch's crew took possession of the NVA flag which had been put into the howitzer, but the battery commander of Battery D/2/11 allowed one of his men to "borrow" it, then not return it despite Sgt. Lynch's protests, apparently because he thought that his artillerymen deserved it as a trophy. I was at An Hoa with my other tanks that night.

Also indicative of how close the NVA had gotten to A24, I later had to "sign off" on gear which had been carried on the outside of the turret and which was destroyed by hand grenades ("Chi-coms") thrown up onto the tank. One of my slides shows Sgt. Lynch, Cpl. Robinson, who commanded A23, and LCpl. Araujo with captured weapons and magazines, including an RPG-7, an AK-47 with fixed wooden stock, and two AK-47's with folding metal stocks, as well as the pistol previously mentioned.

During our time based at An Hoa, my platoon was credited with more NVA kills than either one of the two other tank platoons based there.

In mid-March I went to see Lt. Chuck Lackey, a "mustang" who was Officer in Charge of Logistical Support Unit Maintenance at An Hoa. He had helped me out with obtaining some optical repairs. It was early evening, and I interrupted a big poker game. I was offered a swig of bourbon and a swig of water from a canteen cup. Several days later, Chuck and his master sergeant came over

to our tank area on business, so we pulled out some beer and drank and talked about the Corps for several hours. The old master sergeant was great at telling stories.

On March 23, BLT 3/26 (still without my platoon) moved to Hill 55 with its Recon Platoon and was placed under operational control of the 7th Marines. As Operation Oklahoma Hills began on March 31, 3/26 assaulted Charlie Ridge, formally known as the Dai Loc Slope, (north of Route 4) and Happy Valley. Charlie Ridge overlooked the northern edge of Happy Valley, formally known as the Thuong Duc Corridor. We were told that our BLT had fought with higher authority to take us along with it to Hill 55, but it was perhaps no coincidence that Col. Ord, former C.O. of the 5th Marines, had by this time become the G-3 (Operations Officer) of the 1st Marine Division, which decided to keep us at An Hoa for the time being.

Not long afterward, however, we moved by road march to Headquarters, 1st Tank Battalion, on Hill 34 outside Da Nang for rehabilitation of my tanks for about a week to make them fit for amphibious operations. While there I lived in a "hootch" with Warrant Officer Henry Bookhardt and the other warrant officers of 1st Tanks (all of them involved in tank maintenance). As BLT 3/26 was soon to serve as the Amphibious Reserve for III MAF, we received goodies such as new track and new turret seals for all of our tanks, the latter requiring that each turret be pulled out by a tank retriever. This rehab was accomplished professionally by 1st Tank Battalion Maintenance personnel with the assistance of the members of our platoon but undoubtedly earned us some resentment because of our having received such special treatment.

Editor's Note: Our next issue will have more of Kent's incredible story. ■

John Wear's note: In a recent past issue of our magazine, we posted Robert Kendrick's obituary. We thought that it might be appreciated if we publish an email exchange that he and I had starting in 2013 when Bob first joined the VTA.

## An Email Exchange

**John Wear:** Hey Bob. Welcome to the USMC VTA! I see that you were with Alpha Co, 3rd Tanks. Did you know that my flame tank was also assigned to Alfa Co, 3rd Tanks for the first six months of 1968?

**Robert Kendrick:** No. I didn't know you were assigned to 3rd Tanks. We had a flame tank with us on a few sweeps. But I don't remember one being constantly with us. Impressive watching them work out.

Were you at "C-2"?

**John Wear:** I spend some time at C-2 but more time at Con Thien and at Cam Lo Hill, Cam Lo Bridge and Cam Lo Dist. HQ. For the first three or four months I was the gunner on F-32 "Crispy Critters." Then they gave me my own tank and the 3rd Flame Section to "lead." My tank was then F-31 "Devil's Disciples." In August the new CO from Charlie Co realized that "his" flame section was with Alfa Co and so we were reassigned to Charlie Co. We went to Cam Lo Hill where Charlie Co had its HQ... and then to Mai Xa Tai and An Loc... Charlie 4, Oceanview and Cua Viet... and finally to Quang Tri. What was the name of your tank (on the gun barrel)? Who was on the crew?

**Robert Kendrick:** I was on at least five different tanks. First, I was gunner on A-35. It was brand new, still nice and white on the inside. Sgt. Perry was TC of that one. It sank while we were crossing a stream after about a month. Only 11 rounds had been fired from the main gun. Then I went back to Dong Ha and a series of replacement positions as needed all in the Northern I Corps area. Did it all from drive to TC. I was gunner on A-13 during the Lam Son 250 "Turkey Shoot" bit. We hit a mine on the way back. Right side, right under the gunner's seat. That jarred a few joints.

"Ski" was loader for a while. "Short Round", Pierce, Cook, Niemen and Virgil Melton. I caught a little shrapnel in my back when Melton was hit in the head. I turned down a Purple Heart. It would have been embarrassing. Tiny little holes in my shirt. I never felt it but slivers of metal were working their way out of my back for over the next decade. "Chewy" Pena, Sgt. Wagner, Sgt Johnson, Pignato,



(Left to Right:) John Wear, Bob Minetto, John Perry

Frank Luhan, Eddie Meyers, Lt. Tank, Lt. Murphy, Gunny Cornelius, "Snake", Floyd, "Blues." I'm surprised how many names I've forgotten.

**John Wear:** Let's start with John Perry. See the above photo. That photo was taken before May '68... that's when the guy in the middle, Bob Minetto, was KIA. The three of us were buddies forever. We went to Tank School and then to 5th Tanks at Camp Pendleton for almost a year and then 3rd Tanks in-country. The last time that I saw Perry was at Dong Ha... around August-September 1968. He told me that he had been foolishly riding on the front fender of his tank without a helmet and for one reason or another the driver stopped abruptly and Perry went head long onto the dirt road out in front of the tank. He said that the fall had "rung his bell." To be honest, he was acting totally goofy. I am guessing that he had TBI pretty badly. After that encounter with Perry, my tank went down the Cua Viet River and I don't think I was in Dong Ha again until maybe November. Perry had already rotated home by then.

Fast forward to 1999 when the VTA started. I was looking far and wide for Perry. I found several John Perry's from the St Louis, MO, area. He was from a town called Fluorescent. I actually made calls to several John Perry's but none of them were our Vietnam Marine Sgt John. Maybe ten

years ago, I was on the Sgt. Grit website Marine Bulletin Board when someone mentioned that he was from a small town outside of St Louis. I asked if it was Fluorescent and the Marine veteran said, "Yes." I then asked him if he knew John Perry. He said, "Yes." Then he said, "Sit down because I have a story to tell you."

He went on to tell me that John had married and had a really successful home siding replacement business. The Marine veteran had actually worked for Perry on occasion. Several bad luck things then went down in John's life. He had been drinking heavily and his wife left him. Then his daughter got mad at him and left him. One evening he then got loaded, went down to his basement and pulled out the revolver that John's father had committed suicide with years earlier. His estranged daughter found his lifeless body about a week later. He had used the same gun to kill himself. I was heartbroken.

Virgil Melton will probably be in DC for our 2015 reunion. He was at the last reunion in San Antonio. His videotaped interview is on the VTA website... talking about Lam Son 250.

(Editor's Note: Virgil was tragically killed about a year ago and his obit was posted in our magazine.)

If you start making our reunions, the names will come back as others remind you. Also, when people see your photos, they will tell you names in them that you have forgotten. That is some good shit...

**Robert Kendrick:** John Perry was TC of my first tank, A-35, I was there when Minetto was KIA. It hit Perry pret-

ty hard. After A-35 sank I never saw him again. That's a very sad story about Perry's death.

My Dad was CO of Schools Battalion before I was there. Camp Del Mar was my stomping ground as a teenager. During boot camp (P.I.) I was put through an extra ringer, Dad being a Major at the time. One of the drill instructors approached me an evening at Perris Island. "So, your dad's a Marine Major" he advanced in a threatening manner. I said, in proper recruit form, that he wasn't. The DI said he didn't think so. I returned quite promptly, "He's a Colonel now." The letter from home fresh in my hand. He backed down. But my trials did not.

I was offered OCS out of boot camp. Turned it down several times. Bit of regret there once in a while. I became a Merchant Marine Officer later and still use that commission today. I did see a couple of the interviews of the last VTA meeting on the web. Good to see Virgil looking well. I've got more pictures of him. My nickname was "Shakespeare". Guess I earned that one. Since then, I've done well as an actor in professional theater. I think I do remember seeing you there. Small world.

**John Wear:** I am digging out some old email correspondences that are still in my "IN" box. Above is a long set of emails that we exchanged 3+ years ago. For whatever reason the following year (2016) you let your USMC VTA membership lapse. Do you want to rejoin? You are missing four Sponson Box magazines each year.

**Robert Kendrick:** Yes, I would like to rejoin. The former subscription was a victim of an over bearing barrage of family and business matters.

Editor's Note: Unfortunately, Bob never renewed his membership. He passed away in 2024.



If it is not written, you may soon be forgotten... ■

**WHY MEN WHO HAVE BEEN TO WAR YEARN TO REUNITE**

WRITTEN BY A MEMBER OF THE HAWAII OLD SOLDIERS ASSOCIATION

"I now know why men who have been to war yearn to reunite. Not to tell stories or look at old pictures. Not to weep or laugh. Comrades gather because they long to be with the people who once acted their best; who once suffered and sacrificed, who were stripped of their humanity. I did not pick these

men they were delivered by fate and the military. But I know them in a way I know no other men. I have never given anyone such trust. They were willing to guard something more precious than my life. They would have carried my reputation, the memory of me. It was part of the bargain we all made,

the reason we were all willing to die for one another. As long as I have memory, I will think of them all, every day. I am sure that when I leave this world, my last thoughts will be of my family, and my comrades. SUCH GOOD MEN..."

Submitted by Bob Skeels

**WHY ATTENDING THE USMC VIETNAM TANKERS REUNIONS IS SO SIGNIFICANT?**

There are a number of reasons why our tanker reunions are so important. Tanker and Anti-Tank Marines and all of the support roles, who were deployed together and/or who serve in the same unit or combat area have forged a bond that is almost unbreakable. This bond helped us during the worst times. A reunion allows our members to reconnect and share their experiences while they were in the Marine Corps and afterward.

As members of the 1st, 3rd and 5th Tank Battalions and the 1st,

3rd and 5th Anti-Tank Battalions in Vietnam, in any MOS, we shared similar experiences as well as the bonds of being Marines and the oath of allegiance to our country. Each of us has walked along the path of the warrior and our shared experiences has made each of us stronger. We were willing to give our lives to protect a fellow Marine.

The USMC Vietnam Tankers Reunion allows us to re-forge this bond, rekindle past friendships, and heal from past experiences together. Our reunion events can

have a therapeutic benefit for us and it allows us to come together again and renew the relationships we had in the past.

If you plan to attend our September 2025 reunion in San Diego, California, that's great. If you have not attended a recent reunion or have never attended our reunion, please give serious consideration to joining us this year.

Semper Fi,

Bill "JJ" Carroll

Sergeant Major-USMC Ret.

**USMC VTA 2025 REUNION**

**September 10 – 15, 2025  
Handlery Hotel**

950 Hotel Circle North, San Diego, CA  
Phone: 619.298.0511

The special reunion room rate will be \$159 per night. Free parking. Complimentary Wi-Fi in all rooms. Heated outdoor swimming

pool. Business center with complimentary board pass printing. Fitness Center. Dry cleaning and laundry service

The hotel is two blocks from Fashion Valley Mall one of the largest shopping malls in the metropolitan San Diego area. It

features over 190 assorted retail stores and there are over 12 restaurants nearby.

Room reservations: The last day to make your room reservations is August 4, 2025. Toll-Free reservations assistance: **1-800.676.6567**. Please provide our group as **"USMC Vietnam Tankers Association Reunion."** Reservations will

be made with a credit card but no charges will be made until after the first night stay... or if a cancellation is made 72 hours before the first night stay so, please make your room reservations early ... even if your attendance is in question, you can always cancel later with no cost to you. Reservation hours are Mon – Fri, 7:00 AM to 8:00 PM

(West Coast) and Sat – Sun from 9:00 AM to 5:30 PM.

The hotel is located 6 miles from the San Diego airport. Calling Uber will cost you about \$10. A taxi cab will run around \$20. It is also 3 miles from downtown San Diego; 2.5 miles from Little Italy; 2.5 miles from Balboa Park and 3 miles from Sea World.

**PERSONAL INTERVIEW SIGN UPS**

The **USMC VTA History Project** needs to record your stories. More importantly, once we obtain and chronicle our experiences, not only will they be shared within the USMC Tanker Community ... but they will be added to the archives in the US Library of Congress, the Marine Corps University and the world-renowned Texas Tech University "Vietnam Archives."

The goal of **USMC VTA History Project** is to assure that we (and our stories) will never be forgotten.

If you would like to be interviewed during our 2025 reunion in San Diego, please do not wait until the reunion to sign up. Go ahead and contact Bruce Van Apeldoorn now either by phone 585.613.6564 or by email at [bvanapeldoornsr@gmail.com](mailto:bvanapeldoornsr@gmail.com). Bruce will add you to

the new 2025 reunion interview schedule and then let you know the day and time of the interview.

We will have one full day in San Diego available for interviews and we have already received several requests for a time slots. We would love for you to gather your buddies and assemble a group of tankers for a group interview session.

**PODCAST INTERVIEW SIGN UPS**

We are also trying something totally new at this reunion. Frank "Tree" Remkiewicz will have a quiet room set up to conduct his podcast interview program. If you have an

aversion of going on camera for our video interview program then the podcast may be exactly what you are looking for. You can sign up at the WELCOME table on the

first day of the reunion or you can give Tree a call before the reunion. Call today!!!

**Tree's cell phone number is 209.996.8887.**



## 2025 San Diego Reunion Schedule Wednesday, September 10 – Monday, September 15 (This schedule is subject to change)

<b>Wednesday</b> (Sept. 10)	0900 – 2330	<b>Arrival Day</b> – Register and pickup Welcome Packet (Sept. 10) outside the Slopchute hospitality room (Presidio Room) Sign up for VTA History Interviews The Slopchute is Open - Lunch & Dinner on your own
	0600 – 0815	<b>Breakfast on your own</b>
<b>Thursday</b> (Sept. 11)	0830 – 1200	<b>Ladies Coffee (Terrace Room)</b> <b>Reunion kick-off and VTA Business Meeting</b> (In the Slopchute)
	0900 – 1200	Enter to win a FREE hotel room for reunion! Must submit ticket before 0900 in the meeting room and be present for the drawing to win
	1200 – 1630	<b>Free Time and lunch on your own</b>
	1100 – 1630	The Slopchute Open
	1700 – 1800	<b>Picnic dinner in the Garden Area – Paid by VTA Cocktails - Cash bar</b>
	1800 – 2000	Short Live Auction! (In the Slopchute)
	2000 – 2300	<b>Slopchute Open</b>
<b>Friday</b> (Sept. 12)		<b>Wear your reunion T-shirt today!!!</b>
	0600 – 0815	<b>Breakfast on your own</b>
	1000 – 1015	<b>Load buses for Camp Pendleton</b>
	1030 – 1545	<b>Tour Edson Range and Mechanized Museum</b> <b>Lunch at Edson Range – Paid by the VTA</b>
	1445 – 1600	<b>Load buses / back to the hotel</b>
	1630 – 1700	<b>Return to hotel</b>
<b>Saturday</b> (Sept. 13)	1700 – 2300	<b>The Slopchute Open</b> <b>Dinner on your own</b>
	0600 – 0745	Breakfast on your own
	0800 – 0090	Load buses to MCRD
	0920 – 1130	Recruit Graduation
	1130 – 1230	<b>Tour the MCRD Museum</b>
	1230 – 1430	<b>Lunch at the MCRD Mess Hall – Paid by VTA</b>
<b>Sunday</b> (Sept. 14)	1445 – 1530	Load buses to return to hotel Return to Hotel
	1600 – 2300	The Slopchute Open <b>Dinner on your own</b>
	0600 – 0815	<b>Breakfast on your own</b> <b>Open Day–All Day</b> Interview Schedule Posted in Slopchute <b>Lunch on your own</b>
	1000 – 1530	The Slopchute Open
	1600 – 2030	<b>FAREWELL BANQUET</b> (In the Crystal Ballroom) <i>NOTE: Dress for this function is a shirt with a collar, dress slacks, shoes and socks. Coat &amp; tie optional. Wearing of military ribbons or medals on a jacket is highly encouraged..</i>
<b>Monday</b> (Sept. 15)	1600 – 1645	Cocktails – Cash Bar
	1700 – 1715	Presentation of Colors and remarks
	1715 – 1800	Dinner Served
	1800 – 1805	15Head Call
	1805 – 2030	30–minutes – Guest Speaker 35–minutes – Fallen Heroes 05–minutes – 2026/7 Reunions
	2030 – 2400	The Slopchute Open – Last Call.
		<b>Departure Day</b>



## OFFICIAL REGISTRATION FORM 2025 Reunion San Diego Handlery Hotel September 10 – 15, 2025

**Want to save \$30?  
Mail your registration before July 30**

Please Print All Information

Member's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Guest's Name (s): \_\_\_\_\_  
and relationship \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Town: \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Cell Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Vietnam Tank or AT

Bn: \_\_\_\_\_ Co: \_\_\_\_\_ Years in-country: \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a first time attendee? YES NO MOS

**Would you like to participate in our video interview program? YES NO**

Your USMC VTA membership dues must be current in order to attend the reunion. If your membership is delinquent please mail your dues with this registration (or the dues will be collected at the sign-in desk). No partial payments of the registration fee are accepted. Fee covers planned food functions (two meals), bus transportation, meeting facilities, hospitality room, beer & sodas, entrance fees (if any) and other expenses associated with the cost of hosting the reunion. Registration fee does not include your sleeping room, taxes, meals or air fare.

Reunion Refund Policy: If you find that you cannot attend the reunion after you have pre-paid your reunion fees, the USMC VTA will refund your total reunion fees if you notify us prior to July 30, 2025. If you notify us of your cancellation after that date, we are sorry but we cannot make any refund offer. Be sure to cancel your hotel room reservation.

NAME(S) as you want them to appear on your reunion name tag

Men's T-Shirt Sizes S – XL = \$20 each  
(\$5.00 extra for XXL & XXXL)

○ \_\_\_\_\_ ○ SHIRT SIZE \_\_\_\_\_

### TOTAL REUNION FEES

**My Registration Fee:** . . . . . \$170 = \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
*(After July 30th the late registration fee is \$200 each)*

My T-Shirt . . . . . \$20/\$25 = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Number of guests \_\_\_\_\_ X \$170 = \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
(Early registration fee for each guest is \$170.00 and late registration is \$200 for each guest)

Guest T-shirt \_\_\_\_\_ X \$20/\$25 = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Guest T-shirt \_\_\_\_\_ \$ X \$20/\$25 = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

SUB TOTAL: = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Optional:** Would you like to donate a few dollars to help with expenses? \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

You must make your own hotel room reservations by Aug 4<sup>th</sup> to get the reunion room rate!

Call: **1-800-676-6567** and be sure to mention the “**USMC Vietnam Tankers Reunion**” for the special room rate of \$159.00 per night. The special room rate is good for three days prior and three days after the reunion dates as well. Please note the regular hotel room rate is \$217 per night.

**CAUTION: Do not confuse the above hotel room booking deadline date with the early registration offer which has a July 30 deadline. HOTEL REGISTRATION MUST BE MADE SEPARATELY BY YOU BY AUG 4, 2025**

### HOW YOU CAN SAVE \$30.00

Submit this form along with your payment by July 30th to purchase a reunion t-shirt and save \$30 off of the Late Reunion Registration Fee of \$200.

Mail your check or money order made out to: **USMC VTA** and the completed registration form to:  
**USMC VTA**  
c/o Ron Knight  
6665 Burnt Hickory Drive  
Hoschton, GA 30548-8280

Pre-July 30 Form

## Merry Christmas 2024

BY BRUCE VAN APELDOORN

Like many home owners, we decorate to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Winning the best display in River Bend, NC was just a plus. It is also a source of pride for our children and grandchildren who help to set up the many displays plus ring the house with lights.

River Bend is a small community of about 3,000 folks of which many are Marine. They are either active duty or stayed here after completing tours at MCAS Cherry Point, MCAS New River or MCB Camp Lejeune, “Semper Fi” is a very common term spoken here.

The town promotes lots of civic activities such as the only Independence Day Parade in the county. Halloween is pretty big ... but Christmas consumed the town. Nearly every home has some external display. The town provides an online map so those folks who are out to view the lights know where the best displays are. Then there is the Annual Award of the Best Yard. We feel very fortunate to have received that award for 2023. Yes, it did enhance our Christmas experience.

Items of note are the Christmas Wreath which Nancy's father built for her about 25 years ago and the Manger in the front window which my grandfather built for the family during the Depression. The most popular item is the Leg from the movie A Christmas Story.



**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**

**USMC Vietnam Tankers Association**

16605 Forest Green Terrace, Elbert, CO 80106-8937

**Please note: If the last two digits of "EXPIRATION:" above your address label is "24" or lower your 2025 membership dues are now due.**

**Make your check out to: USMC VTA for \$30\* and mail to:**

**USMC VTA c/o Bruce Van Apeldoorn, 99 Shoreline Drive, New Bern, NC 28562-9550**

**\*Over & Above donations are always gratefully appreciated.**



**Let us understand: North  
Vietnam cannot defeat or  
humiliate the United States.  
Only Americans can do that.**

Richard M. Nixon