



Sponson BOX

Voice of the USMC
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Ensuring Our Legacy Through Reunion, Renewal & Remembrance™

NOVEMBER 10TH HAPPY 250TH BIRTHDAY MARINES!



TASK FORCE ROBBIE - 1968

Cover Stories: Task Force Robbie..... Pages 16-36

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1964  1975

For us it was the six o'clock news,
for them it was a reality.

We called for pizza,
they called for medics.

We watched children play,
they watched children die.

We learned of life,
they learned of death.

We served dinner,
they served their country.

Our passion was success,
theirs was survival.

We forgot,
They can't.

- Author unknown

 **NAM TALK** 

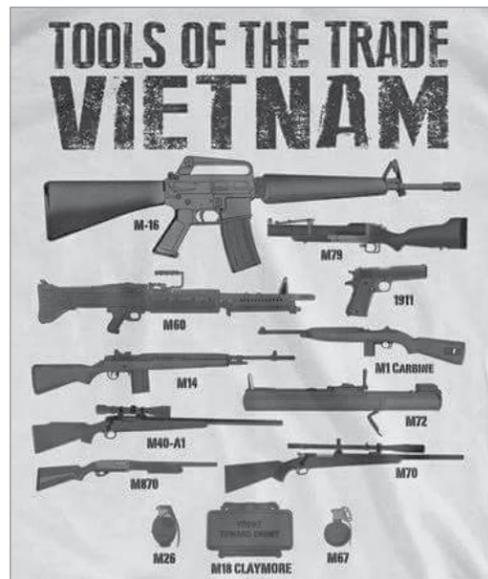
* GRUNT * BOONIE RAT * HUMP * CHARLIE * INCOMING *
 * CLAMORE * BUSH * FIREFIGHT * MON-SOON * RECON *
 * POINT * NVA * FIREBASE * TETE * BEAU-COO * FRAGS *
 * FNG * THOUSAND YARD STARE * MEDEVACS * PRC 25 *
 * PUFF * CHICOM * HUEY * COBRA * DINKY DAU * DMZ *
 * CORPSMAN UP * WATER - BUFFALO * HAM & MOTHERS *
 * ARVN * OP * DEE DEE MAU BRO *
 * VILLE * CHARLIE * CHU - HOI * WILLIE PETER *
 * KLICK * HOOTCH * FLAK JACKETS * LIMA - CHARLIE *
 * SNIPER * ARC - LIGHT * GUNNY * NVA * SKY - PILOT *
 * R&R * TRACERS * ROCKETS * GET - SOME * SINE LOI *
 * BOOM - BOOM * KA - BAR * HOTEL TANGO * LT. * KIWI *
 * NUMBA TEN * MED CAP * TRIP WIRE * RUBBER LADY *
 * ROCK & ROLL * WIDOW MAKERS * ROCK APES * JODY *
 * KIT CARSON * FIRE IN THE HOLE * ARTY * SPOOKY * VC *
 * RPG * VIPERS * MIGHTY MITE * R&R * FREEDOM BIRD *
 * IF I HAVE TO EXPLAIN IT... YOU WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND - !

A FEW FACTS ABOUT THE VIETNAM WALL

There are 58,267 names on the wall.
 39,996 were just 22 or younger.
 8,283 were 19. 33,103 were 18.
 12 were 17 years old.
 5 soldiers were 16.

There are 3 sets of fathers and sons on the wall.
 31 sets of parents lost 2 of their sons.
 997 were killed their first day.
 1,448 were killed on their last day.
 8 women were on the wall, nurses.
 244 soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor during the war and 153 of them are on the wall.

☆☆☆☆



Marine Corps General Orders

1. Take charge of this post and all government property in view.
2. Walk my post in a military manner, keeping always on the alert and observing everything that takes place within sight or hearing.
3. Report all violations of orders I am instructed to enforce.
4. To repeat all calls [from posts] more distant from the guardhouse than my own.
5. Quit my post only when properly relieved.
6. To receive, obey, and pass on to the sentry who relieves me, all orders from the Commanding Officer, Officer of the Day, Officers, and Non-Commissioned Officers of the guard only.
7. Talk to no one except in the line of duty.
8. Give the alarm in case of fire or disorder.
9. To call the Corporal of the Guard in any case not covered by instructions.
10. Salute all officers and all colors and standards not cased.
11. Be especially watchful at night and during the time for challenging, to challenge all persons on or near my post, and to allow no one to pass without proper authority.



CODE OF CONDUCT

I I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

II I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

III If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

IV If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

V When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements derogatory to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

VI I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.

Letter from the President

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

HAPPY USMC 250TH BIRTHDAY!!!

2025 REUNION: As I am writing this letter, we are about to gather in San Diego. As we always have done in the past, we will have an outstanding time and the main reason has always been, what seems like forever, that so many of us love reuniting with our US Marine brothers. For those of you who have never been to one of our very special get togethers and/or for those who have not been to one recently, you are missing an event of a lifetime. **And just a word of warning:** For our 2011 reunion in San Diego, fourteen years ago, we had almost 250 attendees. For this year's gathering, we may not reach 100 total attendees (which includes wives and family members). Considering our lack of attendees we may have to rethink our biennial reunions. They are a tremendous amount of work and it costs the association quite a bit of money over and above what we collect from the registration fee. So, if more of our membership cannot find a way or a reason to attend, or if their health precludes attendance, the arduous work and expense is for naught and we may have to significantly alter our get togethers.

TASK FORCE ROBBIE: This issue is dedicated to the special 3rd Marine Division "Mobile Armored Task Force" that was assembled and active during 1968. For those of our membership that may have no knowledge of it, hopefully this issue of our magazine will be highly informative for you. And as an aside, for those of you who served with 1st Tanks, it would be nice to see more stories coming from you-all. You know that you have stories to tell about the things that you experienced. The membership would truly love to read and understand. Who knows? Maybe your story will shake out some cobwebs in other members and we can see a whole slew of stories show up for publication.

2026 MINI-REUNION: We are making plans to conduct our next mini-reunion (and per normal it's going to be just three days) in **Kansas City, Missouri** where we will visit the world-renowned **National WW-1 Museum and Memorial** plus experience the most outstanding BBQ in the US. It will be **September 10 – 13, 2026**. Full details will be in the next issue of our magazine.

"THANK YOU" LETTERS: Several months ago, we sent out an email inquiry to all of the VTA members who have email addresses asking you-all if you'd like to receive a hand-written letter from a local Colorado Springs charter junior high school history class thanking you for your service to our nation. The project was the idea of the school's history teacher after she spent most of the spring semester teaching the kids about the "Cold War" that included Vietnam. Sixty of you responded and we assume that by now those letters were gratefully received. The week that we sent out the email, I volunteered to come to the school and present my own personal Vietnam experience to the 140 history students. The teacher gratefully accepted and the following Monday I took my power point slides and spoke to six different classes about what it was like (for me) to be deployed in a US Marine tank for 12 months and 29 days in Nam. It was so gratifying that so many of the students really got into the presentation and asked me so many really great questions. The two that I want to relay to you-all are, "What did you feel when you were sent out on an operation?" My answer was that most of us were far happier and excited to be heading out to face the enemy than we were being afraid of being injured or killed. I remember a phrase that we used, "Get Some!" The other question was, "How did you feel after a battle?" My reply was that I remember not being able to light my cigarette because I was shaking so badly and that was because between the adrenaline pulsating in my body and the release of the pent-up fear during the firefight. I am guessing as you read this, you're saying, "That's how I felt too!"



"Every man's life eventually comes to an end. It's only the details and how he (lived and) died that distinguishes one man from another."
 Ernest Hemingway

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BOB: 10/22/52

Wife: Eileen

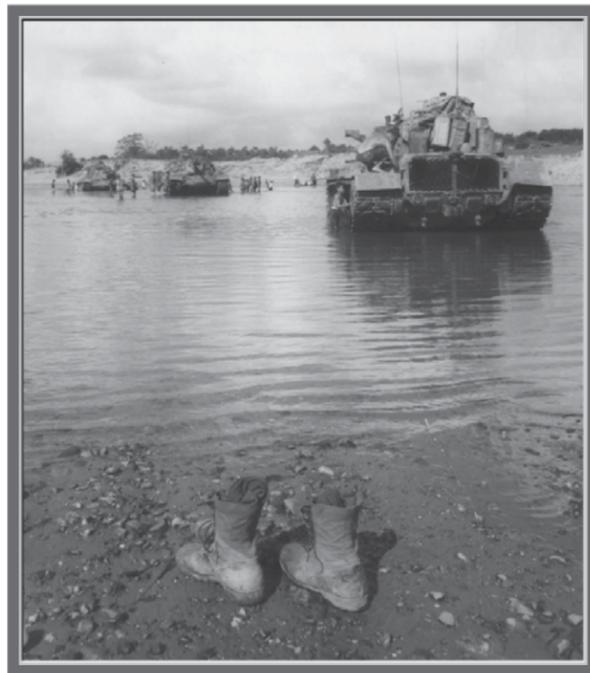
Recruited by: VTA website

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ON THE COVER:
1968 – Task Force Robbie, 3rd Tanks
Washing their vehicles in the Cam Lo River

Our Readers Write

(Formally known as "Letters to the Editor")

OOOPS!!!

Greg Kelley writes: I know I'm not the only one who saw the posting of Hank Brightwell in the "Great Tank Park in the Sky" and took note of the year he was born and the year he passed away. Didn't know he was born in 1932 and didn't think he was 89 when he passed!

That aside, Hank was one of the first Marine tankers that I became friends with over there. We were both part of the advanced party for staking out the new battalion HQ when it moved from outside Da Nang to outside of Hue-Phu Bai. We were more than comrades-in-arms, and we stayed friends through the years. He was a good man, and I already miss him.

John Wear writes: As soon as I got your email, I looked at the proof of the most recent magazine and note that the years are 1947 – 2025. I don't know where those incorrect years came from since I am sure that we submitted the right years to the printer. Sorry...

And as an aside, Hank was one of the attendees of the very first USMC VTA reunions in 1999 in Washington, DC. He wrote me a note just before the 2023 reunion in Colorado Springs. In the note he reminded me that he and I were the only two VTA members who had attended every single reunion since the beginning and that because the altitude of Colorado was going to preclude him from being able to attend ... so he was passing the baton of the last VTA member to have attended every one of them. God bless and keep Hank in the palm of His hand.

From Laura Riensche

Wanted to let you know that we received the extra issues of the Sponson Box that you had sent to us. My favorite Marine, of course, is on the cover.

I read Rick Lewis's advice inside the front cover (below the Ronald Reagan quote, of course). Rick has a good list there, and I will try to do that, after all my other special projects are done. (I promised my brother's family that I would try to write what I recall of our parents meeting, etc. as I am the last of the family now). We know we should leave some information for "when", and too often put off doing the project. When a special Korean War veteran friend passed away, a retired Colonel who was also a friend of his daughter instructed her in what to do.

Hope you have an enjoyable time at the San Diego reunion. Would love to see everyone but traveling farther than Billings won't work anymore.

Too Funny – Too True!



Submitted by Armando Moreno

8th Grade "THANK YOU" Letters:

Doug Scrivner writes: Got a letter today from a kid (aka "Winter") from the charter school in the Springs thanking me and Welcoming me Home from Vietnam. I answered and said, "Thanks." Told him (or her), that I was a member of USMCVTA.ORG. They told me that their grandfather was a Vietnam vet and said that they hoped they will be as brave as him (and us) when they got older. Told 'em I was sure they would be just as brave. But that they had to be damn sure they became a tanker. Ok, the last part I lied about ... besides, the Commandant screwed up and did away with tanks, somebody in their right mind will fix that I hope...

Ribert Fierros writes: I received my "thank you" letter. It surely warmed my old heart. Please thank the teacher for me.

Roger Luli writes: I got my letter today. I will reply tomorrow.

Fred Kellogg writes: Got my really nice thank you letter this past week.

John Wear writes: Below is one of the letters that was sent to me:

Dear Mr. John Wear, my name is Helen Ostrowski and I am an eight-grade student at Monument Academy in Monument, Colorado. I would like to say thank you for all you've done in the Vietnam War. I'm sure that it took a lot of bravery to do what you did. In my history class, I've learned about the Vietnam War, and now I understand how difficult it would have been. I truly appreciate the courage you had to help our country >>

get where it is today. After learning all the details of the war in school, I've realized that freedom takes bravery, and veterans like you truly deserve credit for your sacrifice for people like me. Your ability to stay tough in those hard times inspires me. You truly are amazing! Although it's been a long time since the war, I would like to say, Welcome Home. I know that you probably don't hear this often, but you have no idea how important it is for you to be honored. Thank you for your service and determination. Sincerely, Helen.

USMC Deploying to American Cities

Howard Blum writes: In April 1968 I was getting ready to do a flame tank demo for one of the OCS classes at Quantico when we were called into DC for riots after the Martin Luther King assassination. We were bussed into DC and dropped off in a park across from a DC police station. We were put into fire teams and had fully loaded M-14s. The only orders/information given was to protect the area. We were assigned foot patrols in the 8th & I area. No prep was done for such an event. No food, water, shelter was provided by USMC for the first couple of days. We were given food/water by some residents in the area and slept in DC police station cell block. We had Molotov cocktail thrown at us and were shot at. It was quite an experience.

Editor's Note: Howard went on to serve as a law enforcement officer in the Washington DC area for the next 30+ years.

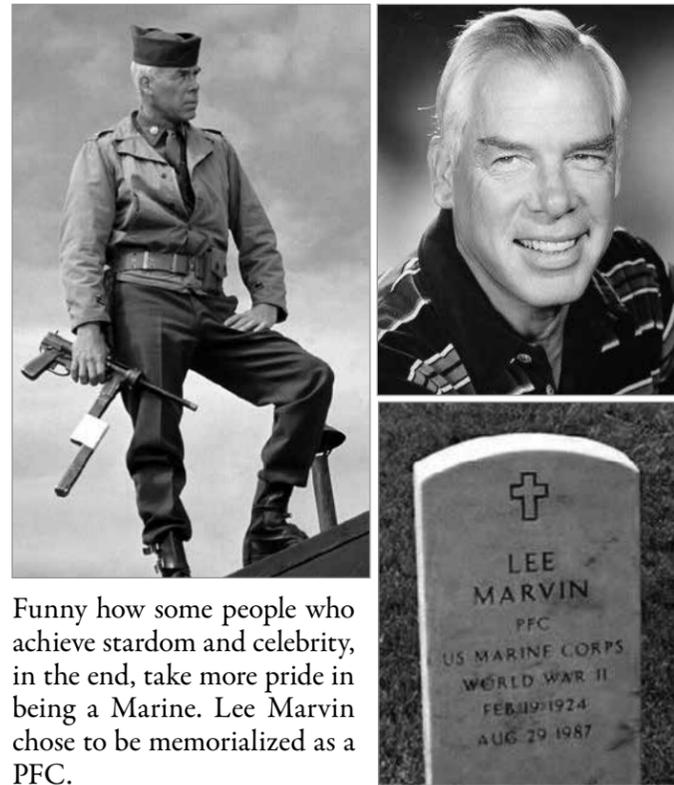
Thank you, Kyle Watts

Bob Skeels writes: I have and I will forever in my lifetime feel that I did not thank you enough for honoring and ensuring through your excellent combat true story writing guaranteeing the continued legacy of those 1968 Vietnam Marines in my infantry platoon that did not come home ... along with the other brother Marines that served alongside of them!

Your gifted writing of writing the September 2019 story for the Leatherneck magazine regarding the March 1969 NVA ambush of Harold Riensche's tank retriever and the June 2023 story of "90 Days a Grunt" in 1968 was a lifetime treasure for the men and families that I served with during my tour of duty in that horrific Vietnam war.

You have made me and these exceptional men the proudest Marines in history by writing some of their Vietnam service stories and it demonstrates the very strong value of those that served this great nation in sharing their wartime stories. You are so appreciated for your own service in the US Marine Corps and to the great Leatherneck magazine and after talking to some of the Marines you have honored in you writing that they wish that there was a high enough service decoration (beyond the MOH) to express our very strong "THANK YOU."

PFC Lee Marvin, USMC



Funny how some people who achieve stardom and celebrity, in the end, take more pride in being a Marine. Lee Marvin chose to be memorialized as a PFC.

Remembering our Comrades

Howard Blum writes: I read about Terry Broussard and Tony Johnson passing in last Sponson Box and I knew both Marines fairly well. I was in A Co, 5th Tanks (Okinawa 1967) with Terry. He was a nice guy and if memory is correct, from Louisiana. And I worked with Tony when we were 2D detectives (MPDC 1970's). He was friendly and well liked.

Tom Kelly writes: As I mentioned to you on the telephone, MGySgt Funkhouser was a S/Sgt and my Maintenance Chief, when I had Charlie Company, 1st Tank in late 1969 at LZ Baldy. While I had the company, three of our tanks ran over mines. Two of them were repairable but one was completely destroyed. When I got word of these explosions, Funkhouser and I would catch a chopper to the site and he would make a quick list of parts needed to get the tank operational and would arrange for getting the tank back to LZ Baldy. Within days, he and his crew would have the two tanks operational. Because of his outstanding work while I had the company, I put him in for meritorious promotion to Gunny Sgt and I understand that he got that promotion several months later.

A Past Commandant

John Wear writes: When I read Mike Belmessieri short story about the possible "beginning of the end" of our beloved Corps, I noted that Mike seemed to think that in 2008, a non-Marine was appointed as Commandant by

George W Bush. I decided to look up the entire list of past C.M.C.'s and noted that General James Conway served as the head of the USMC from 2006 to 2010 and was in fact a Marine but he was the first Commandant in 40 years to have not served in Vietnam.

A Memento from 1985



Robert Fierros sent these photos to us



In the Photo: My gunner, then Tom Yax and me (Biran Fieldhouse).

Brian Fieldhouse writes: I'm writing about the photos from Adam Zlotek that were in the last issue of the Sponson Box. They brought back many memories when I was assigned to C Company (May 67 until 15 September 67). It also provides a little mystery. While at B Company around February 67, I was driving F-32 (Snoopy vs the Viet Cong) and hit a mine that blew off the right rear road wheel. We put the track back together and drove to the B Company area on Hill 55.

The pack was damaged from the explosion, so the pack was taken from F-31 (which had been used as a parts mule) so that we could take the tank to Battalion Headquarters for repairs. It turned out that the hull was also warped so we could not properly reassemble it. We were told that it was not repairable in country. F-31 was then towed to 1st Tanks for a new pack, and I was supposedly to reunite with SSgt Gladney and with a little bit of drama that was accomplished.

Then in early May as "Operation Hickory" began, I loaded F-31 onto an LCU and headed to Dong Ha. After doing

another repair to the final drives at Dong Ha, we finally got F-31 ("Li'l Hot Stuff") on the operation. It was then that I found out F-31 and crew was now in Charlie Company.

Shortly after that, F-31 was turned over to a Cpl. Juan Mejia and sent to Okinawa for repairs. That left F-33 ("Toi U Ahn" ... that translates to "I love you") which was sent near the Ashau Valley, on "Operation Cumberland." That operation lasted until 15 September 67. So now there is the mystery of when "Snoopy's" picture was taken. If anyone saw "Snoopy" in 1968, then we would know that it got repaired and sent back into Viet Nam. The only other answer was someone copied the original.

John Wear replies: Thanks for the note and the good remembrances. It is interesting to read your memories since a year later the spring of 1968, I was the 3rd Flame Section leader and had F-31, F-32 and F-33 under my wing. Just before that, in Jan - Feb 1968 ... F-32 and F-33 were deeply engaged in the battle in Hue City during the Tet Offensive of '68. About two months later a brand-new F-31 showed up at the Dong Ha 3rd Tanks maintenance yard and I got it.

Also, an aside, at the end of 1967, whoever was the Charlie Co, 3rd Tanks skipper, he did not want flame tanks so 3rd Flame Section was assigned to Alfa Co, 3rd Tank for about six months. That is, Alfa Co had six flame tanks. Then around August 1968 a new CO took over Charlie company and we got assigned back to Charlie Co.

F-31 was named "Devils Disciples" when it showed up brand new in Dong Ha.

F-32 was named "Crispy Critters."-When I got there, F-32 was still "Toy U Ahn" but I did not like that name so we changed it.

F-33 as far as I can recall, it was named "Snoopy versus the Viet Cong." ■





A live fire demonstration of the M10 Booker at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland on April 18, 2024.

Why the Marine Corps should adopt the M10 Booker

The Army cancelled the M10 Booker. As the leaders of the Marine Corps' 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, we believe the Army's loss could be the Marine Corps' gain.

LT. COL. JOHN J. DICK,
LT. COL. DANIEL D. PHILLIPS

Published Jun 16, 2025

IMAGINE YOURSELF AS A MARINE IN THE 3RD LIGHT ARMORED RECONNAISSANCE BATTALION, PROUDLY WEARING THE INSIGNIA OF A UNIT THAT BLENDS SPEED WITH LETHALITY. YOU'RE IN YOUR EARLY TWENTIES — PERHAPS ONLY EIGHTEEN — SHAPED BY SOME OF THE TOUGHEST COMBAT TRAINING THE U.S. MILITARY OFFERS. YOU KNOW YOUR MISSION INSIDE AND OUT: MOVE FAST, FIND THE ENEMY, AND REPORT BACK, EMBODYING THE SPIRIT OF LIGHT ARMORED RECONNAISSANCE. YOU ARE IN ONE OF THE MOST DEMANDING AND HIGH-PRESSURE ROLES IN THE ENTIRE U.S. MILITARY, AND YOU ARE PRETTY SURE YOU HAVE THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD. YET A GNAWING CONCERN GROWS AS YOU PUSH FORWARD, SKIRTING THE FLANKS OF LARGER MARINE FORMATIONS. THE NEWLY INTEGRATED ULTRA-LIGHT TACTICAL VEHICLE (ULTV) YOU AND YOUR FELLOW MARINES RIDE IN IS NIMBLE AND FAST. BUT IT LACKS PROTECTION AND FIREPOWER ON A BATTLEFIELD OF UNMANNED AERIAL SYSTEMS (UAS), TANKS, OR MODERN INFANTRY FIGHTING VEHICLES. ONCE FORMIDABLE, THE LAV-25'S 25MM CANNON IS NO MATCH FOR MODERN ARMOR AND OFFERS LITTLE PROTECTION AGAINST DIRECT HITS. YOU AND YOUR FELLOW MARINES MUST RELY ON TACTICS AND MANEUVER — A DANGEROUS GAMBLE AGAINST PEER ADVERSARIES



Marine Lance Cpl. Spencer Coyne, a light armored vehicle gunner with 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, poses for a photo in front of a Light Armored Vehicle 25 before participating in a gunnery range in preparation of Exercise Joint Viking 25 in Setermoen, Norway, Feb. 19, 2025.

As light reconnaissance battalion leaders, we see these gaps as urgent and tangible. Speed and stealth alone are not enough. Marines need a direct-fire platform that can survive and dominate in close combat. We propose integrating the M10 Booker into future Mobile Reconnaissance Battalion formations. Its 105mm cannon and tracked durability would transform our ability to fight for information and keep pace against adversaries with real armor. The M10 is not a luxury — it's an operational necessity, bridging the gap between maneuver and lethality to ensure Marines prevail when contact is made.

A force caught between vision and reality

“Constantly test our assumptions, constantly war game, constantly experiment, watch the threats, watch the adversary, watch technology, and be willing to make adjustments along the way. So we're in step one of 10 maybe. This isn't the final chapter and we're not done with it. This is actually just the beginning.” — Gen. David H. Berger, War on the Rocks, 2020

The Marine Corps launched Force Design to modernize the force for great power competition, aiming to replace outdated systems with precision fires, unmanned platforms, and advanced digital networks. Although the vision is clear, execution has not kept pace. The Corps has shown a genuine commitment to innovation, but it continues to face challenges in fielding new capabilities at the scale and speed the evolving threat environment demands. This gap is most evident in the Light Armored Reconnaissance community's transition to the Mobile Reconnaissance Battalion. Though doctrinally justified, the doctrinal shift has outpaced materiel solutions. The Marine Corps sent its last M1 Abrams to the Army in 2020. While it did introduce programs like the Armored Reconnaissance Vehicle and the squad-level use of attack drones under Organic Precision Fires, other delays and cancellations have stalled progress. Unlike the Infantry Battalion Experiment — which added medics, scouts, additional mortars and

other capabilities to traditional formations — the Marine Corps has not completed a key, comprehensive review for the Mobile Reconnaissance Battalion concept, known as the DOTMLPEFP review, for Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership & Education, Personnel, and Faculties-Policy validation.

Delays in key acquisition programs continue to strain the Marine Corps' ground combat element. The Amphibious Combat Vehicle has suffered from mechanical issues that limit its reliability in littoral environments. The Corps canceled the Organic Precision Fires-Mounted program in favor of lighter alternatives, while cybersecurity concerns sidelined the Long Range Unmanned Surface Vessel. The Ultra Light Tactical Vehicle program ended in 2024 without replacement, and the Navy/Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System remains in testing. Long-range fires may not be fielded until 2030, and the Army's Next Generation Squad Weapon program has faced criticism from within the ranks and a supply chain that is not yet fully online. As a result, Light Armored Reconnaissance units are taking on new missions without the tools or capabilities needed to succeed.

Armor isn't going away

Armor remains relevant across today's battlefields, from Ukraine to the Indo-Pacific. European nations continue to modernize their armored forces, as seen in Poland's purchase of K2 tanks and Sweden's acquisition of CV90s, supported by the European Union's €150 billion (\$173 billion) defense investment. Meanwhile, China is advancing its armored capabilities and deploying counter-drone and directed energy systems. These global trends reflect a clear consensus: armor still matters, if adapted to modern threats.

The Marine Corps' 2020 tank divestment was driven by strategic priorities, but evolving conditions warrant reconsideration. Fielding armor like the M10 Booker would restore direct-fire support and align the Corps with broader modernization efforts and the operational divide between mobility, survivability, and lethality. As the European Council on Foreign Relations notes, tanks remain relevant when integrated into contemporary warfare systems.

A missing capability at the worst possible time

In the Indo-Pacific, this modernization lag has left the Marine Corps in a dangerous capability trough — neither equipped with legacy systems nor armed with replacements. Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment require equipped forces to sense, strike, and survive, but the current inventory of light, fast vehicles and lack of heavy, direct fire mean we risk being able to detect and deter but not decisively engage.

Though these shortcomings are tactical, they must be solved in acquisitions. As the Center for Strategic and International Studies warns, “the challenge for Force >>

Design is not the concept, but the lag between divestment and capability replacement. That gap represents a period of strategic vulnerability.” If capability fielding remains slow, Force Design’s foundational assumptions may falter. As Keenan Chirhart wrote in a recent War on the Rocks analysis: “The Marine Corps should work to flatten the entire landscape and move from concept to capability to acquisition faster than an adversary can make that capability obsolete.” In other words, the Corps must prioritize near-term investments in survivable mobility, precision fires, and recon modernization to avoid a scenario where our forces can find the enemy, but do little about it.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth canceled the Army’s M10 Booker program not because he doubted the vehicle’s capabilities, but to support his broader vision of building a more agile and adaptable U.S. force posture. In his May 1, 2025, directive, Hegseth emphasized that the future fight will demand platforms that are “not just powerful, but agile, survivable, and deployable in complex theaters.” The strategy will shift our emphasis away from traditional mechanized formations toward distributed, mobile units that can engage across multiple domains — maritime to mountains, but also air and even space and cyber — that Force Design envisions. While the cancellation signaled the end of the Booker’s path in the Army, it simultaneously created an opportunity for the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps now has the chance to reevaluate the M10 Booker through a different lens — one that prizes expeditionary utility, direct fire capability, and integration with stand-in forces. The Booker may not be the system the Army wants, but it may be what the Marine Corps needs under evolving reconnaissance and maneuver doctrine.

Why the Marine Corps should integrate the M10 Booker

The Marine Corps is evolving under Force Design to prepare for high-end conflict in contested maritime environments. At the heart of this evolution is the transition from Light Armored Reconnaissance to Mobile Reconnaissance Battalions, which reflects a broader shift in



Marines with 3rd Littoral Combat Team, 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, drive an ultra-light tactical vehicle during a live-fire training exercise at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, Nov. 21, 2024.

how the Marine Corps expects its reconnaissance forces to shape the battlespace. As Marine Corps doctrine (MCDP 1–0 Operations) makes clear, reconnaissance units must do more than observe—they must actively fight for information and influence enemy decisions. The Mobile Reconnaissance Battalion is to be made up of three companies, one of which is Light Mobile Reconnaissance (LMR). LMR companies will be equipped with ultra-light tactical vehicles (ULTV) and dismounted sensors. With minimal firepower and almost no armored protection, these units must either avoid contact or depend heavily on external fire support.

In contrast, the M10 Booker provides a self-contained capability to detect, fix, and finish enemy forces. Armed with a 105mm cannon, coaxial 7.62mm machine gun, and commander’s .50 caliber weapon station, the M10 Booker offers versatile firepower suitable for counter-reconnaissance, blocking operations, or support to seizure of key terrain. Its employment would enable the Mobile Reconnaissance Battalion to transition from a passive observer to a combat-capable maneuver element.

Surviving and communicating on a modern battlefield

Force Design emphasizes distributed maritime operations, but this distribution must not come at the expense of survivability. Army Engineers designed the M10 Booker to survive in high-threat environments. Its armor package protects against small arms, indirect fire fragments, and medium-caliber munitions. In practical terms, Mobile Reconnaissance Battalions equipped with M10s can persist under fire, conduct reconnaissance-in-force, and survive encounters with enemy mechanized forces. Ultra Light Tactical Vehicles, in contrast, are highly vulnerable and must disengage at first contact. The M10 Booker could also play a key command-and-control role on the battlefield. It could be adapted as a hub for the Marines’ Network-On-The-Move concept, and integrate into emerging communications systems like the ALL.SPAC multi-band satellite communications.

Logistics and the ‘right to repair’

One of the main concerns about bringing armor back into the Marine Corps has been sustainment. However, the M10 Booker offers a more expeditionary alternative to the heavier M1A1 Abrams, with reduced weight, improved mobility, and lower logistical demand. Weighing between 38 and 42 tons, the M10 can be airlifted by a C-17 (one per flight) and transported by both Landing Craft Air Cushion and Ship-to-Shore Connectors. It runs on a fuel-efficient diesel engine and requires less maintenance than a traditional main battle tank.

While critics argue that armor reduces maritime agility, the M10’s lighter weight and strategic lift compatibility strike a balance between survivability and mobility. But to unlock its full potential within the stand-in force concept,



The M10 Booker Combat Vehicle.

the Marine Corps must avoid inheriting the Army’s legacy sustainment model, which relies heavily on centralized contractor support. The Army’s experience with the M10 — characterized by high costs and limited maintenance flexibility — highlights the risks of a static, depot-based logistics approach ill-suited for expeditionary operations.

For Marine forces operating forward in contested spaces, sustainment must be as agile as maneuver. Integrating the M10 Booker into the force will require a new maintenance model aligned with Force Design principles — one that empowers Marine maintainers to conduct field-level repairs using scalable diagnostics, digital technical data, and additive manufacturing. The Corps should adopt a hybrid approach, similar to naval aviation, where Marines handle most maintenance organically, with limited depot-level support from General Dynamics. Contracts should also include expeditionary repair kits, 3D-printable files, and tailored logistics packages. In contested logistics, sustaining armored platforms at the edge is essential.

Historical precedent and an opportunity

The Marine Corps has a long history of turning Army-rejected platforms into operational assets. In the early 1980s, it adopted the Light Armored Vehicle-25 after the Army dropped the program, gaining a fast, amphibious, and lethal platform that served effectively for over four decades. The M10 Booker presents a similar opportunity. With over 100 units already built or contracted, the Corps can capitalize on sunk costs by pursuing one of three resourcing strategies grounded in past success and doctrinal logic.

First, the Marine Corps could replicate its 1991–1992 acquisition of the M1A1 Abrams by requesting M10s through an Army transfer at no procurement cost, assuming full sustainment responsibilities. This “zero acquisition” model could save \$12–15 million per unit but would place long-term lifecycle costs, estimated at \$3.5–4 million per vehicle, on Marine Corps budgets. It would also require retooling logistics, training pipelines, and shifting away from the Army’s contractor-heavy sustainment model toward a more expeditionary approach, as outlined in the Marine Corps logistics doctrine.

Second, the Corps could pursue a joint procurement agreement with the Army, similar to past efforts like the now-canceled Joint Light Tactical Vehicle, formalized through a Memorandum of Agreement. A coordinated acquisition effort would allow the services to share costs, align production timelines, and include Marine-specific modifications like lighter armor packages. Entering during Lot 3 or later could reduce unit cost to \$11–13 million and yield additional savings on bulk sustainment.

Finally, the Marine Corps could fund an independent Program of Record using rapid acquisition authorities under 10 U.S. Code § 4022, allowing full configuration control. While this offers maximum flexibility, it carries the highest cost, potentially \$1.2–1.4 billion over a decade for 80–90 vehicles, along with added investments in training infrastructure and new Military Occupational Specialties.

Each strategy reflects viable paths to restoring armored firepower within the Corps, consistent with Force Design’s focus on flexible, joint-capable formations. Treating the M10 as a modern successor to the LAV — repurposed, upgraded, and resourced for expeditionary use — would close the Corps’ armor gap without compromising its operational agility.

As the Army decides what to do with the M10, there are possibilities within the Marine Corps. The M10 Booker could integrate into Marine Corps Light Armored Reconnaissance battalions to address the current capability gap by providing mobile, protected direct-fire support essential for modern reconnaissance missions. Alternatively, the Marine Corps could field the M10 during the transition from the Light Armored Vehicle to the Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle in the early 2030s. The Army nearly completed the testing and evaluation for the M10 Booker, where it was scheduled for fielding to Army units starting in the fourth quarter of the 2025 fiscal year, before its cancellation. The M10’s design offers enhanced lethality and survivability, enabling Light Armored Reconnaissance and Mobile Reconnaissance Battalion units to effectively engage fortified positions and light armored threats, thus restoring a critical combined-arms function within the Marine Corps’ expeditionary framework.

As contested maritime environments become the norm, reconnaissance units must go beyond passive observation — they must actively fight for information, deny the enemy freedom of movement, and shape the battlespace to enable decisive action. The integration of the M10 Booker into the Light Armored Reconnaissance/Mobile Reconnaissance Battalion is not simply a platform solution — it is a doctrinal pivot that restores balance to Force Design and reclaims combat credibility for Marine reconnaissance in the Marine Expeditionary Force security space.

The M10 Booker directly addresses the Corps’ current capability gap in survivable, mobile

(Continued on page 44)

To the Great Tank Park in the Sky

"The brave die never, though they sleep in dust: Their courage nerves a thousand living men."

Minot Judson Savage, American clergyman and author

George "Manny" Jordan, Jr 1941–2025

George "Manny" Jordan, 84, of Lincoln County, MO, passed away on April 17, 2025. He was born April 6, 1941 in Elco, Illinois to George and Edith Savannah (Burke) Jordan. George attended school in Illinois and entered the US Marine Corps. He received an honorable discharge. Manny was a Gas Tanker Driver for over 30 years with Arco (then became BP/Amoco). On Nov. 16, 2003, Manny and Joanie were united in marriage in Spring Valley, CA. He was a loving husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather and friend. He was an active member of the USMC VTA.

Rhea David Hambright, 1948 – 2025



Rhea David Hambright, of Bandera, Texas, was born October 7, 1948 and passed away on May 17, 2025, peacefully surrounded by his loved ones. He was born in Atlanta, GA to Edward and Virginia Hambright on October 7, 1948. He was an active member of the USMC VTA. Despite his very serious handicap and thanks to his best friend, Larry Parshall, Rhea attended many of our biennial reunions with his service dog, Bea.

Karl Buttstadt, 1948–2024

Mary Jo Buttstadt writes: Thank you for your wonderful note. Unfortunately, you didn't hear from Karl because he died on 12/11/24. He was in the hospital dealing with heart issues. Agent Orange took him peacefully in his sleep. His heart just gave out on him. He was 76! and we were married 54 years! I wasn't totally shocked because he was becoming so week. His blood pressure was 80/40 and his doctor told me to take him straight to the hospital immediately. That was right before Thanksgiving. They tried so many meds on his but his heart was only functioning 20%.

William Keith Kimball, 1948–2016

William Keith Kimball passed away at Fairfax INOVA Hospital in Falls Church, Virginia on Thursday, April 28, 2016. He was a Marine Corps veteran, having enlisted and served two tours of duty as a Tank Commander in Vietnam. After returning to the United States, William graduated from Clarion College in Clarion, Pennsylvania with a double Master's degree. He went on to work in the aviation industry as a medivac pilot, corporate jet pilot, and flight instructor. William retired from the aviation industry to become the proprietor of Piper Hobby in Chantilly, Virginia. Unfortunately, Bill never became a member of the USMC VTA.

Ralph Schwartz, 1947 – 2025



Clyde Hoch sent this from Facebook: Our hearts are broken over the loss of Ralph Schwartz. Ralph is a Marine who served in Charlie Co, 1st Tanks in '68 – '69 and earned a Purple Heart, was also a longtime member of the Marine Corps League. Ralph coordinated the collection box locations for Toys for

Tots for many years. He also picked up toys at multiple collection locations and brought them to the North Pole to be given to thousands of children. Ralph was a good man and Marine who loved children. Rest in peace Ralph; you will be deeply missed! And as a side note, it appears as if Ralph's wife, Duann died in April of this year. Ralph was a longtime member of the USMC VTA.

Your Attention Please!

We would greatly appreciate it that if you recognize a name in the obits that you, please send us an email note or give us a phone call telling us about the recently departed Marine. Anything that you recall might be posted so that others will know that he is remembered by others... plus we will have another record of his memory.

ME AND BEA

BY RHEA HAMBRIGHT
10/14/2021



I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. I have lived in 15 states but call Fayetteville, Texas home. After I graduated from High School in Panama City, Florida, I joined the United States Marine Corps. I was sent to the lovely and exciting tropical paradise of South East Asia. There I met all kinds of new people, most of them were not very friendly. I came home, did two years of college, got married, had four kids. Remarried years later and my life was upgraded more than I deserved.

Two and a half years ago, I lost the love of my life to cancer. I was alone and couldn't do many things I had taken for granted over the years. A great friend suggested I get a service dog. He found Service Dogs; Inc. and the rest is history. Well, not all history. The fun part is just starting.

A description of my physical challenge: I am wheelchair-bound, I have COPD. My left leg is amputated above the knee. My neck is fused together. Both my shoulders have been replaced but one is frozen. Then all the effects of 6171m better known as Agent Orange. It seems every organ in my body is touched in some way or somehow by Agent Orange. I sweat on half of my body.

Because of my physical challenges and since I lost my wife, I couldn't do my laundry. With my bad shoulders I could not lift wet towels. I seem to drop everything I touch. I had trouble dressing myself (coats, socks and pants). Getting out of my recliner is a chore. Every time I needed something, like a bottle of water, it's an ordeal. My emergency meds like my nitro pills and my medical alert device were never where I needed them.

I did not like my life. It was empty and dark. I had not the energy to do any of the daily tasks that needed to be done. I felt I needed help, both with the daily tasks and keeping myself safe. I chose Service Dogs, Inc., because they responded quickly. They were closer to home than others. The price was right – free!

When I went to fill out the application for a service dog, I was introduced to Miss Deana. It was then and there that I realized that I was home. The staff was always there and you couldn't find a group of more dedicated people helping you find your new best friend! I can't say I chose SDI, but I can say I was lucky enough to be chosen by them.

I only met one dog. That was Beatrice. We were supposed to meet for just a short while on our first meeting. The reason for the short visit was to see how we meshed together. Did I like her, did she like me? I was there to meet several dogs. Bea and I hit it off so well that I never met another dog. So, at that time I didn't know that we would be paired. All in all, it was one of the greatest moments of my life to have met my new best friend and someone to help me with my daily routine. I had no idea what to expect when I was chosen for a service dog. I was very

anxious and very nervous. What if I don't pass? What if I don't like the dog? A thousand things went through my mind. Once I was introduced and started my classes, all my worries were moot. The staff were very courteous and professional. There were no time limits or pressures to learn a command. Being at ease makes your experience with SDI much more pleasant.

How does Beatrice help me? It would be quicker if I told you what my dog doesn't do for me. She gets me water from the fridge then closes the door. Does my laundry, brings my dirty clothes to the laundry room, takes them out of the basket and puts them in the front load washer. After they are washed, Bea takes them out of the washer and puts them into the front load dryer. After they are dry, she gives them to me so I can fold them or hang them. She opens doors for me which is a big deal when you are in a wheelchair. She retrieves my meds and medical alert device. When I drop anything, she is there to pick it up. She helps remove my clothes at night, tugs off my socks, pants and coat. Probably the biggest thing she does for me is just being there for me. She keeps me from going insane! Miss Bea is the only thing I can talk to, living alone as I do.

How my life has changed with my new Service Dog? It is wonderful. I was a shut-in before I got Bea. There was so much I couldn't or wouldn't do by myself. Now I go places and see people. She has become part of me. You wonder how you made it before you got a service dog.

Before I was paired with Bea, I was a wreck waiting to happen. No one wanted to talk to me, no one wanted to help around the house, no one to care for. I had lost my wife. There wasn't one good thing going for me in my life. And let's not forget COVID 19. Now I want to get out and do more, see people, experience life again. I lost so much and now I want to get it back. Bea makes me see the world in a totally new light and I am forever thankful.

When I first got Beatrice, I mentioned to one of the trainers that Beatrice is a long name for a dog. Growing up I was told to give a dog a one syllable name because it is easier for them. Anyway, the trainer said, "We don't call her Beatrice, we call her Bea." My eyes welled up and I was moved very deeply. My wife had just passed and her name was Betty. Three guesses to what I called my wife. That's right Bea! I think she sent me Beatrice! ■

TAPS

BY GREG KELLEY

Several months after my December '67 return from 'Nam, while stationed at Camp Lejeune, I put in for a transfer. I remember the situation pretty clearly. At the tail end of one morning formation, the gunny in charge rattled off a couple of openings. One of the openings was for Marine Barracks at Quonset Point Naval Air Station in Rhode Island.

"Anyone interested come see me after formation." Well, Quonset Point Rhode Island was less than a hundred miles from my home on Cape Cod, so I jumped at the chance. Yes, I met the requirement of having at least another twenty-four months active duty remaining. Yes, I have my dress blues.

Once I reported in, I found out that what I had thought of as "squared away" took on a whole new meaning. Translation: Unless you've served in a Marine Barracks, you really have no idea what squared away means. I learned quickly. Highly polished brass... white belt...highly polished

holster, shoes, dress cap...crisp creases in all uniforms, etc.

Our duties at the Barracks included such things as manning the gates, raising and lowering base colors, various security details, the Sabotage Alert Team, security for the nuclear weapons stockpile, and honor guards for funerals. One of your charges as part of a Marine Corps funeral honor guard is to remain stoic. No tears allowed. The no-tears-allowed part was not an easy order to follow. Having returned from Viet Nam only a few months earlier, and with all those deaths still fresh and clinging to me, it was particularly difficult for me to stay firm. Our twenty-one-gun salutes were followed by Corporal Carey playing taps on his bugle. Carey took playing taps to a different level. He would seek out a hiding place fifty yards or more away from the funeral, and wait to play until just after we had fired our seven M-1 rifles three times in unison. So, after the smoke from

our volleys would come wafting up and sometimes across the gathering, his sad and solemn bugle would cry to us from a distance. Carey was not just a musician, but an artist with his horn. It was all I could do to keep my tears at bay! Most of us know taps from how it's played to signal the end of the day, but taps at a Marine funeral is much more significant. It signifies closure to that Marine's life. As I was sometimes one of the flag folders at the end the ceremony, I would end up close to the loved ones and watch them as our NCOIC handed the tightly folded white-starred blue triangle to the wife or mother or father. Most would clutch it to themselves as if it was somehow a part of their fallen Marine and now all they had left.

Today, some fifty-seven years later, whenever I hear taps played, I am instantly transported back to those funerals, and still fight back my tears.

Living in America

BY CLYDE HOCH

I grew up in what I thought was a very poor family. Everyone was poor back then. I didn't realize how good we had it even as poor as we were. When I got to travel around the world in the Marines, I realized what being poor really was. In a port in Europe as the sailors were dumping the ships' garbage into a barge, I saw people picking through the garbage and eating some of it.

Vietnam was even worse. Outside of the cities people lived in grass shacks they built from materials found in the jungle. They had dirt floors, and any furniture was made from materials found in the jungle. They had no chairs and always squatted to eat or talk with each other. They ate what they found in the jungle. The one thing that surprised

me was they shared what little they had. To make matters worse for them, the North Vietnamese would come into their villages at night and take what little food they had. They would take their children to come and fight for them. If they refused their parents would be killed.

I have come to realize that living in America is a great God given privilege. America is still a place where one can go from poverty to wealth. Some who come to mind are J D Vance and Ben Carson. No one suffered more than those who signed the Declaration of Independence. Many were wealthy and successful who lost everything they had, and many died in poverty to bring to you a fabulous country. Take a good look

around you and appreciate all that you have. You may feel you don't have much but most times we do not appreciate all that we have.

Nothing on this earth is perfect. America has its faults but is still the finest country in the world. Every time I see the American flag or hear The Star-Spangled Banner or America the Beautiful I feel a sense of pride. I feel a sense of pride when I think about the fact that I served that flag. I join a long line of men and women who stepped forward to do our part to make America great and free. Keep in mind millions of men and women died so you can have the freedoms you have today. Please take one minute of your day and pray for them.

Purple Heart

Geroge Shaw writes: *In reference to my email about a DD-215 (modified) please find below the notarized letter I was required to send to HQ Marine Corps to obtain my Purple Heart. I was happy that, through the VTA, I was able to locate my Platoon Leader, Lt. Rodney (Fuzz) Henderson.*

Rodney A Henderson

2044 Parkwood Drive
Johnstown, CO 80534
Phone: 970.218.9740

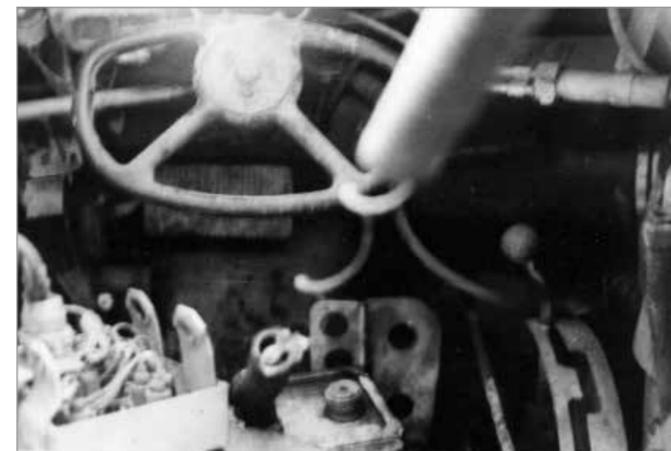
March 26, 2009

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is in reference to wounds received by PFC George Shaw, USMC, on February 18, 1967. I, Rodney A Henderson, then a 1st Lieutenant, was the Platoon Leader of the 3rd Platoon of Bravo Company, 1st Tank Battalion, 1st Marine Division. Our home base for the 3rd Platoon was on Hill 41 in Quang Nam Providence, RVN.

On the morning of February 18th, I accompanied an infantry patrol from 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines in the area of the hamlets of La Chau and Hill 22. We had repeated clashes with the enemy for most of the patrol, with neither side able to inflict casualties on the other. As we approached Hill 22, we came under heavy small arms fire and received several casualties that required medivac. Because we could not secure the LZ for the medivac chopper, I called for two of my tanks to come pick up the wounded and transport them to Hill 41 for medivac. Tanks B-31 and B-32 met us at Hill 22. I climbed aboard B-32, commanded by G/Sgt Servando Garza, the Platoon Sgt, to confer with him about picking up of the wounded. We hadn't gone more than a few yards when B-32 detonated a land mine. The force of the explosion blew off the right front two sets of road wheels, ruptured the belly of the tank, and sprayed shrapnel inside the tank, wounding the gunner, loader, and tank commander/Platoon Sgt. The driver, PFC George Shaw, bore the brunt of the explosion, and was blown out of the tank, onto the front slope plate. The explosion jammed the transmission linkage in forward and the tank continued to rumble forward – the track had not been blown apart. Although PFC Shaw was severely wounded, he managed to get back into the driver's hatch and apply the brake hard enough to bring the tank to a halt, killing the engine. Everyone was evacuating the tank, for fear of internal explosions and to get away from the smoke and dust. G/Sgt Garza and I got to the front of the tank and assisted PFC Shaw getting out of the tank. Although the explosion literally blew his trousers off and blackened his legs and buttocks, it did not appear that his wounds were more than a severe bruise, even though his hip holstered pistol was bent about 45 degrees! The infantry corpsman checked him over and said he wanted him medevaced and x-rayed for internal injuries – he expressed concern that it was more than a bad bruise. Tank B-31 hooked up to B-32, the wounded were put aboard B-31 and they proceeded to Hill 41 for the medivac. It wasn't until the next day that we learned of the extent of George Shaw's injuries, and went down to the hospital to bid farewell and speedy recovery to George Shaw.

I took the following pictures of B-32 upon my return to Hill 41 that day. The picture of the driver's compartment leads one to wonder how anyone could have survived that explosion – much less just been "badly bruised"! I am thankful for the excellent Navy Corpsmen we had as "Doc's" ■



I certify that the above information is true to the best of my recollection of the events of February 18, 1967.

Signed: _____ Date: _____
Rodney A Henderson

This letter was signed before me this _____ day of March 2009.

My commission expires _____
Notary Public (Seal)

COVER STORIES

TASK FORCE ROBBIE

INTRODUCTION

Task Force Robbie

3RD TANK BN, 3RD MAR DIV

Feb 1968

In the later part of 1967 and the early part of 1968, the 3rd Tank Battalion was spread all along the area known as "Leatherneck Square" that was just south of the DMZ ... and all across the western part of northern I Corps. The "spread" was so wide that there were not enough tanks to be able to be assigned to each and every firebase that might need defending. Instead of having a few tanks (or no tanks) present at selected locations, the CO of the 3rd Marine Division decided to congregate a large mobile armored rapid reaction force in a central location (at Cam Lo Hill). The plan was, if a far-flung location needed assistance with dealing with attacking enemy elements, the "mobile armored rapid reaction force" could mobilize and deploy almost at a moment's notice. Thus, the birth of "Task Force Robbie."

From the "official" 3rd Tank Battalion 1968 Command Chronologies:

On 3 February Task Force Robbie was organized as directed by the Commanding General. The Task Force includes eleven M48A3 tanks and 3 M67 flame tanks of this Battalion. The Commanding Officer, 3d Tank Battalion was assigned as Executive Officer of the Task Force and the Battalion Executive Officer was assigned as the Task Force S-3. Initially the unit headquarters was located at the A Company Command Post and moved to Cam Lo Hill on the 5th of February. From that position the Force has run armored columns to Camp Carroll and Dong Ha.

Enemy activity in the City of Hue delayed the displacement of the Battalion Command Post which remains at Gia Le. This, the existence of the Provisional Rifle Company, and the formation of Task Force Robbie resulted in a wide dispersion of Battalion elements. The Commanding Officer, Executive Officer and Assistant S-3 Officer are at Cam Lo with two platoons of tanks from Company C, one section of flame tanks and two tanks of Company A. The Battalion S-4 is at Gia Le with a Battalion Rear. The Battalion S-3 is in a forward Command Post located at the Company A Command Post. The Provisional Infantry Company is at Quang Tri. Company B is at Camp Carroll with one platoon at Khe Sanh, one platoon at the Rockpile, one section at YD051552 and one section at YD073573. Company A is at Dong Ha with one platoon at Con Thien, one platoon Gio Linh and two platoons at the C-2 Bridge position. In addition to the tanks with Task Force Robbie, two Company C tanks are at Cua Viet and two are at A-3. The Company "C" Command Post is at Quang Tri. Company A, 3d Anti Tank Battalion is at Khe Sanh with one platoon split between Con Thien and the C-2 position. The 2d Platoon, Company "A", 5th Anti Tank Battalion was attached on 24 February and its personnel are located at Dong Ha awaiting the arrival of the platoon vehicles.

The Marines' First Answer to an Armor-Centric Fighting Formation

MAJ BRIAN GUENTHENSBERGER, USA

SUBMISSION TO ARMOR & CAVALRY JOURNAL-16 SEPTEMBER 2009

As the month of January came to a close in 1968, there wasn't a unit of the United States military in Vietnam that wasn't feeling the pressure of the Tet Offensive. Ground commanders suddenly found their attentions drawn in multiple directions. The 3rd Marine Division's sector included such hot spots as Khe Sahn, Dong Ha, Con Thien and Hue City, as well as key terrain and lines of communication such as Route 1, Route 9, and the Cua Viet River, and they certainly had their hands full. Their Commanding General, Major General Rathvon Tompkins, soon appreciated the need for a mobile reserve to respond quickly anywhere within the division's sector. His answer was Task Force Robbie, an armor-centric mobile reserve that "was the first occasion that the concept of mobile warfare with an armor-oriented formation was used in combat by the Marines."

No stranger to heavy fighting, Major General Tompkins was a seasoned combat veteran, having earned a Navy Cross as a battalion commander on Saipan in World War II. The first Tet Offensive attacks occurred on 29 January 1968. Not wasting any time, the first initial staff briefing for Task Force Robbie was on 1 February, 1968. By the 5th of February, Task Force Robbie was operational, with its headquarters at Cam Lo.

Strategic and Tactical Reserves have been, and always will be, a critical component of combat operations. What made Task Force Robbie significant was its composition. Discussed in the initial planning phases, and made official on 2 February, Task Force Robbie would "come from the 3rd Tank Battalion,

3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, and the current infantry battalion, usually 1st Battalion 9th Marines or 1st Battalion 4th Marines, located on C-3 (Cam Lo Hill). Other supporting units would be the 11th Engineer Battalion, 3rd Communication Battalion, 3rd MT Battalion, "B" Battery, 1/44th Artillery (US Army M-42 Dusters and Quad -50's). 12th Marines provided FSCC support and pre planned fires. The Division Air Officer would provide TACP capabilities." In short, the center of this combat formation would be the 3rd Tank Battalion. The main part of the Task Force was the 3rd Tank Battalion, but usually a company at a time was stood up for Task Force Robbie missions while the rest of the 3rd Tanks participated in other operations such as the Battle of Hue City and the defense of the Khe Sahn Combat Base. At any given time, 3rd Tank Battalion contributed "eleven M48A3 medium gun tanks and three M67A2 flame-thrower tanks" for Task Force Robbie missions, but typically those tanks came from Charlie Company, 3rd Tank Battalion.

A combat formation with tanks at the core is a concept that was unheard of in the Marine Corps as "tanks were always used in either direct support or attached to the infantry battalions or regiments." That would change with Task Force Robbie. The Task Force was named after the man that was chosen to be its commander, Colonel Clifford Robichard. He was the senior Colonel in the Division, and a veteran of World War II and Korea. He had an infantry background, but received cavalry training while an ROTC Cadet at Norwich University. He was known to spend time on the tank line, learning

the intricacies of mechanized life. His men knew him as a "hardnosed Marine officer who knew how to attack." He was definitely extremely well suited for this mission.

The reason why Cam Lo was chosen as the Command Post (CP) location, according to the Task Force Robbie S-3, Major Bruce MacLaren, was that "Cam Lo was far enough from the DMZ and enemy artillery, and also had good access to existing lines of communications, Routes 1N and 1S, Route 8B, and Route 9 to Khe Sahn. 1/9 (1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment) was in the process of developing the Cam Lo Hill area for their CP. It was decided that TFR headquarters would be co-located to take advantage of mutual infantry protection." Being co-located with an infantry battalion, in vicinity of all major routes throughout the division sector, made Cam Lo an ideal location for a division mobile reserve.

The Task Force was operational approximately a week to ten days from its inception. That includes everything from establishing its operational base to establishing the logistical support. The typical missions on the Task Force's agenda were robust. They included "Daily Road sweeps and mine clearances, armored assaults on known enemy positions, H & I fires when available (mostly from C-2 and A-1 positions into DMZ and above as well as from Camp Carroll and Khe Sahn), patrolling, mounted and dismounted, orienting USAs in bound 3rd /5th Brigade into the Cam Lo and DMZ TAOR. and civil affairs with established South Vietnamese villages." But those missions came straight from the Division CG. >>

Colonel Robichard visited Division daily. The Task Force was kept busy.

Route reconnaissance is vitally important in any mechanized operation, and Task Force Robbie's solution was to send tankers out on dismounted patrols with the infantry. The intent was for the tankers to observe the terrain prior to mounted patrols in order to determine traffic ability and accessibility of the terrain, as well as identify alternate routes to the main roads as they were usually infested with enemy mines. Additionally, bypass routes to the major choke points, such as at rivers and bridge crossings, could be identified. These tankers could then come back and brief the rest of the mounted Marines on the best routes to take. It was discovered that there were sufficient parallel routes to the main roads to avoid the most heavily mine-infested areas and "that with some engineer effort it was possible to mass Task Force Robbie at any point in the area of operations." Once outside the wire, reconnaissance by fire was another TTP that was heavily used, mostly with machine guns, but all weapons systems were utilized.

Despite the prior planning and preparations, the fighting was no less fierce. Typically deployed in an over watch covering the infantry's move, the tanks would be called to action upon first contact with the enemy. Of major concern to the Marine tankers were enemy armor and anti-tank mines, the latter being the major contributor of Task Force Robbie's battle damages to their fleet of M48A3 Patton Tanks. Corporal John Wear, a Tank Commander of an M67 Flame-thrower tank that was involved in two mine strikes during his tour, asserts that "If you did not hit at least one mine while in-country, you were not out snoopin' & poopin' in the bush very much!!!" A review of the Command Chronologies for the 3rd Tank Battalion for April, 1968 reveals 8 mine strikes resulting in damages to the battalion's tanks. In addition, the Marines of Task Force Robbie had

to contend with small arms, mortars, RPG's, satchel charges, and indirect fire on an almost daily basis.

Dong Ha was a battle fought at the height of the Vietnam conflict in 1968 between two battle-hardened opponents. The 320th NVA Division, a veteran of the 1954 Dien Bien Phu campaign, was an elite unit in the North Vietnamese Army. They started combat operations along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in January of 1968, so they were fresh and combat ready. The 3rd Marine Division, headquartered at Dong Ha Combat Base, had been fighting the 320th since that time. Dong Ha was strategically important to both sides. Not only was it on the junction of Route 9 and Route 1, the two major roadways in the north along the DMZ, but it was also on the Cua Viet river and had an airstrip as well. It was an important logistical asset. "Dong Ha controlled an eighty-kilometer frontage of combat bases that faced the DMZ from the beachhead at Cua Viet, west to the jungle covered mountains in the vicinity of Khe Sanh." The 3rd Marine Division, a well-equipped fully operational combat division, owned it. The North Vietnamese wanted it. They sent the 320th, a refreshed combat division with new troops, to take it.

The necessity for the US forces to keep Dong Ha was evident. It was strategically important to keep Dong Ha due to its location for logistical and combat reasons. The US could both monitor and control enemy movements in the area and respond quickly to enemy activity.

The 3rd Marine Division had been operating in Vietnam since 1965. They were acclimated to Vietnam. The 3rd MARDIV had eight regimental sized elements including all combat, combat support, and combat service support assets. They also had an infantry battalion from the US Army Americal Division attached to them. The Marines were well supplied by land, sea, and air due to its location. The 320th consisted of roughly three

regimental sized elements, mostly infantry equipped with small arms and some artillery, mortars, RPGs, and recoilless rifles. Marine units that had captured recon elements from the 320th before the battle noted that they were recent conscripted soldiers. They were fresh, but had little combat experience on the individual soldier level. The 320th was well dug-in along the Cua Viet River and had established operations in the area. The Marines had the 320th at a disadvantage.

The initial actions that brought about the battle of Dong Ha started on 29 April 1968. "Two battalions of the 2nd Regiment, 1st ARVN Infantry Division bumped into the NVA seven kilometers north of Dong Ha." The battle raged and it looked as if the ARVNs were beaten. At that point General Tompkins, the 3rd MARDIV commanding general, dispatched Task Force Robbie to help out. Task Force Robbie was dispatched from Cam Lo, located ten kilometers to the west. It made it three kilometers east of Cam Lo before being ambushed by a fierce NVA ambush. According to the Command Chronologies of 3rd Tank Battalion, Task Force Robbie "engaged an estimated company of VC/NVA" on the 30th of April, 1968 resulting in two tanks being struck by mines and an Ontos receiving damage from an 82mm mortar. They suffered eleven KIA, twenty-nine WIA, and lost four tanks. At that point, Task Force Robbie limped back to Cam Lo. Tanks would be used for CASEVAC purposes. Sergeant Mike Taber, a Tank Commander in Task Force Robbie, described the scene and having to come back with "dead bodies on the backs of our tanks." This engagement was significant because "this was the first occasion that the concept of mobile warfare with an armor-oriented formation was used in combat by the Marines." Additionally, "this triggered a series of savage infantry fights in the swampy terrain along the river east of Dong Ha."

This touched off a brutal three-day

battle that witnessed brutal fighting. The main element fighting for the Marines was the Battalion Landing Task Force (BLT) 2/4, which was a revamped 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. They were among three Marine regiments reorganized and reassigned to new Strike Landing Forces that were designed to allow the BLTs to rotate to and from Okinawa for R&R and rapidly deploy back into Vietnam as needed. BLT 2/4 was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, a hard charging Marine that reinstated basic marine esprit de corps and discipline which appeared to be lacking when he took command just a few months before.

The main maneuver companies; Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, and Hotel, experienced savage and brutal combat at all levels. Echo 2/4 first saw action in Nhi Ha, about nine kilometers north of Dong Ha. Hotel Company, on a routine patrol, was shocked to find NVA in a tiny village of Dong Huan. This told the Marines that the NVA were farther south than originally thought. A firefight erupted. The Navy

sent two utility landing craft up the Bo Dieu from the Cua Viet to aid in the Marines' effort. The NVA launched several rounds from 57mm recoilless rifles, with two shells penetrating the hulls of one of the craft. This prompted a withdrawal of the craft and the Navy eventually terminating operations in the area. Company F was to secure the Dai Do area and Company G was to reinforce them. To prepare for their initial assaults, the Marines prepped the areas with heavy artillery, air support, and naval gunfire. The NVA took cover in fortified bunkers and dug-in positions and waited out the barrage. When the artillery finally ceased, the Marines would each attack their respective village upon orders from Lt Col Weise. When that happened, the NVA snipers would pick off Marines as they approached and then the NVA soldiers would come up out of their fighting positions when the Marines got within close proximity. The result was brutal hand to hand fighting. Captain Livingston, the commander of Echo Company, ordered his men to fix bayonets on the

last day of serious fighting on 2 May. Company E did so and charged Dai Do. The wall of fire coming from the NVA soldiers was deafening.

In Nhi Ha, the NVA called in artillery from across the DMZ on their own positions. The fighting was so close that Marines and NVA soldiers were killed in the artillery onslaught. By the last day, the losses of the Marines were taking its toll. Toward the end of the fighting, a junior lieutenant was in command of E Company, the other company commanders were wounded, the Battalion Sergeant Major was killed by shrapnel from an RPG, and Lt Col Weise was pulled to the rear with serious wounds. The 320th NVA Division headed back across the DMZ to regroup when the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines came in to relieve BLT 2/4 on 5 May. But the Battle for Dong Ha was won on 2 May with a heavy loss to the Marines. When the fighting had ceased for Dong Ha, E Company had forty-five men left, F Company had fifty-two, Company G with thirty-five, and H Company had sixty-four. ■

TASK FORCE ROBBIE ON THE INTERNET

A NOTE FROM THE VIRTUAL WALL

In late April 1968 it became apparent that the North Vietnamese Army was again moving across the DMZ into the area north of Dong Ha. On 29 April the ARVN 2nd Infantry Regiment sent its 1st and 4th Battalions in a pincer movement to locate and engage NVA units around An Binh. "Task Force Robbie", consisting of Delta 1/9 Marines reinforced with tanks from Alpha 3rd Tanks, was sent to relieve building pressure on the ARVN's southern flank.

"Robbie" ran into trouble at Cam Vu, about 5,000 meters west of An

Binh, where a North Vietnamese blocking force was waiting for them. After taking 10 dead and 22 wounded in a six-hour fight against a clearly superior force, "Robbie" broke off the contact and withdrew. The ARVN forces had absorbed 17 dead and 47 wounded, could not link up, and also withdrew.

At this point the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, was brought into the fight, advancing toward Cam Vu. India 3/9 was the first to make contact, encountering an "L"-shaped ambush just north of Cam Vu. As 3/9's other

three companies deployed in support of India, the NVA broke contact and withdrew under cover of artillery fire from within and north of the DMZ.

The fighting around Cam Vu was paralleled by the engagement of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, with elements of the 325th NVA Division at Dai Do some 5 miles to northeast of Cam Vu. These engagements—the 2nd ARVN Infantry, 1/9, and 3/9 at Cam Vu and 2/4 at Dai Do—were the opening engagements in what became known as the "Battle of Dong Ha."

While the Cam Vu fights cost >>

the North Vietnamese at least 197 dead, Allied losses also were high:

- 1st Bn, 9th Marines—10 dead
- 3rd Bn, 9th Marines—36 dead
- 1st and 4th BNs, 2nd ARVN Infantry—17 dead

Ten Marines that were killed in the opening engagement at Cam Vu:

- Sgt Roy L. Gibson, Dallas, TX
- Sgt Elmer J. Perry, Odessa, TX
- Cpl Raymond E. Stanley, Manchester, NH
- HM3 Robert A. Vinton, Shaker Heights, OH (H&S Co with D/1/9)
- LCpl Patrick L. Bruckner, Reseda, CA
- LCpl Russell W. Noyes, Woburn, MA
- Pfc John F. Hutzell, Williamsport, MD
- Pfc Eduardo Marquez, El Paso, TX
- Pfc Lawrence J. McRae, Wilkes-Barre, PA
- Pfc Adam S. Najjar, Palm Springs, CA

From “The US Marines in Vietnam – 1968 – The Defining Year”

With the commitment of large U.S. forces to the far western reaches of I Corps in Operations Scotland II around Khe Sanh and Delaware in the A Shau Valley, the North Vietnamese decided to mount a new offensive in the eastern DMZ. Perhaps hoping that the American command with its attention riveted to the west would be caught off guard, the 320th NVA Division at the end of April and early May struck in the sector just above Dong Ha. Dong Ha served not only as the command post for both the 3rd Marine Division and the 9th Marines, but also remained the main logistic base for the north. It lay at the junction of Routes 1 and 9 and was the terminus of the Cua Viet River route. During the month of April, while the new Quang Tri base and Wunder Beach further south in Quang Tri Province alleviated some of the logistic pressure on Dong Ha, nearly 63,000 tons of supplies came in by sea at the Cua Viet port facility

for the 3rd Marine Division and then were shipped up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha.

Despite its obvious importance, Dong Ha was vulnerable to a determined enemy attack. The most immediate available troops were from the nearby 2nd ARVN Regiment which had its command post in the town of Dong Ha. Marine support units rather than line infantry were at the Dong Ha base itself. Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins’ only reserve was Task Force Robbie, under Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, consisting of a rifle company. Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and an armored company, Company A, 3rd Tank Battalion, reinforced by four Army vehicles including two M42 ‘Dusters,’ a platoon of Ontos, and a platoon of engineers. For the most part, even this modest force was committed elsewhere.

Napoleon/Saline sector to a new defensive position near Route 1. At 1715, Marine helicopters lifted Company E, BLT 2/4 from near the hamlet of Nhi Ha in the Napoleon northwestern sector to just north of the Dong Ha Bridge.* Later that night, Tompkins ordered the helicopter lift of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines from the 4th Marines Operation Lancaster II sector to C-3 to reinforce Task Force Robbie.6**

On the afternoon of the 29th, the 320th initiated attacks against the ARVN 2d Regiment and against the Marines in the Kentucky area of operations. On 29 April, enemy sappers blew a culvert on Route 1 near the hamlet of An Binh, about four miles north of Dong Ha. Acting upon intelligence that North Vietnamese regulars had entered An Binh, the ARVN 2d Regiment sent in its 1st and 4th Battalions north from Dong Ha and south from C-1 to investigate the incident and trap any enemy forces between them. The ARVN units themselves, however, encountered heavy resistance “which they could not handle” and called for assistance.

According to a newspaper account. Lieutenant Colonel Vu Van Giai, the 2nd ARVN commander, told Major General Tompkins that “he was holding on the road but that he was worried about some new pressure that was starting to build up on his left flank.” At that point, about 1415, Major General Tompkins ordered Task Force Robbie to move from C-3 with Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced by Company A, 1st Tank Battalion, to assist the ARVN.

At Cam Vu on Route 88, a secondary route running parallel and 3,000 meters north of Route 9, about 5,000 meters west of An Binh, the Marine task force ran into a North Vietnamese blocking force waiting for them. In a seven-hour “sharp engagement,” lasting from 1600 till nearly midnight. Task Force Robbie suffered casualties of 11 dead and 22 wounded and reported killing 26 of the enemy. Four of the tanks with the task force also sustained damage. Task Force Robbie returned to its original positions at C-3. In the meantime, the two South Vietnamese battalions had disengaged and retreated to C-1. The ARVN reported killing 130 of the enemy while taking casualties of 17 dead and 47 wounded.

On the evening of 29 April, concerned about the obvious presence of North Vietnamese units on Route 1. General Tompkins alerted additional forces. He directed Colonel Milton A. Hull, the 3d Marines commander, to be prepared to send a company from the A Marine M48 tank and two Marines, part of Task Force Robbie, to engage an enemy force near Dong Ha. Task Force Robbie was the 3d Division’s small armored reserve force, called after the nickname of its commander, Col Clifford J. Robichaud.

Napoleon/Saline sector to a new defensive position near Route 1. At 1715, Marine helicopters lifted Company E, BLT 2/4 from near the hamlet of Nhi Ha in the Napoleon northwestern sector to just north of

the Dong Ha Bridge.* Later that night, Tompkins ordered the helicopter lift of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines from the 4th Marines Operation Lancaster II sector to C-3 to reinforce Task Force Robbie.6**

On the afternoon of the 30th, the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at C-3. Reinforced by four tanks from Task Force Robbie, the battalion then pushed forward towards Cam Vu. Just north of Cam Vu, about 1610, Company I of the 3rd Battalion, like Task Force Robbie the previous day, came up against North Vietnamese, probably in company strength, in an L-shaped ambush. As Company I attempted to establish a defensive perimeter, the other companies of the battalion and the tanks pushed forward to assist the exposed company. With the coming of the reinforcements, the Vietnamese disengaged under cover of artillery north of the DMZ and their own mortars.*** The Marine reports showed 41 enemy killed at a cost of 20 Marines dead and 72 wounded. Despite the severity of the clash at Cam Vu the fiercest fighting of the day occurred about 10,000 meters to the northeast, involving BLT 2/4 and units of the 320th NVA Division in the village of Dai Do, about 2,500 meters north of Dong Ha. The battle for Dong Ha had begun.

The Fight for Dai Do, The First Day

Dai Do was actually a cluster of five hamlets, only one of which was actually named Dai Do, on a small peninsula carved out by the Cua Viet where it runs into the Bo Dieu. The Cua Viet rims the eastern edge while the Bo Dieu forms the southern boundary. Two unnamed small tributary streams of the larger rivers outline the northern and western reaches of the peninsula. The northernmost stream which flowed into the Cua Viet marked the boundary between the 2d ARVN Regiment and the 3d Marines. This stream separated the hamlet of Bac Vong in the Napoleon/Saline area of operations from the hamlet of Dong

Huan on the northeastern lip of the peninsula. About 500 meters south of Dong Huan was the hamlet of An Loc which overlooked the Bo Dieu. Dai Do was another 500

From the perspective of General Tompkins at the 3d Marine Division command post, he could not be sure that the main thrust of the enemy was in the Dai Do sector. At the same time that BLT 2/4 fought in Dai Do, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu, about three miles to the west, had engaged other elements of the 320th NVA Division, the same place where Task Force Robbie had run into trouble the day before.” Along Route 1, the 2d ARVN Regiment also reported continuing contact with enemy forces. Together with the attacks on the US Navy river boats, Tompkins believed the North Vietnamese poised a real threat to the entire coastal plain from Cam Phu south to Quang Tri. Still, according to Major William H. Dabney, recently promoted and a former company commander at Khe Sanh reassigned to the 3d Marine Division G-3 staff at this time, General Tompkins entered the division FSIC (Fire Support Information Center) on the evening of the 30th and ordered the artillery commander, “to take every tube that is in range of Dai Do ... to shift its trail so that it is pointing at the Dai Do area and ... fire max sustained rate with every tube all night.”

In an interview a few days after the initial action, a reporter quoted General Tompkins as stating, “Yes, I can tell you the exact moment when I made up my mind it was going to be a real battle—it was at 9:15 Tuesday morning (April 30).” According to the Tompkins interview, when the general looked at the map, the “situation was pretty obvious.” He believed, “the whole picture adds up to one of two things—the enemy was either driving through to Dong Ha itself, or he was planning to ... slip by one or both sides of Dong Ha, and go for the provincial capital of Quang Tri, just eight miles due south.” According to Tompkins

such a threat was more than the 2nd ARVN Regiment could handle, “it was time to call in the Marines.”

The 3rd Marine Division commander only had a limited number of reserves that he could throw into the battle. * Tompkins believed that the insertion of the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu contained the enemy forces to the west. He still remained concerned, however, about the capability of the ARVN to hold the center and also about the uncovering of the northern SS approaches to Dong Ha with the withdrawal of Company G from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan. As Lieutenant Colonel Weise later observed, “Nhi Ha had always been a key staging area for NVA infiltrating south along ‘Jones Creek.’” With BLT 2/4 committed to Dai Do, only the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines remained in the Napoleon/Saline sector, safeguarding the southern banks of the Cua Viet. General Tompkins request-

3rd Tank Battalion

PUC 12 Jul 65 – 15 Sep 67

SU 3rd Mar Div

MUC 28 Jan 68 – 31 May 68

SU Task Force Robbie

The opening contact with the 320th NVA Division came early on 29 April. Two battalions of the 2nd Regiment, 1st ARVN Infantry Division bumped into the NVA seven kilometers north of Dong Ha. As the fight raged on and it began to look as if the ARVN were beaten, General Tompkins dispatched part of his division reserve from Cam Lo, ten kilometers to the west, to help them. Task Force Robbie, consisting of a rifle company from 1/9 and a tank company from the 3rd Tank Battalion, made it just three kilometers east of Cam Lo before being ambushed by a strong NVA force. After losing eleven dead, twenty-nine wounded, and four tanks, TF Robbie limped back to Cam Lo. ■

Editor's Note: Many years ago, it might have been in 2005, I was introduced online to Col. Bruce Mac Laren, USMC (ret). At the time, when "Mac" found out that I had been with Task Force Robbie, he informed me that he had been the S-3 for the task force and that he possessed the complete S-3 journal that he'd like to donate to the USMC VTA. The following story is derived from his journal.

A Vietnam Journal

BY BRUCE M. MAC LAREN, COL. USMC (RET)

S-3 Comment: Task Force Robbie (TFR), a 3rd Marine Division Reserve Mobile Task Force, was established on 021200H Feb 68 to assist 3rd Mar Div and III MAF units to counter the NVA Tet Offensive in I Corps. TFR was disestablished on 291845H May 68.

By 29 May 68, most members of TFR had been returned to their parent organizations ... or were in the process of returning. A skeleton crew of Marines was manning the operations section in our command bunker on C-3 (Cam Lo Hill) until our net was secured officially by the Division G-3 and Comm Officer ... and our command bunker was to be taken over by 9th Mar personnel. I was the TFR S-3 since its inception. When I was assured that elements from 9th Marines were moving into the bunkers and assuming command, I departed for 3rd Mar Div headquarters in Dong Ha. It was my intention to turn over the Task Force Robbie S-3 Journal along with some classified files.

Upon my arrival in Dong Ha, no one at the Division G-3 Section wanted to sign for the TFR S-3 Journal ... let alone read or accept it. Instead, I was briefed by Col. Micheaux, G-3, to return to Cam Lo Hill (C-3) to set up our old TFR CP in order to form up another task force, greatly reduced, to be called "Task Force Mike". I complied with the orders. But ... Task Force Mike is another story.

I have kept the TFR S-3 Journal and have periodically shared some of the entry comments with former Task Force members, and some military writers who were interested in the Task Force's roles and missions during the Tet Offensive. I guess this input now is my effort to share "our" TFR experiences

with any interested Marines, Corpsmen, or a few historians. The contributors were Ops personnel, duty officers, NCOs, and communicators in the TFR command bunker during the Vietnam War. Writing styles were different.

021200H Feb 68: 1300H The Task Force Robbie (TFR) S-3 Journal was officially opened. Colonel Clifford B. Robichaud, then Division Inspector, was appointed by Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, CG 3rd Mar Div. as the Task Force commander ... ergo the TF title, Robbie! I attended that meeting and was given the assignment to find a good location for the Task Force CP.

I had frequently passed through the Cam Lo Hill (C-3) area enroute north to Con Thien to check on 3rd Tank Battalion personnel deployed there. Lt. Col. Fred Chapman, my former CO at 3rd Tank Battalion, now an Ops officer at COC, 3rd Mar Div, suggested the C-3 area to General Tompkins because it would have provided rapid deployment to Cam Lo village, then adjoining the Montagnard village, and had excellent MSR access. Politically, Cam Lo village represented the most northern vestige of the barely functioning South Vietnamese government ... as it was. There were other obvious tactical reasons for selecting the C-3 area (e.g. the importance of the Cam Lo bridge and river fording site to the north, assuring access to our DMZ fire bases, high ground visibility, relatively clear defensible terrain, rapid MSR deployment, helo pad availability and better time/distance deployment capabilities to key Division strong

points.) I would also point out that elements of the 4th Marine Regiment (H 2/4) were already deploying to and developing the defensive positions on Cam Lo Hill. These rotating seasoned infantry units could provide TFR with good perimeter security. (It became a regular practice to locate infantry battalions to C-3 on a rotating basis). Inasmuch as the TFR tanks would be deployed between Dong Ha, Con Thien, Camp Carroll, and Khe Sanh, the Cam Lo Hill area would meet our needs. A helo recon with Col. Robichaud, Lt. Col. Karl Fontenot (then CO, 3rd Tank Battalion), and myself verified the Cam Lo Hill's suitability. Once approved by the CG, Colonel Robichaud and Lt. Col. Fontenot remained overnight in Dong Ha and assisted in our staff development, selection, and rudimentary planning. Lt. James (Deuce) Donlan and I reported back to Cam Lo Hill to coordinate the TFR arrival and positions. Colonel Robichaud had given me some personal instructions prior to my departure. At 1800, TFR received its first WIA. First Lieutenant Riel was hit by incoming shrapnel and medevacked to Dong Ha. His wounds were not serious.

030001H Feb 68: 1800H Colonel Clifford Robichaud, Colonel James Stockman, G-3, Lt. Col. Fred Chapman, Lt. Col. Harvey, and Lt. Col. Karl Fontenot (CO, 3rd Tank Battalion) put together a staff to operate the new mobile task force as follows:
CO Col Clifford Robichaud
XO Lt Col Karl Fontenot
S-1 1st Sergeant Richard Kawanis
S-2 GySgt Carl W. Keegan
S-3 Major Bruce M. Mac Laren

S-3A 1stLt Douglas C. Barney
S-4 1stLt James T. Donlan
Comm O Major David H. Murch
MTO Capt. Flood, 1stLt T.W. Musser
TACP Maj Collins, Captain Ackrey
11th Engr: Sweep/Demo Team Leaders
Sgt. Harold Myers, Sgt. Leonard West
B Btry 1/44 Arty: 1st Lt Charles Wood USA

CO "C" Co. 3d Tk. Bn Captain Warren J. O'Buch
1st Plt CO 2nd Lt Stephen Larsen
2nd Plt CO 2nd Lt John T. Mero
CO H 2/ 4 Capt. J.L. Williams
5th AT, A Co. 1st Plt 1st Lt Smith
3rd Recon Bn, Recon Co (-)

S-3 Comment: The 27th Independent Battalion (27th IB) NVA, was the first identifiable enemy outfit to be our adversary from day 1 of the TFR establishment. I was never very sure as to that unit's strength, but as soldiers, they blended well with the bush, and acted against us during periods of our own defensive inattention. I was to learn in about a month that their cadre had close ties with villagers adjacent to C-3. Unlike the Viet Cong, I did not believe that they collected taxes from the civilians. To my knowledge, the 27th IB did not wear proper NVA uniforms, which created problems for us as well as themselves in the event of their capture. IDing their KIAs revealed mostly standard Vietnamese civilian attire, but also unlike the VC, they appeared to be more physically fit. To the best of my knowledge, based on what little solid intel G-2 was able to pass us, the CO, 27th IB, was named "Ho". He was a North Vietnamese Catholic, and he was a graduate of the University of Hue. This was all the info I had at the time. Later on, reports came in referring to NVA 320 Division and NVA 324 B Division. These were uniformed soldiers enroute south skirting our perimeters to the west and via Laos.

Interestingly enough, I was to obtain closer personal and military contact

with the NVA CO 27th IB. One day, while driving back from an inspection in Cam Lo District Headquarters, my driver stopped the jeep in the village and allowed a young teenage girl assisting her grandmother to cross the street. The young girl nodded toward me and said, "Merci, Monsieur"

Hearing French was not a real surprise in Vietnam. It was a second language among the educated. I responded in my poor French (2 years in high school and 3 years in college ... plus living near Woonsocket, RI), "Comment allez-vous, jeune Mlle?"

She stopped dead in her tracks and responded, "Je suis très bien... et vous, Monsieur?"

I smiled and said, "Vous parlez excellent Français, Mlle. Vous êtes une bonne fille à s'occuper de votre grand-mère."

She beamed another smile, "Merci, monsieur. Ma grand-mère est très vieille. Vous êtes le premier Américain que j'ai jamais parlé à..!"

Now pleased with my French effort, I said, "Je suis très chanceux, ne suis pas."

After she crossed the street safely, I said, "OK, Mlle. Voici quelques repas pour aider vous et votre grand-mère." Voyez-vous plus tard! And I passed her a small C-Ration box, waved, and we moved out.

She yelled, "Au revoir, Monsieur. Merci."

Numerous villagers were observing us uncertain as to the rhyme or reason for our contact. I felt it didn't hurt our rather tedious relations there overall.

About a week later, the sentry at Check Point 1 called and advised the CP that there was a young girl and an old lady at his post, and they wanted to see the "commandant"! I sent a jeep, and they were brought back blindfolded to our bunker. When they arrived, the girl stated her grandmother was very ill, and she was unable to get any local medical care. She had missed our last Medcap in the village. I took them both to our medical bunker and turned them over to the corpsmen. Our dentist, temporarily acting as our

regular doctor, and our Senior Medical Chief examined the grandmother in the presence of her granddaughter. She was diagnosed as having early stages of cholera... not uncommon in our area at the time, but deadly for senior citizens. The Chief administered two butt shots much to the grandmother's dislike, and also a 30-day supply of pills was given to the granddaughter with explicit instructions. I had the two women returned to Check Point 1, and they cleared C-3. I was told later by a Kit Carson scout (Chieu Hoi), via one of our translators, that the two women were interrogated by the village elders upon their return. Apparently, our medical support went over very well.

I later visited Cam Lo District Headquarters. Upon completion of my inspection, I decided to get a haircut in the local open-air barber shop. I sat in an empty chair. A few moments later, a clean-cut Vietnamese man came by and sat in the chair next to me. We nodded to each other. Two minutes later, my Chieu Hoi came in all agog and started to pull me out of the chair. I complied with his efforts and got back in the jeep to return to C-3. I asked my interpreter at the command bunker to find out what was the matter with my Kit Carson scout in Cam Lo. He returned and advised me that the Vietnamese man getting a haircut was Lt. Col. Ho.

A few weeks later, the young girl (now called Miss Nyuen by our sentries. I had found out from a Chieu Hoi and a village elder that she was raised and educated in Hue City, but was moved to the countryside by her parents when the battle for Hue City ensued) again approached the Check Point and asked to see me. This time, I walked down to the Check Point. The girl passed me a small folded message written very poorly in French. The note purported to be from the CO, 27th Independent Battalion. Lt. Col. Ho was proposing that we exchange the bodies of our KIA's still in the field after a fire fight which had occurred several days earlier between 1/9 and the 27th IB. He suggested that myself and two >>

Marines meet him at the road junction of Route 9 and the Cam Lo River Road. I passed the info to Col Robichaud who was still in Dong Ha. The Colonel told me to wait until he had briefed the G-3. In about an hour, the Colonel called me back on a secure line and told me to disregard the note from Lt. Col. Ho. Furthermore, I was ordered to assist 1/9 and retrieve the Marine KIA bodies immediately. (We had been practicing dragging grappling hooks with a tank section for a couple of days. We knew exactly where the bodies were.) The next morning a small infantry force with a tank section went to the battle site near Hills 30/40 after the area was well-prepped with artillery ... mostly air-burst. The team quickly recovered the bodies by dragging. The bodies were not mined. Once recovered, the bodies were properly ID'ed and shipped to Dong Ha. We did not fire again in the vicinity of the dead NVA troops. CO TFR approved our action.

After the event, I gave it much thought. I believed we had missed a good chance to get to know our enemy better. During our nightly informal discussions atop our command bunker, Colonel Robichaud agreed that it might have been a good opportunity, but that TFR had no authority to make a separate cease fire or treaty according to G-3 and Div. JAG. As usual, the Old Man was probably right!

S-3 Comment: Discipline in TFR was overall excellent. With daily incoming from the NVA, Marines, Corpsmen, and Army personnel on C-3 for the most part were cautious in their movements and caring about their comrades. Colonel Robichaud raised Hell when he would observe a Marine out of his bunker or foxhole ... and not wearing a helmet and armored vest. I do not recall CO TFR ever holding an Article 15 nor recommending a Summary or Special Courts-Martial for anyone in the TF. These matters were left to the parent organizations. One TFR communicator was found being involved with black marketing (Selling C-rations for local currency or

MPC.) That Marine was returned to his parent organization with a full report following from S-1. The case of our NCOIC Engineer team leader, was a sad incident and regrettable. That NCO had been performing his duties in a most professional manner. It was alleged that he was disrespectful to a Company Commander and his interpreter. CO TFR did not want to get into details over the incident, and he ordered me to bring the NCO back to our CP and find him a job. I did not interview him at all. I left that to Captain O'Buch who was appointed as the Investigating Officer. O'Buch handled the issue. He deemed there was a cause for relief and recommended we return the sergeant to his parent unit. The Engineer Battalion took appropriate action. The Old Man regretted the incident very much as he and the young engineer had much good interaction during his assignment as our senior engineer. The battalion, company, and small unit commanders did an excellent job of supervision ... and essentially took care of their own disciplinary and judicial problems

040001H Apr 68: 0700H TFR departed for operation. 0900H TFR sit rep to G-3. Progressing fine. 0915H F-33 hit mine. VTR dispatched. 0955H Tanks fired into village resulting in three (3) friendly WIA. 1000H Sit rep to G-3. Progress fine. 1100H Sit rep to G-3. Progress fine. 1120H VTR returns with F-33. 1140H team "A" reports finding and destroying rice and med supplies. 1145H Called 48 Forward to send VTR to take Flame back to Dong Ha. 1200H Sit rep to G-3. Progress fine. 1315H Dusters return to CP to refuel. 1330H Ammo truck sent to rearm (64 HE rounds, 5 canister rounds, and 50 grenades.) 1500H Sit rep to G-3.

050001H Apr 68: 0700H Sit rep from field units. All secure. 0800H Sit rep from all field units. All secure. S-3A picked up old lady in the vile which was swept yesterday and will bring her back to C-3 before she is turned over to 3/4. 0900H Sit rep from the field. No change. Continuing search and destroy mission along Route 8B. Little enemy

contact. 1215H CO TFR established contact with Double Eagle (USA 3rd of 5th Cav.). Awaiting linkup. 1300H Sit rep from the field. No change. 1500H TFR has linked up with Double Eagle unit. 1600H Sit rep from the field. No change. 2000H Sit rep. Have moved to N/T position. 2100H Sit rep from the field. All secure. 2200H Sit rep from the field. All secure. 2400 H Ops continue along Route 8 B. One (1) detainee. Division ordered TFR to shift to east and physically tie in with Double Eagle. This was accomplished.

TFR had emergency action plans to support the Cam Lo District Headquarters, and the CAP unit kept us advised when they sensed something was amiss operationally. Col. Robichaud did not hesitate to inform Div COC and the Army headquarters in Dong Ha when Cam Lo District Headquarters gave him concern. As the operational tempo increased near C-3, CO TFR split our bridge security force and sent one half of Lt. Mero's platoon to Cam Lo District Headquarters to bolster the defense there. Lt. Mero's platoon sergeant was the NCOIC of that reinforcement. That SNCO had a good reputation in TFR. Apparently after he had been there awhile, he tired of the attitudes of a few CAP members who really had no restrictions on their relations with local villagers. He took exception to one CAP member who allegedly was acting under the influence in the local bar. There was a face off by both Marines. The CAP Marine was shot by the SNCO who believed the CAP Marine was about to shoot him. Indeed, this was an unfortunate circumstance which resulted in the death of a CAP Marine and career damage to a good SNCO.

S-3 Comment: By now most of us in the command and operations section of the Task Force realize that our NVA enemy is more sensitive to the area to C-3's east rather than our western flank in Laos and Cambodia. Enemy troop and supply columns can travel without fear of a real attack. There was too much political involvement at the highest

levels. One of the reasons I pushed our unit commanders to use the passable flanks of Route 8B, Route 9 and even Route 1 north of Dong Ha was to avoid being channelized by mines. If the enemy intelligence personnel were trying to keep a plan on our TFR order of battle and operations, that task would be insurmountable. Colonel Robichaud had his own plans, and moved the TF out at the most unpredictable times at his choosing. Having the tankers included on the infantry foot patrols gave us much planning latitude.

300001H Apr 68: 0300H S-3 1/9 submitted following info: KIA-4, WIA Evac 16, WIA non evac 6, MIA 7. TFR WIA (Evac 5, WIA (non evac) 2. Enemy: KIA 26, Msg forwarded to Beachboy COC. 0715H CO 1/9 stated AO on station to search for MIAs. 0730H AO spotted four (4) bodies MIA at 173615. NVA (4) moving north at 171622. 0930H Critique held on yesterday's operation. CO 9th Mar, CO 3/9, and CO 2nd ARVN aboard. Plans for mop-up of Cam Vu area. Capt. O'Buch and Lt. Mero will operate with 3/9. Mero will command the tank platoon. TFR will monitor the operation. 1500H TFR sends 5 tanks, 2 Flames to move out with 3/9 to Cam Vu. Capt. O'Buch w/ 3/9 Command Group. Lt. Mero, Tank platoon commander, 1530H CO TFR briefing: 1600H Lt. Trainor delivered 5 tanks to bolster TFR. Sgt. Howard, Tk NCOIC. 2140H Drakepool S-3A called concerning tank disposition plus other TF units. Info passed. 2140H Rec msg from CC-6 on three TFR WIA's. HM 2 Hansen, L/Cpl. Pawlak and Sgt. Yax. Report incomplete. 2400H 3/9 operation ran into immediate contact w/enemy in Cam Vu area. 5 tanks, 2 flames from TFR now engaged. Unit holding in perimeter defense. TF units sustained 8 WIA's.

S-3 Comment: Obviously I believed that TFR got pretty well clobbered on 29-30 April. I was disturbed because the Colonel had left me at C-3 because the Chief Corpsman advised him my malaria and amoebic

dysentery was getting no better. As near as I can understand the feedback I received from the participants, the first tank to hit a mine was on Route 8B just past the vile. None of the other tanks, according to what I could glean, deployed to use off-road capabilities. I have always sensed that the NVA is very sensitive about the area east of Cam Vu. Control of that area would accommodate any drive they may exert to Dong Ha from the Ben Hai north.

S-3 Comment: About this time, I received a report from an FO in the tower that they had spotted "enemy" within the 62-grid line ... our northern established boundary. I advised the FO to notify Division that we were preparing a fire mission, and I moved to the tower immediately to observe. General Tompkins made daily recon flights to most Division units. He heard the fire mission request, and asked that we hold it until he arrived. He landed in our LZ in about ten minutes. I had already viewed the potential target (The enemy was three old ladies gathering firewood ... but well within our grid zone firing boundary.) The General climbed the tower, accompanied by two officers from G-3 and G-4. The Old Man peered at the target through the BC scope and really exploded.

"Who put out the firing order?"

I responded, "Division did, Sir", and showed him a copy of the firing order. General Tompkins then asked the G-3 rep for an explanation. The G-3 rep could not explain the origin of the firing order. (Now, the General and I went back a few years to when I was his recorder on a promotion board at HQMC. He knew that the TF would not have allowed the fire mission.) As the General re-boarded his helo, he smiled, gave a thumbs up and winked. Needless to say, my popularity at Division Headquarters was at a new low.

S-3 Comment: One afternoon as we started to wind down, the Old Man and I took a break and sat up on the bunker-top looking to the north. Col. Robichaud commented that he believed that the mission would soon be ending

since the start of Operation Thor. He seemed a mite depressed and stated,

"You know Mac, we missed a good chance to cross the DMZ with our task force and really hurt the NVA. How far do you think we might have gotten?"

My response was rather guarded, but I agreed the challenge would have been a good one. It looked like the CONUS political scene drove our mission... let alone the USA in Vietnam.

"Sad!", I replied.

"Bullshit!", the Old Man responded, "We could have and should have!" The Colonel always exuded such optimism to his officers and Marines. His leadership kept us together during the hard times.

S-3 Comments: When Colonel Robichaud left us to return to 3rd Mar Div, he almost immediately transferred back to CONUS. "Robbie" left without a handshake or farewell. I heard rumors later that he had ended up at the Naval Health Clinic, Great Lakes, Illinois. Sometime later, the Colonel passed away.

Lt. Col. Toner and I ... and other TFR members who were close to the Old Man ... often discussed his departure. Later, while we were stationed at MCDEC, Quantico, VA, Lt. Col. Toner and I would periodically just sit down and have a cool one ... and reminisce about the Old Man. Therein later, I was to find out the problem. My naïveté always prevailed, I guess. In sum, Colonel Robichaud was a great task force commander. He had fought well in three (3) wars. He always accomplished the mission ... and cared for his men. ■

Editor's Note: Col. "Mac" Mac Laren PCS-ed to the "Great Tank Park in the Sky" in March 2011. Also, the Colonel's last remark about crossing the DMZ and attacking North Vietnam gave me chills. That is one of the origins of the scuttlebutt that was going around that summer that we were gearing up to invade in to North Vietnam with a land invasion by Marines.

HITTING THE MINE WITH TASK FORCE ROBBIE

BY JOHN WEAR

In late April, 1968, on one of our many ops with TFR, we are called out to go outside the wire at Cam Lo Hill and travel to an area called Cam Vu. We hear that 1/9 has walked into a buzz saw of NVA. There have always been rumors of NVA activity near the Cam Lo Bridge. This bridge was built by the French way back in the 1920's. There has been little or no concern that it could be blown up since we Marines take such pains to keep the local villagers happy. We don't mess with them and we leave them alone to do their own thing. The mention of NVA activity is not a good thing since the villagers are supporting us, not the enemy. If a group of NVA or a VC cadre gets a foothold in the village then the pro-American village leaders could all be assassinated and the bridge blown up. As we trundle along, I am sitting deep inside the tank since the gunner must stay inside prepared to operate the .30 cal. machine gun and the main gun flame-thrower when needed. I watch outside through the main periscope as the grunts and tanks sweep along the road. After half an hour of this non-activity, I am bored out of my mind by just sitting there. I begin to read the paperback novel that I have stuck inside of my jungle utility trouser pocket.

All of a sudden, there is a very loud "Pop! Actually, it is an explosion but inside the tank it is more like a loud "POP!" ... and the whole tank bucks up in the air and falls down hard. This is not like hitting a big bump in the road or going over a wide ditch at a too fast speed. This is a violent up and down...There is dust everywhere inside the tank.

"What the fuck just happened, Goodie?" I ask our driver over the intercom.

"I don't know but the tank won't go," Goodie, our driver, responds.

Charlie, the TC, starts to get out of the cupola and comments that he thinks that we hit a mine.

WE HIT A MINE!

As soon as Charlie gets out of the TC's cupola, I follow quickly behind him. The tank's left side is a mass of broken volute bumper springs, road wheels and track blocks. There is a set of road wheels about 75 yards away just inside a B-52 bomb crater. We put in a call for a tank retriever to come pull us back to Dong Ha for repairs but there is none available. One of the gun tanks backs up and we attach our tank cables to him. He pulls us into the perimeter of Cam Lo Hill and then we sit just inside of the main gate until a retriever can be dispatched to drag us to Dong Ha. As it turns out the commander of our task force was supposed to keep all of our tanks on the hard surface road. He ordered

some of us to go cross country and what happened? We hit an unexploded 155 mm artillery shell that had our name on it. There were three other tanks who hit either mines or unexploded ordinance that same time frame. I guess that some of our officers could be considered shit birds too.



"Goodie" inspects his handiwork

A few hours of waiting and our wounded "dragon" tank is hauled back to the tank battalion maintenance facility at Dong Ha. We spend several days repairing damage including finding replacements for our missing road wheels, bumper springs and track block. And even more back breaking is pulling torsion bars to be replaced. It is extremely heavy and troublesome work.

As we are working, the sounds of the massive firefight out at An Loc and Dia Do is pretty darn frightening. It makes my stomach ache and I kept feeling so nauseous that I could not eat when it was meal time. Here we were safe and sound back at the Dong Ha tank park while our Marine brothers were getting their asses handed to them by a far superior enemy force. It was a feeling of helplessness mixed with a liberal dose of seething anger.

Meanwhile the extensive damage and the lack of spare parts make the repairs take over a week to accomplish. It's the same old story: Hurry up and wait. While we are in Dong Ha it's warm chow three meals a day at the 9th Motor T mess hall on the hill above the tank park. It is cold beers at the FLSG-B ("floozy") club and a choice of movies at either the "floozy" flicks or up the hill at the doggie (US Army) "sky duster" compound. Either theatre is out doors with telephone poles to sit on. We usually bring a few cold ones with us to the flick and hope the gooks don't send in any incoming while we are watching the show. When there are incoming rockets or artillery, everyone simply gets up

and dives into the deep slit trenches on either side of the theatre. It's "ass hole to elbow" time with men falling on top of one another in the trenches. It's uncomfortable but safe.

I recall that one evening while we watched John Wayne in the Vietnam War classic movie, "The Green Berets", there was a loud air plane engine noise above our heads. There was a shout of "INCOMING!" and everyone dove for the trench line next to the movie seating. Naturally the movie stopped and all of a sudden, an AC-47 "Puff-The Magic Dragon" gun ship that was overheard began its deadly gatling gun barrage out the side of the plane toward

the suspected enemy position outside the Dong Ha wire. What a sight! Red tracers in an endless stream. What a sound! It sounded like canvas being ripped apart as an unbroken wand of red light fingering the target area. Actually, there is one red tracer round for every five bullets shot. So, to see an endless stream of red means the 30,000 rounds per minute that the four or six mini-guns are able to shoot wrecks havoc on the gooks below. I have heard that there is nothing larger than a match head left of the area after this air borne attack is completed. Talk about chopped salad!!! ■

John Wear's Viet Nam Journal

APRIL-MAY 1968

"To really live you must nearly die"—the inscription on my Zippo lighter that I used during my tour.

We had hit a mine during an operation to rescue some hapless grunts from the 9th Marines who had been ambushed by a far superior force of NVA regulars in the village of Cam Vu. When the mine damage is repaired, we report back to Cam Lo Hill and our return to "Task Force Robbie." We park the tank at the bottom of and in between two tall hills. At the top of one of these hills there are several huge 155-mm self-propelled cannons. These monsters are used for support of grunt operations during the day and for H&I (harassment and interdiction) firing every night. Not long after we arrive there, my stomach begins to really ache every evening after about 9 PM. I go to Sick Call the next morning. The "Doc" (Navy corpsman) tells me to relax and it will go away.

"What do you mean, Doc?" I ask. He says that the Marine arty barrages are making me get "up tight" and my stomach is all in knots all day. Then at night when the fire is not as intense, I relax and my stomach that has been balled up all day also relaxes. It's like a muscle that is tense all day and when it relaxes, it hurts! He says that if I stop worrying about the outgoing arty, my stomach pain will disappear. In a day or two, the Doc is right!

The "hooch" that we are assigned is a rectangle of dirt-filled wooden 90 mm ammo boxes. There is already one flame-thrower tank crew living in the hooch. I recall that one tanker is from Hawaii and, of course, his nickname is "Pineapple" or "Piney". There is another guy, a Mexican-American named Joe Medina (who we call "Mex") and their TC is a chuck (white guy) named Tom Yax. The hooch is way too small for even two tank crews so we decide to build our own bunker next to the original.

Charlie West and "Goodie" take our tank over where there is a lot grunts working on filling sand bags. They bring back with them several large bundles of empty sandbags and we begin to fill them on the side of the hill that is nearby our hooch. Charlie also figures that there must be pre-filled sand bags somewhere that we can use. He takes the tank and comes back with the tank's rear armor plate loaded with a huge pile of them. The sand bags are wet and moldy but they are filled with dirt and it will save us a lot of time and effort. As we are off loading these old filled sandbags, a huge centipede falls out and scurries along to the ground. We all run for cover since no one wants to get stung by this monster. The centipede scurries under the tank's track. We get a can of lighter fluid and in flame tank tradition, we burn the thing up.



Task Force Robbie Flame Section-1968

(L to R) Charlie West (TC - WIA), Joe "Mex" Medina (driver - WIA), Brad "Goodie" Goodin (driver), Danny Pawlak (TC - WIA), Tom Yax (TC - WIA 3 times), John Zimmerman (gunner - WIA), Bob Stephens (gunner) and "Mole Man" (driver - WIA).
Missing: John Wear (gunner) - (I was taking the picture) and Juan "Pineapple" Irizarry (gunner - WIA) >>

In practically no time, we get the walls of the hooch built. But we are too lazy to put up a proper roof. That is, most structures in Cam Lo have large wood beams and at least two sand bags-thick roofs for protection. We simply cover our roof framework with plastic sheeting and then hold the plastic down with a few randomly placed sandbags. A little while later, I acquire a very long “engineer” stake. I mount my Colorado State flag on a tall pole near the hooch.



In the above photo is the Colorado state flag and our ramshackle hooch to the left of the flag pole.

The very next afternoon, there is this horrific explosion just outside the door of our new hooch. An incoming enemy rocket has been fired and one of the grunt lieutenants has been killed...right next to our hooch! We figure out that the gook arty forward observer must have seen my Colorado flag fluttering in the breeze and used it as an aiming stake. I take the flag down. No need to encourage the gooks to shoot at us.

In our quest to fight boredom and to keep occupied, we build a volley ball court next to our bunker. We played a few games but the sun is too hot and there is no cold water (or better yet no cold beer) to cool off with so we stop playing. None of us are much good at the game anyway.

The next day, one of the flame section tanks has been ordered to go out and accompany two Gun Tanks and a platoon of grunts who must go out to recover three bodies that were left in the field during a firefight a few days before. At first thought, I am pissed. The rule is that Marines do not leave their wounded or their dead on the battlefield ... ever. What is going on? But this is a very unpleasant task that must be accomplished no matter what the reason. Cpl. Yax's tank is the one that is tapped to go. This is very lucky for us. What the duty is going to

be is that the grunts will find the bodies and then they will load them on to the tanks for movement back to Cam Lo Hill. The tanks are to be a 52-ton hearse. When they come back from the mission, they tell us that the bodies had been out in the bush for two days in the 100+ degree heat. The bodies have decomposed so badly that they were very black and squishy. To look at them you could not tell if these dead Marines had been Anglo-American white, Mexican-American brown or African-American black. The recovery Marines said that it was beyond gruesome. Poor old “Pineapple”, the gunner and Yax, the TC, had reached down to grab one of the poncho-wrapped bodies to pull it on to the back of the tank. Pineapple inadvertently grabbed the dead Marine's hand. As he pulled up, the hand came off of the dead Marine's arm and into “Pineapple's” hand! It was all black and swollen and full of maggots. As he relayed the story, Pineapple said that he could not get the smell out of his nose. The three of them blew their lunch for an hour after they got back. Actually, you could walk by their tank parked in their tank slot back on Cam Lo Hill and you could smell the rotten smell for a week. Ugh! Even after they went down to the river and washed the tank with soap and scrub brushes, the dead smell still prevailed.

Many years later I learn that soon after the NVA ambush that the brass of Task Force Robbie were contacted by the NVA through a local village official. The NVA tell the Task Force Robbie brass that they will turn over the Marine bodies to us if we release several prisoners that were taken captive during the firefight. The Task Force Robbie S-4 said that he felt that this was a ruse and that the NVA did not have the bodies. That is when our tanks were sent out to find and bring the bodies back. Again, later I found out that the Marine bodies had been mutilated and had been booby-trapped so that the Marines who went out to collect the KIA Marines has to use grappling hooks to assure that they would not be harmed while gathering the KIA Marines.

It is my understanding that Task Force Robbie is designed to be a rapid reactionary force of tracked and armored fighting vehicles that can respond to any NVA attacks on American or Allied bases in and around Leatherneck Square. This collection of tanks, anti-tank Ontos, tank retrievers, Amtrak's, US Army APC's, Sky Dusters, Quad 50's and Marine self-propelled artillery was created in response to the NVA's Tet Offensive and to the general lack of availability of armored fighting vehicles in each and every base along the DMZ. You can't be everywhere all the time. When there is enemy action, the plan is to get as much firepower as you can muster as fast as you can get it to where the enemy attack is happening. In reality, we can get to Con Tien or Gia Linh to the north in a short time (ten or fifteen minutes). We can get west to Camp Carroll or the Rock Pile in a little longer time

frame (maybe 30 minutes). We can go east to Dong Ha or Quang Tri in perhaps 45 minutes to an hour.

While we are vegetating at Cam Lo Hill, we have two or three dry runs at various times of the day or night. I recall on one such dry run exercise that we have all lined up waiting a few more tanks to get in position. Over the radios, Sgt. Lloyd, the black “new guy”, who had been at 5th Tanks in Camp Pendleton with me, comes on the radio saying that his tank's intercom is broken and he cannot make it out the gate. The scuttlebutt is that Lloyd always has an excuse for not being able to go out in the field. If it is not his radios, then it's his machine gun or his tank suspension or a fuel leak. The word is that he is a chicken shit mother- f*cker. So much for our hero. I do recall back at Camp Pendleton that one time that I said something about “colored” Marines to Lloyd.

He shot back, “What color are you referring to Wear? Purple? Orange? Red? I am not a color; I am black and you may call me a ‘splib dude’ or black.” He was a real piece of work. He is also really one big splib dude so I am not going to mess with him. I recall another story about Lloyd giving some fairly small white guy a hard time about whatever racial issue he was having that day. This white Marine tells Lloyd to back off where upon Lloyd suggests that they step outside. They did go outside and big tough Lloyd proceeds to get his clock cleaned by this smaller dude. As it turns out, the white “wimp” was the lightweight Golden Gloves State Champion back in his home state.

Another of those Task Force Robbie dry runs sits very clearly in my mind. It was getting to be sunset. We had finished evening chow and had just settled in for the evening when the call goes out to “Mount up!” Our driver, “Gordie”, was already “toasted” so our TC, Charlie West,

tells me to drive in order to keep “Gordie” hidden inside the turret to sleep it off. We get in line and after a short delay; we take off in a mile long procession of armored vehicles.

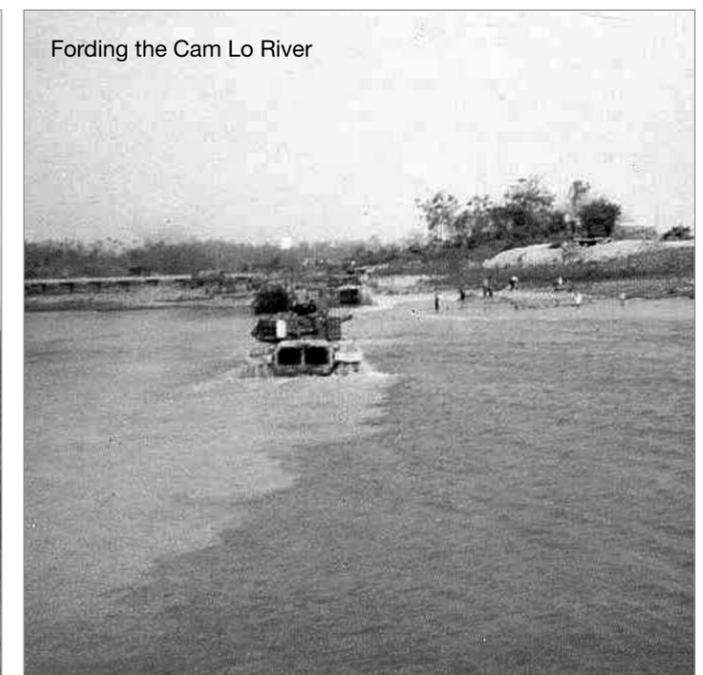
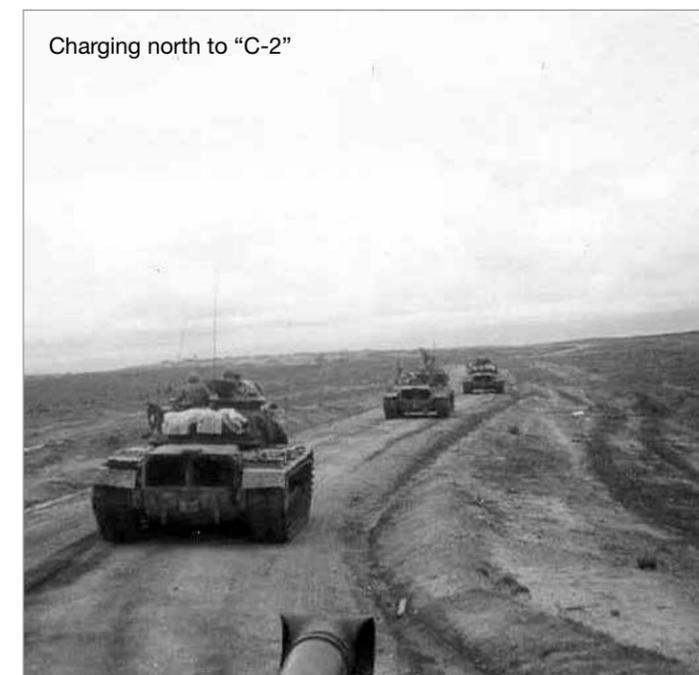
We ford the river at Cam Lo Bridge and proceed through the village of Cam Lo. I take the tank from low to high gear as we accelerate up the small hill on the opposite side of the river. For some strange reason, I imagine that I am back in the World driving in my car that has a 4-speed gear shift on the floor. All of a sudden, I take the tank out of high and back down to low and punch the accelerator. The 54-ton monster bucks like we hit a huge hole in the road and I hear Charlie's voice reverberating through my tanker's helmet intercom, “What the fuck are you doing Wear?”

I answer him, “Sorry.”

As we pull on to Highway 9 heading west towards Camp Carroll, the tank behind us comes over the radio saying that we have white smoke coming out of our exhaust. Oops! My untimely and stupid gear shifting has blown an oil line or a diesel fuel injector. The tank retriever full of “shit-fisters” stops and they come over to see what is going on. One of them takes a tank bar and disengage those final drives as they hook our tank up to the retriever and haul us back to Dong Ha for repairs. Hurry up and wait time again.

Let's see. Over the course of my partial tour in Nam, we have been back to the 3rd Tank BN tank ramp at Dong Ha for (a) RPG damage repair for a few days, (b) mine damage repair that took a week and (c) now a busted fuel line repair that will take at least a few more days ... Oh! I forgot that we needed quarterly maintenance done for a few days this past month as well.

One time when we are back in the rear, I ask >>



the “shit-fister” (tank mechanic) what he did in The World. He said that he was a sign painter in a grocery store in his home town. I ask him if he’d paint a new name on our tank. You see, for some ungodly reason, someone at some time thought that having a gook name on a tank was cool. The tank’s name is “Toy U Anh” which roughly translated means “I love you” in Vietnamese. I hate this name. A fuckin’ gook name on a USMC tank? No fuckin’ way! I first want him to put NAPALM STICKS TO KIDS on the gun barrel but there were too many lifers who said “No way!” So, I check with “Goodie” and with Charlie West and we become the CRISPY CRITTERS! The guy does a great job of painting over the gook letters with a white background and then uses yellow paint to change the official name.

During our blown fuel line repair time in Dong Ha, we eat three hot meals and we get to attend out door movies. Between supper and the movies, we are usually able to visit the Enlisted Man’s Club (EM Club) over at Force Logistics & Supply B (Flooze B). This place sells Falstaff (fall flat) and Carling Black Label and Olympia beer. Three brands of beer that no one anywhere in Vietnam wants. That is, the pogues down in Saigon have first dibs on anything that comes in country; then the pogues in Da Nang; then the pogues in Phu Bai and then the pogues in Quang Tri. We get what is left over. I figure that the Saigon warriors get the Budweiser and Coors, the Da Nang dudes get the Schlitz and the Pabst, the Phu Bai and the Quang Tri pogues get anything that is left that is half way decent and we get the dregs. No one in their right mind would order these two beers ever! But they are cold and they help us cope with Nam. We are allowed two beers per man per time in line. We usually take two to the table, get back in line, and take two more to the table and then drink. The trouble with this method is that there is only x amount of beer available each evening. So, you have to both chug-a-lug and get in line to get more or you get a lot of them all at once and they get warm on you. Someone announces that the beer stock is running out and someone else announces that the movie is starting so we take our remaining beers and head over to the telephone pole seats to view the flick. The movie is “The Magnificent Seven”. This is the western where a bunch of famous actors are all in a band to attack a gold shipment in Mexico. I am sure that I have seen this movie at least six times but I like it more each time I do.

At the conclusion of the flick, we amble back to the tent to hit the rack and to cop some Z’s. As we enter the Alfa Company area, there is a very drunk Marine sitting on a sandbagged bunker outside of our tent. I recognize him as one of the HQ gun tank crewmen who I fought

alongside in Hue. It’s PFC Clayton Flannery and he has a .45 pistol in his hand. We stop and ask him what he is doing. He waves the pistol in the air and slurs, “I’m gonna kill that fuckin’ mother fuckin’ bastard.”

I ask him, “Clay, who are you talking about?”

“That fuckin’ bastard, McAfee.”

“But why?”

“Because he caused Bobby Hackett ta get killed in Hue” he slurs.

“Come on Clay, old buddy, give me the pistol” I say fairly calmly.

“Fuck you, Wear.” He shouts back at me.

“Clay, give me the pistol.” I come back in a slightly louder voice.

“Fuck you, I’m gonna kill the fuckin’ bastard motherfucker.” He shouts.

“Come on Clay, give me the fuckin’ pistol.” I shout.

“Fuck you.” He shouts waiving the pistol toward me.

“Clay, your fuckin’ drunk and you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing. Give me the fuckin’ gun!” I yell at the top of my lungs.

By now I am starting to think that perhaps I should not be standing where I am with a drunk waiving a cocked and loaded .45 caliber pistol in my face. If that friggin’ gun goes off, I will have a medium sized hole in my face and a gaping cavern on the back of my skull with my brains flowing out. That’s how a .45 works. Small entrance wound and a massive exit wound. The bullet takes whatever is in its way out the exit wound.

Just then a blur of a figure streaks past me then slams into Clay. The impact sends both of them crashing to the dusty ground and the .45 pistol goes flying. It’s Charlie Waters, my TC. As they gambol on the dirt, Charlie stands up, grabs the pistol and he holds the weapon over Clay’s head.

“You dumb mother fucker! I ought to pistol whip you! What the fuck are you doing? Marines don’t threaten to kill each other!”

With that, Clay starts to cry like a baby.

Charlie yells at me, “What the fuck are you doing, Wear?” I told him that I was trying to get the gun away from Clay.

He says, “This stupid asshole is drunk. You can’t reason with a stupid fuckin’ drunk asshole. You can only knock him on his ass and take the fucking weapon away from him.”

That was that. Many years later, I found out that good old boy Charlie Waters served as a Sheriff in a small town in the great state of Alabama. He really is a good old boy!

Editor’s Note: Some names have been changed to protect the innocent. ■

When Tanks Saved the Day

BATTLE FOR DONG HA

BY MAJOR FRANK BRETH

On 30 April 1968, I was Major Frank Breth, the S-3 Ops/0 of 3/9, who coordinated and ran the ops for 3/9 (Bill La Montagne) from March 1968-September 1968. In August 1967 I joined 3/9 after they had come out of Operation Buffalo in the DMZ, and was assigned as CO of Mike Company and went through Cam Lo, C-2 and the Con Thien adventure in Sept- Oct, until we were relieved by 1/9. I then was assigned to Hue as the Liaison officer from 3rd Mar Div. to 1st ARVN Div. I went through the Battle for Hue and then returned to 3/9 as the S-3, replacing Ben Gardner and working for La Montagne at the Rockpile as we built LZ Stud at Ca Lu.

...before I go further on the DMZ, I have a very little-known story about 3rd Mar Div. tanks during the Battle for Hue. Those tanks saved the day and were crewed by all young guys who did terrific work. That’s a separate story which needs telling. If you are interested, I’ll write it up. Bill La Montagne and I were together on that one also in Feb–March ‘68. Editor’s Note: BGen Breth passed away before writing that story.

On 30 April 1968, 3/9 in total was at the Rockpile with H&S, India, Kilo, Lima, and Mike. India was on the outposts. 3/9 was in the 4th Marine Regiment sector, just west of the 9th Marines, who had the “Leatherneck Square” sector. It was relatively quiet with LZ Stud becoming a major base with more convoys on Route 9, with occasional shelling from “Mutters Ridge” and the mountains in the west (3/3 later captured the 75mm pack which now sits by the entrance at Marine Barracks, 8th and I, in DC). It was a routine day until about 2 PM when the 3rd Mar Div. CG flew into the Rockpile and said he needed us to go into action in the 9th Marines zone. He mentioned that a platoon of 1/9 with some tanks had received heavy casualties east of Cam Lo. We scrambled in to our field gear, left India with H&S to secure the Rockpile. It seemed within minutes that CH-53s started shuttling us to a site just south of the base at Cam Lo. La Montagne, Tom Mix, myself, 1st Sgt Paddock and the command group went in first to coordinate with 1/9 and Task Force Robbie at Cam Lo. Lima came in next with Tom Schieb as CO, then Kilo, 81s, and Mike.

As I recall everyone was on the ground by 3:30, or so. I had spoken with the CO and “3” of 1/9 (“Blackie” Cahill and Angie Fernandez) plus a rep from TF Robbie. Their info was sketchy and somewhat unsure of the total picture that had happened or what the enemy strength was. Our mission was to recover the platoon from 1/9 and get the tanks out.



They had been out there 24–36 hours from what I recall. 1/9 had recently come out of Khe Sanh and apparently did not have all their companies available so we got the mission. The TF Robbie rep (Major Bruce MacLaren) did have comms with the tanks and they said the NVA were all over and we better get there by nightfall. After getting the radio freq. call signs out, for fire support, air and the 9th Marines we moved out about somewhere between 3:30–4pm. We went out in a spread-out formation, companies in column with Lima leading, Kilo, the CP and! 81s and them Mike with a platoon of tanks. They had already ambushed the tanks so we kept our tanks back so we could fix the enemy and then run the tanks up when we needed them. When we left, we had about 3–4 hours until dark. We asked for an AO and he was going to be on station in about 45 minutes to an hour. Since we didn’t know that ground well enough, we needed his eyes. They got there but it was just after the NVA opened up on us, Lima Company especially.

Looking at the map, Cam Vu, where the tanks were pinned down just west of the village, was about 2,800 meters (about 1–1/2 miles) across fairly level plain with waist high thick grass, lots of bushes. As we moved east to Cam Vu the ground was open at least 1,000 meters to the west. The entire battalion was in column, moving well. What we did not know was that an NVA regiment was waiting us. They had laid a trap knowing the Marines would rescue their own. Fortunately, 3/9 had some very experienced troops and leaders at all levels who knew how the NVA operated in the DMZ. About 45 minutes after we started, Lima ran into well dug-in and camouflaged units which had AK-47s, RPD machine guns and 60 mm mortars... an NVA battalion of about 300 soldiers. They opened up and with the initial volley and they caused numerous casualties in Lima; one platoon and part of another was hurt pretty bad but they put up a heavy volume of fire in return and the NVA slowed, giving time to pull back most of the dead and wounded. I spoke with Tom Schieb in a matter of minutes and need help ASAP. The AO just arrived on station and reported what the NVA was doing to come around Lima and rap them. They ran fixed wing and nailed a large group. I told Gene Bryan, the CO of Kilo to move up quickly on Lima’s (Tom Schieb) left >>

flank to cover him, La Montagne and the remainder of the command group to follow Kilo so we could organize Kilo and Lima together. Rich O'Neill, CO of Mike Company took the tanks and went further to the left (North) to cut off any NVA who might be trying to come around behind us. I told La Montagne that Schieb need help ASAP so he took the command group, while I took two radio operators with me running to catch up to Schieb so I could run support for him. The three us "high-diddled" across this open terrain about 500-600 yards alone when all of a sudden, a 200+ round artillery barrage fired from North Vietnam with 130mm guns landed behind Lima and just before my team about 50-60 yards. My team ducked down for about 2-3 minutes until it stopped.

It was apparent that we had a large NVA unit to deal with and not some "rice farmers". These guys had fire support from the north and heavy machine guns, plus 82 mm mortars. This meant at least a regiment and they were trying to close the trap. My team and I ran about another 100 yards on a small path to close on Lima and all of a sudden came on a NVA machine gun crew loaded and pointed right at us. They were all dead...killed by their artillery strike which had just fired! Moments later we were with Lima and Tom Schieb. He was wounded and needed all the help he could get! My team and I picked up the coordination, to the AOs, got air on station, adjusted artillery at the flanks, and briefed the Regiment "3" (John Hopkins) as to what we were dealing with. Keep in mind that 2/4 and 1/3 were fighting the NVA 325th Division about 6-8000 meters east of us. We were running into a large NVA force protecting the 325th's west flank! While I with Schieb, we were receiving heavy small arms fire, RPGs and mortar fire. All of a sudden, this fire stopped as I heard Kilo assaulting "on line" to our left flank (north) closing in on us. Their fire was terrific and they did one great job as they had cut down an NVA company trying to encircle Lima. Kilo quickly caught them off guard and "cleaned them up" and tied into us. This was about 6 pm. The air was humid, hot and still with no breeze.

By this time the CP. and the 81s had arrived on scene and we began getting the casualties ready for med evacs. During this time, we were mortared pretty heavy by 82 mm mortars. Which caused casualties and more wounds to those awaiting med evacs. The H-34 med evac birds flew from Dong Ha down route 9 then north to us at very low level to avoid the heavy NVA fire. The corpsmen from Kilo, Lima and H&S did absolutely incredible work collecting, stabilizing and medevacking the wounded. I clearly remember one of the medevac birds flying low at dusk about 50 feet with fire streaming out of the belly. We watched him sit down and pull everyone out before it exploded. Another bird was on him and collected them immediately. Our medevacs continued in to darkness. Not only were there Lima's and the CP casualties but also the dead and wounded of the 1/9 platoon and the immobilized tanks we recovered. Concurrent to all

this action "Mike" was making its way with the tanks around to the left (north) of us to cut off any NVA and close to us for the night. They uncovered a large NVA force (estimated company) on their own and had a tough fight. The company's weapons and the tanks tore them apart.

This company was apparently trying to come around our back and trap us but Mike and the 3rd Tanks caught them. Mike and the tanks closed on the battalion position just after dark. We started heavy artillery fires close to us and we received no assaults that night, only mortars which were not targeted near us. We had apparently hammered a large NVA force. Several years later I spoke with a USMC radio intercept officer who was listening to the NVA frequencies who told me they were screaming that we were "nailing them". Unfortunately, Lima Company bore the brunt of the enemy attack but held together and did their share of putting the steel to the NVA. It is interesting that every company of 3/9 and the tanks were all involved in the action. That action was a credit to the tankers and the Marines of 3/9 as they did some great work handing "Charlie" his "lunch". The next morning, we were reinforced by a Delta, 1/9. We were to keep moving east to route #1, which was about 5-6000 meters to the east. We tightened up and went into Cam Vu, which was about 300 meters away. It was a small deserted village with about 8-10 grass hootches. I remember watching our preparatory fires on Cam Vu. A tank fired at a hooch and I saw the grass come off as the round "bounced" off the grass hut! The NVA had built reinforced concrete pillboxes inside the grass huts. We found the "ville", but had plenty more action as we proceeded east, then south, then west again over the next four days. That's another story...the action continued for 3 more tough days as we moved to clear the area just west of Route #1. ■



Frank J. Breth

Born	October 12, 1937 Fairmont, West Virginia, U.S.
Died	December 6, 2003 (aged 66) Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.
Allegiance	United States of America
Service/branch	United States Marine Corps
Years of service	1959 - 1989
Rank	Brigadier general
Commands held	2nd Battalion, 1st Marines Director of Intelligence, HQMC
Awards	Legion of Merit (3) Bronze Star (3) Purple Heart (2)

Follow up Story on "The Tanks Saved the Day"

BY RICHARD SMILEY,
US ARMY "SKY DUSTER" COMPANY COMMANDER
ASSIGNED TO USMC "TASK FORCE ROBBIE," 1968

This is a reference to the story that you featured in the most recent past issue of your magazine, "Tanks Saved the Day" by (then) Maj. Frank Breth. I guess I never told you my own story about how the tanks pulled the grunts out of deep doo-doo at Cam Vu. It was originally part of my article that I submitted to Vietnam magazine, but back then the editors told me to take it out. So, I did.

I have included a crude map (below) that I originally sent to Vietnam Magazine and although it is not drawn to scale, it does show pretty much how things shook out that night. As you may know, we had a "Candlelight" mission flying overhead that lit up everything with aerial flares after darkness set in. Once the Task Force Robbie CO decided that they had run into more than they could handle the decision was made to retreat back to Cam Lo. The tanks were lined up behind the scrimmage line and by radio, the troops were told to infiltrate back through the tanks and regroup for the trip back to Cam Lo.

The problem was that one squad of Marine grunts was still cut off behind enemy lines. The cut off squad had radio contact although they were keeping as quiet as possible because they had no idea how close "Charlie" was to them. When it became obvious that the NVA had closed up behind them and they were cut off from the main force of Task Force Robbie, they formed up in a 360° defensive

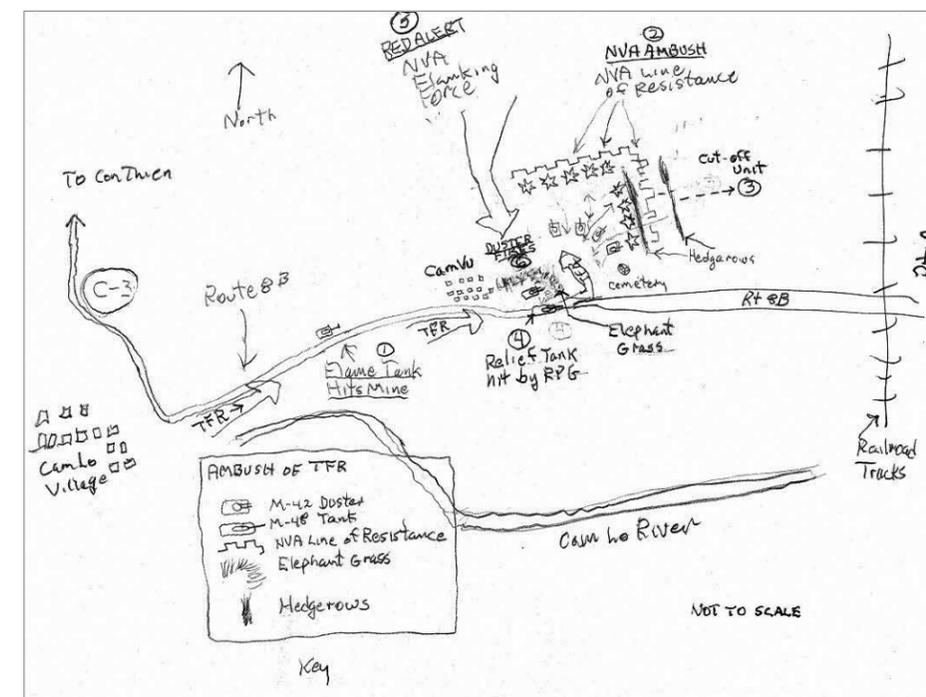
posture and decided to wait for the situation to develop. Meanwhile, the CO of 1/9 contacted the cut off squad and told them that a tank with a Xenon light would slowly pan the light beam from extreme left to right just above ground level. The CO told the cut off squad to key their radio once when the light beam was directly over them. They did that maneuver and then one of the other tanks raced out following the light beam until they arrived at the cut off squad. The cut off squad quickly piled on board the tank (including with their two KIAs) and the tank sped back to the scrimmage line. Quite a clever rescue operation if you ask me. I got the story directly from one of the grunts who was with the cut off squad. That grunt is now retired and living in Dallas, Texas.

One other thing that the Vietnam magazine editors deleted from my original article was my description of another tank which was sent out from Cam Lo to pick up dead and wounded after the shit had already hit the fan. That tank stopped right next to my Sky Duster, probably only 20 feet away. Shortly after the tank arrived an RPG flew out from the middle of the elephant grass directly in front of us and hit the tank right on the turret. I saw sparks fly all over the place as if a welder were trying to cut a hole in the turret. About five minutes later I watched as a couple of Marines hauled a tanker crew member out of

the loaders hatch. He was alive >> but obviously wounded. It was shortly after this that we began our retrograde to Cam Lo. I'm not sure why the editors took that part out of my article, but it might have had something to do with the fact that I got the story from one of the guys in that tank who has suffered severe PTSD ever since Vietnam according to the other Marines who put me in touch with him. Perhaps the editors disbelieved the story or they may have been just trying to trim down the size of my article. I'm pretty sure I still have the message this grunt sent me (I think he was a squad leader who was told to ride out with his squad on the late arriving tank).

Cheers
Richard Smiley

Thanks for the information. >>



BTW, I got a date mixed up in my last message—Major Breth was right. It was April 30 that 3/9 flew in from Camp Carol and went out in battalion strength in the Cam Vu area. You and I and TFR hit the shit the previous day on 29th of April. Senior moment, I guess.

I'm attaching a couple of messages I got long ago from Marine infantry who were at Cam Vu on the 29th. One guy, Gary Werely, was actually in the cut-off squad that was rescued by the tankers and wrote a letter to his friend (maybe a relative) a day or so later describing the situation. You once told me that Marine grunts have a love/hate relationship with Marine tankers. Must have been all love that night!!

Another thing you might be interested in is finding out the name of the tanker who was injured when the tank that drove out from Cam Lo late in the evening to help pick up the dead and wounded was hit by an RPG. They parked about 35–40 feet away from my duster and shortly thereafter were hit in the front of the turret by an RPG. I'll never forget the sight—sparks flying all over the place when the RPG hit. The RPG came from the elephant grass that was in front of us. I watched a couple of Marines (this was by the light provided by the flares from the Candlelight mission overhead) pull a wounded tanker out of (I think) the loader's hatch. He was kind of limp but appeared alive to me. Someone in 3rd Tank Battalion must know who this individual was. If he didn't receive a Purple Heart for this, he damn sure should have.

I printed out the above document and read it a few nights ago. I had previously read somewhere else that it was 3/9 who flew in from the Rockpile to pick up where you and I were with TFR when we hit the shit on 30Apr1968.

Maj Breth got the date wrong, though. 30 April was when we went out to Cam Vu according to Maj McLaren's S-3 report, a copy of which you sent me. So, 3/9 showed up on May 1, not April 30. Maj Breth also says the TFR tanks were left out at Cam Vu on the night of April 30. I don't recall that, but maybe it's true. You'd know that better than I since you were a tanker. But if the VC were armed with RPGs wouldn't the tanks be very vulnerable at night without infantry around to keep the NVA at bay?

Here's my guess: Maj Breth of 3/9 got the word about the TFR tanks being out at night BEFORE we retreated on Apr 30. Yes, the tanks were still out at Cam Vu at night, but so were the grunts of 1/9 and my Duster. We hadn't retreated yet because that one squad was still cut off from the main TFR force. It was darker than Tobey's ass when the cut-off squad was finally rescued (by a tank, no less). Recall it was about midnight before we limped back to Cam Lo. So, in my mind it all adds up except that Maj Breth got the date wrong. He probably got the news that TFR had hit the shit on the 30th, but 3/9 was brought in from the Rockpile by chopper the next day. Problem solved!!!

I do have a second article that will be published by Vietnam Magazine in March 2023. It's about my time as an advisor to the Ruff-Puffs in the Mekong Delta, so there's nothing about Marines or tanks in it. Hmmm, that sounds like a good title for the article "No Marines, No Tanks!" Anyway, I'll send you a copy if you want to read it. I came closer to taking it in the shorts in the Mekong Delta than I ever did on the DMZ.

Lt Richard Smiley
US Army – Task Force Robbie

Editor's Note: This story first ran in the #3 – 2013 issue of our magazine but since we are featuring TFR in this issue, we felt it was worth repeating.

Task Force Robbie 1968

BY DAN "JOCKO" PAWLAK

In January 1968 Camp Carroll was almost cut off from Route 9 due to an ambush. Gun tank Bravo-52, the company blade tank, F-22, my flame tank and two doggie "Sky Dusters" along with a squad of Marine grunts were sent out the north gate to serve as a reactionary unit. Our company commanding officer, Capt Kent was TC of the blade tank and unfortunately, he was KIA. Our small task force was ordered to hold a position at the junction of Route 9 and the road that went up to Camp Carroll. It turned out to be a really bad day and when we got back to Carroll after we had to tow a disabled duster, I was debriefed by the most "brass hats" that I had ever seen in one place. After that things kind of got back to normal.



Then in the middle of February, we were in the process of doing PM on our tank. My crew was Dave Twitchell, the gunner and Joe Medina, the driver and I was the TC.

Author's note: Some of the dates in this story might be off a little because of the time passed. Anyway, as we were doing our work at Camp Carroll, we dropped the escape hatch when all of a sudden, we got orders to mount up and to go immediately to Cam Lo Hill. When we got on to Route 9 and the road north to the village of Cam Lo, we started taking incoming so we buttoned up. Of course, we had no escape hatch and the air inside of the tank got really dusty. When we got to the Cam Lo Bridge and the river, I had Medina gun it with the great hope that we wouldn't stall out while fording the water. We made the crossing a little bit wet but OK. When we arrived at Cam Lo Hill we were told to hang loose. In the meantime, we got another escape hatch and all of us were a lot happier.

As time went by, a Marine named Joe Irizarry joined us. And then another flame tank that had been in Hue with the TC named Charlie West, gunner, John Wear and driver, Brad "Goodie" Goodin joined us. Then Tom Yax and his flame tank joined us. All the while more gun tanks from both Charlie and Alfa companies joined us. One of the tankers from Charlie Co informed me that my good buddy, Anthony Bennett had been KIA from a 500-pound bomb that was booby trapped and his tank ran over it. Anthony had been a good friend and a good Marine.

As March ended, we would go on road sweeps to Dong Ha and Camp Carroll. There were rumors all of the time that we were going to clear the road to Khe Sahn and help to end the siege.

In April, there was also a lot of fighting around Cam

Lo. A Combined Action Platoon (CAP unit) was hit late one day and we went out after dark. A few tanks hit mines and the rest of the night was pretty hairy. On April 29th or 30th (my parents' telegram said the 29th) we went out the back gate of Cam Lo Hill with Tom Yax and several gun tanks. Loaded on our tanks were grunts from the 9th Marines. We were heading northeast with all of the tanks in line when we started taking heavy incoming small arms fire. We got to a small rise when Tom Yax came over the radio saying that he was wounded in the hand and he pulled his tank back. My tank moved forward and we shot our load of napalm. It was a good mix, with no lumps! Everything was very chaotic as I was up in the cupola trying to tell the grunts to move away from the tank so we wouldn't run over them. About that time, we hit a mine. I got wounded pretty badly so we moved back. Dave Twitchell and Joe Medina saved my life that day and I will love them like brothers forever. Like I said, it could have been April 29th or 30th. Tom Yax would know but he has since passed away.

Well, that's my story of Task Force Robbie. I am pretty sure it is as accurate as memory serves me. I wanted to relay this since there are not many stories or articles about TFR activates.

Dan "Jacko" Pawlak
F-22 Bravo Co, 3rd Tanks
Mokena, Illinois
Phone: 815.485.4476

Editor's Note: Jacko's comment about the lack of stories about TFR was a motivator to have this issue of our magazine feature more. ■

Task Force Robbie Redux

BY GEORGE FLAVIANI

A Marine M48 tank and Marine infantry, part of Task Force Robbie, search for an enemy force near Dong Ha. Task Force Robbie was the 3d Division's small armored reserve force, called after the nickname of its commander, Col Clifford J. Robichaud.



Editor's Note: When he received the 2014, Vol. 3 edition of the Sponson Box, longtime VTA member George Flaviani, felt compelled to give me a call to discuss his own experiences with Task Force Robbie and specifically to offer further detail about the operation where Dan "Jocko" Pawlak told of the attempted rescue of the CAP unit that was under siege from the NVA on April 29, 1968. The following is my best recollection of that phone conversation. >>

I was with 1st Platoon, Charlie Co, 3rd Tanks. Our platoon was assigned to Task Force Robbie that was located at Cam Lo Hill. Lt Larson was our platoon leader and Sgt Samson was our platoon sergeant. Late one afternoon, we got a call that a Marine CAP (Combined Action Platoon) unit that was under intense fire from a large force of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) soldiers. The grunt unit that was assigned to Cam Lo Hill was Delta, 1/9. These hapless grunts were just back from Khe Sahn and they thought that they were in for some in-country R&R while assigned to Cam Lo Hill. After we mounted up and as our armored column moved down the road, we came to a bridge that could not accommodate the weight of our tanks, there was a bypass that forded the small stream. Two of the lead tanks made it through the bypass but the third tank was struck by what we think was an NVA command-detonated mine. The only WIA was the stricken tank's loader, so that was good to go. The Task Force Robbie Commanding Officer, Lt Col Robichaud, was in the lead tank and he was obviously was not a tank officer, he said that he wanted to blow the stricken tank in place. But the only real damage was that several track blocks on the left side of the tank needed to be replaced and the track put back on. A tank retriever was called in and when the stricken tank was hauled out off of the road and out of the way, the rest of the task force proceeded to the ambush area and the stricken tank's crew was left with a squad of grunts (for security) while the crew made the repairs to the track.

At the next bridge and bypass, Marine engineers were called up to sweep for mines. They found three 500-pound unexploded American bombs that were set to detonate in a daisy chain. The engineers blew these deadly mines (in today's parlance, they were IEDs) in place and the task force moved on. By now, we realized that the NVA had made painstaking

plans for their assault and they knew that TFR would make a headlong charge to the rescue. That was similar to the cavalry coming to the rescue when the Indians attacked the wagon train. Anyway, the enemy had planted the mines to keep the Task Force from getting to the ambush thus assuring them a victory.

As the armored column moved forward, an American aerial observer flying in a small plane above the Marines, radioed down that there were 50 or so enemy soldiers in a tree line toward their front. The tanks had been loaded with the (then) brand new 90 mm flechettes rounds. Each tank had three of these new "beehive" rounds and the order was given for the TCs to use their range finders to zero in on the tree line; for each tank to set the range on the variable fuses and to fire off one flechettes round into the tree line. I discovered that ranging into a tree line with the range finder was difficult at best but we figured that the range was 800 meters and that is what we set the new beehive round. Talk about making "Swiss cheese" of the enemy soldiers hiding in the tree line!!! I remember to this day that the AO's call sign was, "Southern Cross Delta." After the five tanks blew the shit out of the tree line, Southern Cross Delta came over the radios and said, "I am crediting you with 50 confirmed kills."

We kept moving forward toward the CAP unit that was located on a hill. The incoming NVA fire was intense. Every single tank emptied their .30 cal. banana box and the machine gun barrels were cherry red. During the assault on the NVA, Tom Yax had his flame tank charge up the hill and release his 300-gallon of napalm directly into the enemy position. During the early part of the fight, Yax got the tip of his ear shot off after the NVA bullet went through his comm. helmet.

Just like in the books, "... and darkness fell." It was light and then all of a sudden it was pitch black. There

were no stars or moon and ... trust me when I say that it was do dark that you could not see your hand in front of your face. The NVA kept their assault hot and heavy all night. There were many Marine WIAs and KIAs but since it was so dark and since the NVA fire was so intense, we could not get any medevac choppers to come in. I helped load a few WIA grunts onto the armor plate of my tank. That is where I saw my first sucking chest wound. One of the wounded begged to have medevacs come in. I said, "Can't the corpsman help you?" He replied, "I am the corpsman!"

The next thing to happen was that every single Marine and Army artillery unit from Cam Lo Hill, Charlie 2 and Camp Carroll fired massive amounts of fire missions all around our perimeter. They threw everything but the kitchen sink at the NVA! There were salvos every three seconds for what seemed like hours on end. The next morning, the NVA were gone and we were able to call in medevac choppers and then head home. After we got back to Cam Lo Hill, it was discovered that there were a dozen Marines who were MIA. It was pretty obvious to most of us that they were lying out in the battlefield so another column of tanks was dispatched back to the hill and we retrieved the bodies.

Just a few other remembrances from George:

The name on our gun barrel was "Let It Eat" which referred to the song by Sam the Sham and the Pharos. Bob Acosta was one of our crewmen and he had been a drummer in a band back in high school. He loved Sam the Sham and that's where the name came from. Our motto was, "Put the enemy in front of our tank, and we'll let it eat." Unfortunately, we had to change out the main gun barrel a few months later and because Bill Varella, who was the artist who had painted all of the names of our platoon's tanks, had rotated back to the World so we had no name on the new gun barrel. Terry Bloomer was our gunner. ■



I have a ring (shown above) that a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl gifted to me for helping her family that was from the northeastern part of Vietnam Route 9 in I Corps. Since February 1969 the ring has been kept in a very special and respectful place at my home for safety and it is in thought with me almost daily! I believe that, in hindsight, this gifted ring was in many ways a divine providence situation in the sense that she was well aware of the deadly danger in the Vietnam War against communist conquest. I think she just wanted me to write this story for a family remembrance. Also, maybe in the hope of some justice might to come at some future day for the dark evil of the indigenous Viet Cong living among the civilians of the terrible conflict. And maybe for me personally, this my seeing the story as a real obligation to tell, as there are lessons to be learned for the military along with just adding to the real truth and history of that ugly Vietnam war.

More importantly, to make it clear that while North Vietnam was the force behind the war, with the VC as their local terrorist forces, South Vietnam was partnered with the USA as a SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) member. America's combat veterans certainly want to pass on important lessons to be emphasized or learned in a war zone in the hope they will not be repeated.

Bottom line: US warfighters must temper their interaction with the local civilian populations especially when the country is mired in a vicious, bitter conflict involving both local terrorists and regular troops from the other side of the DMZ.

Before I go on with this difficult to tell story, I want to say that I apologetically misspoke during my one-hour oral interview with the Library of Congress program for the nationwide "Veterans History Project" in 2012 (You-Tube: Skeels Interview). When I was asked by the interviewer if during in my 1968-9 Vietnam tour of duty as a Marine platoon leader (in both the Marine infantry and also in Marine tanks) if I had seen any war atrocities", I immediately replied "No". Because at the time I felt it was not something to pass on that would help any future US combat troops avoid mistakes.

But in fact, I had seen two atrocities during my tour of duty. In the case of one of these atrocities, I could never handle it emotionally to tell anyone about it. However, in respect to this atrocity story, I feel there is a kind of obligation to tell it due to the danger of future warfighters of not grasping the lesson of "coming up to speed" quickly with civilian population interface. There is always very evil danger present in a country involved for many years in a particularly vicious kind of

AN EVIL ATROCITY ON ROUTE 9 IN A VIETNAM WAR ZONE

A Lesson Learned the Hard Way

BY BOB SKEELS

guerilla action to terrify and dominate all the people. So, the citizens of the Republic of South Vietnam were in double danger from both the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and even more so from the merciless local Viet Cong (VC) who would inflict barbaric punishment on any people they thought were supporting the Saigon government and/or the American forces.

All the villages along this dangerous Route 9 access had fences to keep out the wild 500-pound wart hogs and their destructive warhog families. I had killed one of those hogs with an M-79 grenade launcher. At the time, I was at the B Company base camp HQ Officer of the Day. After I had fired off two 40mm flares in order to find out the source of the commotion on the lower 360 fenced perimeter. I discovered that the huge hog had tripped a perimeter trip flare at the fence. Afterward I gave the dead hog to the thankful villagers of Cam Lo in the morning. I have a picture of that HOG sent to me by my tank Company commander, Jay Miller, who was a retired FBI agent in Florida and has since passed away two years ago.

The village fences also all had tall posts that were topped all too often with the severed head of a hapless civilian's who had been killed by the local evil Viet Cong for some offense such as "fraternizing with the >>

Americans” or being supportive of the Saigon government.

One day the nine-year-old girl’s father who was an “ti wi” lieutenant, and member of the Republic of South Vietnam Army (ARVN) lifted her up to my tank’s fender and I then hauled her up on my gun tank turret where she gave me the ring with a big smile. The reason for the gift was for helping her family. And primarily for helping her 90-year-old grandfather ‘right’ his mired, tipped totally on its side big rice paddy tractor. The mishap was right next to their small home which was right on the edge of the long access road to Route 9 that then eventually went west to Khe Sanh and LAOS, the enemy’s sanctuary country. The family’s home floor was very clean, hard packed dirt (seemingly harder than cement). It was just down the road from Cam Lo village and the next to Cal Lu village (where we took prisoner suspects) and then there was My Loc village. This was also very near the important 1967–1968 Camp Carrol operating & fire support base (then abandoned) just off that very narrow thirty-mile dangerous dirt road to Laos.

Unfortunately, and it’s without saying it’s a terrible ‘lifelong regret’, that my US Marine Bravo Company’s five tank platoon unit “could help this family but NOT PROTECT THEM” in this ugly, horrific Vietnamese conflict. The very likable, friendly, sociable civilians (they loved Americans as treaty partners) of the Republic of South Vietnam had to live in truly the most terrifying conditions and predicaments. They had to live, endure and deal with a conundrum... the vilest, and unfortunately fellow citizens that lived among them were called the Viet Cong (often referred to as just the “VC”). They were found in most of the South as was the fierce enemy of the North Vietnam Army (NVA) who had come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North to infiltrate the South and to back up the VC.

So, the South Vietnamese, who only wanted to be left alone, had to live with both their own neighbors who were VC terrorists and the various units of NVA that had infiltrated into the country. You can only imagine the absolute terror, pressure, stress & the truly horrific predicament that the civilians had to endure on a daily basis.

Finally, I never thought there was a reason to tell or that I could bring myself to struggle through this story emotionally. But I will tell you what happened, because as in this case, I feel obligated to tell it as there are critical lessons to be learned about the necessity for warfighters to “come up to speed quickly in a war zone!” Most importantly, I owe it to that 9-year-old Vietnamese girl to tell the story and to reveal the dangerous evil that presents itself in a war. This is why the veterans are always the strongest opponents to a war ever even getting started!

Even after isolating for 50 years and like most Vietnam vets, I often feel like I never left Vietnam! I think that for the most part this isolation was due to the unwelcomed return home, the public hysteria from slanted media generated negative war coverage and lies, etc. But then, it all came to me in another patriotic surge after our nation’s “9/11.” War fighting veterans should step up and tell their stories due to the many totally proven benefits to their comrade war veteran buddies and the great value to many veteran brothers, their families, our nation’s posterity and our national history.

In 2015, I was finally able to start to share a full story about an incident during the war with my own brother. As I spoke to him, he abruptly cut me off when he detected an emotional drift and quickly ended our conversation as he thought this conclusion was in my best interest. But, in actuality many veterans really want and need to tell stories of their proud service and to discuss some not-so-nice incidents they experienced. Frankly speaking, I have found that fellow veterans truly want to hear your story and offer any

suggestions for help if needed. So, my own brother finally let me get through sharing the full story of the incident understanding that I wanted to and really needed to tell my story at least once. Perhaps simply to “get it off of my chest” so to speak.

So, at another occasion, he finally listened and then gave me feedback and replied, “I would have made the same decision, Bob.” WOW!!! Sometimes “Thank you for your service” feedback is great to a veteran but if you can get someone to listen fully to a short story or issue, they may also instantly share with you the burden of carrying the incident. Not bad...”war burden sharing” and actual positive feedback... Then tell your stories!

So, “show up and sign up” to serve once more! You can still be humble and it’s still very honorable and almost imperative in some instances for lessons to be learned. I have learned and actually it has been proven in videos that you can greatly help your war buddies, fellow veterans, and our current US military. I have told three Vietnam combat stories since 2019 to the Marines own Leatherneck magazine that I learned later that have helped brother Marines with unresolved incidents and issues. Believe me, your wartime buddies and others want to hear your own stories and help you.

I freely enlisted like 70% of other fellow American patriot buddies to answer the call to duty from our commander-in-chief to serve this great nation just as my US Navy father did in WWII. And to honorably help a SEATO member that were suffering from both domestic terrorist and invading troops. So, I joined the US Marine Corps in late 1967 after college and after getting a degree at Niagara University, NY. I became a very proud Marine Corps armor (tank) officer. I then served a tour of duty in Vietnam in the 1968–69 period as both an infantry platoon leader for three months in that rigorous Vietnam

DMZ jungle war and then finally I was transitioned over to my assigned MOS specialty as a tank platoon leader to that area below the DMZ, called “Leatherneck Square.” This was all in the northeastern “I Corps” area. I have to say that when I arrived and reported to my tank assignment and began my new assignment as 1st platoon leader, Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Marine Division that I definitely considered myself to be a war experienced and combat hardened Marine. But this is no way an excuse for making this mistake of common-sense logic in this one-story incident during the war with my tank platoon.

While serving as a grunt platoon leader in that western Vietnam jungle area by Laos that was just below the DMZ, I never came in contact with any South Vietnamese civilians. But, when I transitioned to my new tank assignment on January 3, 1969, the civilians were everywhere in my area of operation. But mostly due to the war they were just staying close to their villages, and not venturing to go too far along both dirt roads at that critical intersection near the Bravo company tank park at Vin Dai. And right next door to us was the village of Cam Lo. This village was at the juncture of the only two major Vietnamese highways... Route 1, the heavily mined dirt road that ran north and which went up to and ended at the DMZ and the heavily mined dirt road Route 9 that ran west toward the enemy’s sanctuary country in Laos. Hell of a way to fight a war... all these sanctuaries to assist the enemy!

At the time, when I was first enlisting in the Marines for the aforementioned rational, common reasons to serve the country, I was not aware at the outset of my service entry just how strong the feeling to help defend the actual civilians caught up in the war would become. It certainly would add another strong reason for my wartime service and why we were

defending this treaty partner. These were great, easy to relate to people to help defend from their local VC and NVA enemies. The civilians were so close all the time to our tactical area of operation.

I did not heed the full warnings my tank platoon sergeant, SSgt Al Soto when he said, “Lieutenant, you just exited the Marine infantry unit in that DMZ jungle war with its triple canopy topography to our west, but it’s different here over here in eastern “Leather Neck Square” area next to the South China Sea. Here you will finally get a shower, but you have friendly ARVN soldiers and civilians all over the place that make the big difference.

Importantly the highly decorated second-tour Marine tank SSgt said on my first day of my transition into my tank officer MOS,1802 on Jan 3, 1969: “Lieutenant, we have to bring you “up to speed” on just how the war is very dangerously different here due to civilians and it being a complex internal struggle with two enemies for them and us to deal with!”

So, it should have been because of the ever-present danger from getting a haircut from a civilian barber sitting next to a friendly water buffalo, but it was not immediately intuitive in me to somewhat “temper my relations” and interactions with the friendly civilians and the ARVN since a percent of them were very likely to be VC or VC sympathizers. Besides operating with many other Marine infantry units in this “I Corps” combat area, I worked and fought alongside the ARVN or the Army of South Vietnam on so many operations. We provided security on many occasions for them and at their forward DMZ fire support bases (Con Thien, Gio Linh and Oceanview) that they commanded. At nighttime this was especially common due to the frequent “intel alerts” about a likely imminent attack. Two of these bases were commanded by ARVN commanders and the bases were guarded by a combination of both Marines and ARVN Military.

You know when you are with the U.S. military with the obvious awareness of a treaty obligation to assist a partner. Then this obligation ties to being an American with our great innate value system and our Christian values that the country was founded on along with it’s just in your American DNA to assist the oppressed. To me, it became a special empathy for me toward all the Republic of South Vietnam civilians and their terrible war predicament.

So, it is really hard to temper your interaction completely with the civilians you’re assisting but it’s here that you sometimes learn a lesson the hard way that a war is going on, unfortunately this is my story and lesson to be learned.

At the outset, this was a really intense war in that northern I Corps’ DMZ sector while I was serving there either with the magnificent 3rd Marine Regiment grunts and then with the outstanding, 3rd tanks. The fact that it was a complex internal struggle made it all even more dangerous and intense. I have found that all Vietnam veterans are proud of their Vietnam service and would most likely help these great people again. It is my understanding that up to 70% of the military that served in Vietnam (over 3 million served) were enlisted troops, who were not drafted, and it was so worthwhile that this 70 per cent would volunteer again due to the civilian people being so great.

Then off Route 9, there was a large Marine fire support base called “Vandergriff Combat Base” or fittingly, “LZ Stud.” I spent some time there with my Marine Infantry platoon there in late 1968 using their airfield there for helo lift enemy assaults in the surrounding jungle and then while in tanks, my platoon of five tanks were there many times for night perimeter watch due to intelligence reports of an imminent threat of an NVA sapper attack. The base off Route 9 had high ridge lines on each side and a valley in the rear of the base and one >>

to the front. So, we would deploy our tanks high on each ridge so those big rockets coming in daily over the ridge couldn't hit us. It was horrible when we saw them going into the mess tents down below these ridge lines.

So, on one occasion in late Feb 1969 after Tet '69 had passed, I had a radio call that LZ Stud wanted my tanks on the perimeter again that night. We got off to a late start toward the base due to a reaction force call elsewhere and so we entered Route 9 late and as we passed Cam Lo, my lead tank with my platoon sergeant, SSgt Al Soto, said, "Lt take a look on the right side and that old farmer having trouble with his tractor...let's take a minute and go 'right it' for him."

My tank's driver was LCpl Larry Parshall, who was also my own platoon's lead mechanic and my tank company's qualified mechanic. As an aside, my platoon had 13 mine hits and Larry had us buttoned up and back up within two hours to carry on our missions, so Larry was a really good Marine. We righted the tractor

for this 90-year-old farmer and then the family came out of the house with their ARVN Lieutenant son and in gratitude he insisted that we join them for dinner and spend the night with his family. The ARVN Lieutenant also said he had a gift for me which turned out to be a handy new M2 just converted carbine from an original M1 for my tank turret canvas area along with the M30 grenades. We deliberated and finally anticipating both possible darkness and a possible mine hit along that deadly ambush Route 9, both Sargent Soto and I decided to also spend the night. We did and we employed a safe 360-degree perimeter around the house with our five tanks. The next morning, the little girl asked to board the tank as she had a gift and so the ARVN Lt. father hoisted her up to me and she gave me the ring as a gift for helping the family. We then went on to LZ Stud to provide security and spent two days adding security to the base.

Two weeks later in March of 1969

we were once again traveling west on Route 9 on our way to LZ Stud to provide extra security. SSgt Al Soto was the lead of our tank column. He came over the radio and said to me "Lieutenant, look to the right. The VC have bulldozed that family's house ... but do not look at the fence posts on the left!"

The expression, "War is (indeed pure) hell" and that there are many hazards in combat zones which all Vietnam veterans know are both grossly understated. After 50 years, many Vietnam veterans are "still in Vietnam" mentally even though they are back in the world (or safely at home in the USA.) The expression, "Thank you for your service" from the American public still means something to us... as does things for me like keeping and respecting a certain ring and proudly serving our country!

Semper Fidelis,

Bob Skeels
1st Lt. U.S. Marine Corps
Vietnam War, 1968-69

the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal with device.)

Beginning in February or March, I lived off base in the Beacham Apartments in Jacksonville with Lt. Ron Knight, one of the tank platoon commanders who had been with me at An Hoa, as previously described.

In March, I took a few days leave and joined Lt. Col. Catt in Sebring, FL to watch the 12-hour international endurance race. As he had directed, I met him at a certain bar in Sebring. We drank at the local American Legion and drove our two Chevrolet Corvairs around town the night before the race. Through Lt. Col. Catt's connections, I got to serve on race day as a timer for a Ford GT40 run by an English team entered by Trevor Graham and driven by English drivers Piers Weld Forester and Andrew Hedges. Lt. Col. Catt also served as a timer in the same pit.

Numerous "UAs," Marines who were on unauthorized absence (many from commands far from Camp Lejeune), were assigned on paper to 2d AmTrac Battalion while still UA. When they were eventually apprehended, they were sent to Camp Lejeune to 2d AmTracs for processing. As Legal Officer, I helped my C.O. process such people, as well as the Battalion's own offenders, for battalion office hours and courts-martial. My first Legal Clerk was LCpl. Huisenga, who was succeeded by Cpl. Richard. L. Myers, a superb Marine.

As the result of his offer and my acceptance, Lt. Col. Catt removed the emission control equipment from my 1968 Chevrolet Corvair Monza convertible, just as he had from his own Corvair. On a couple of occasions, he tuned my car for me, replacing the condenser and rotating the top of the distributor until, by ear, its position was correctly adjusted.

On October 9, I was released from active duty at my request, under a program which permitted Marines who had served in Vietnam to leave active duty as much as six months

early. At the time, I was somewhat discouraged by a number of drug cases that we had encountered.

February 1971

Realizing that I loved the Marine Corps and still wanted to be in it for a while longer, I applied at the Marine Barracks, Philadelphia Naval Base to return to active duty.

June-September 1971

On June 3, I was returned to active duty with the rank of Captain and was awarded a Regular Commission at a time when many Reserve Officers on active duty were "being RIF-ed" (released from active duty in a Reduction in Force program). I drove to Camp Lejeune, NC and was assigned as Commanding Officer, Company D, 2d Tank Battalion. This was the last active duty company equipped with the M103A2 120 mm gun tank (rating 17 heavy tanks). Each of these magnificent looking tanks rated a crew of five, including an assistant loader to help handle the separate (two-part) ammunition. However, due to the company's being seriously understrength (60 people instead of the 121 that we rated) and extensive tank maintenance problems, we normally had available just seven tanks, the equivalent of a reinforced platoon. I attempted to transfer to 2d AmTrac Battalion with the support of Major Gerding, its C.O., who had been ExO to Lt. Col. Catt when I was with that battalion but (fortunately, in retrospect) was rebuffed by the Personnel Officer of Force Troops, FMFLant.

My first C.O. at 2d Tanks was Maj. F.M. Slovik. At a change of command ceremony at Landing Zone Falcon in late June involving a mechanized pass in review by the entire battalion, Maj. Slovik was relieved by Lt. Col. F.E. Grube. Home movies, which I have retained, were taken of this ceremony with my camera by one of my staff NCO's. I led my tanks in the pass in review.

I initially lived in the BOQ at Courthouse Bay, then moved off base to the Beacham Apartments in Jacksonville.

One night I went out for a few beers off base with a Master Sergeant L.W. Smith, who had until the recent RIF been a Temporary Captain. As a captain, he had been the best company commander at 2d AmTracs when I was a lieutenant and the Legal Officer there the previous year, and he and I had developed considerable respect for each other. He was having difficulty adjusting to having lost his Temporary Commission in the RIF, but, as always, was extremely professional.

After one of the lieutenants on our Battalion staff was killed in a motorcycle accident in Jacksonville, I was assigned the additional duty of investigating officer in the case.

September-November 1971

As an experiment, the Marine Corps wanted to experiment with having a tank officer lead a mechanized task force, whereas heretofore infantry officers has always been put in charge of such mechanized units. I was picked by the C.O. of 2d Tank Battalion from among his company commanders, which was an honor. Lt. Col. Grube selected me and sent me on Temporary Additional Duty to 8th Marine Amphibious Brigade as Tank Officer of the MAB to lead the Provisional Armored Force of BLT 1/2 under Lt. Col. Alfred M. Gray (15 years later to become Commandant of the Marine Corps).

The armored force, a mechanized task force nicknamed "Task Force Hughes" by Lt. Col. Gray, consisted of my command group (Staff Sergeant D. D. Williams ((I was given my pick of the Battalion, and I picked him)) and LCpl. Phipps, a radio operator), and Co. D, 1st Bn 2d Marines (a rifle company with about 155 men) reinforced with a communications detachment, a section of two 81 mm mortars, a team of forward observers for the mortars, >>

CHAPTER THREE CHRONOLOGY OF MY U.S. MARINE CORPS SERVICE

BY KENT S. HUGHES

November-December 1969

At the end of my leave, I drove to Camp Lejeune, NC, reporting on November 12, where I was assigned duties as Battalion Legal Officer, 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, Courthouse Bay, Camp Lejeune. My Commanding Officer was Lt. Col. Jack R. Catt, a really fine officer. I drove to Newport, RI for Temporary Additional Duty as a student in the four-week, non-lawyer course at Naval Justice School beginning November 23. I rented the first floor of a Victorian house on the water on

a point near Jamestown with another Marine officer, a Navy P-3 Orion pilot, and a Navy RA-5 Vigilante Naval Flight Officer.

February-October 1970

In February, I was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V" for meritorious service in South Vietnam in a ceremony at 2d Amtrac Battalion, Courthouse Bay, Camp Lejeune. Some of the details in the citation were inaccurate. I explained that to Lt. Col. Catt as he presented me with the medal, but he said, "It's what's

between the lines that counts." (Other awards, less important, include a U.S. personal decoration: the Combat Action Ribbon; a Navy unit award: the Navy Unit Commendation; campaign and service awards: the National Defense Service Medal and the Vietnam Service Medal with 3 stars; two foreign unit awards: the Republic of Vietnam Meritorious Unit Citation Gallantry Cross Color with palm; and the Republic of Vietnam Meritorious Unit Citation Civil Actions Color (1st Class with palm); and a foreign service award:

and an artillery FO team), a reinforced platoon of seven M-48A3 tanks; a platoon of 10 LVTP5 amtracs and my LVTP5A1 (CMD) command amtrac; a section of two 106 mm recoilless rifles; a squad of engineers; and a naval gunfire spot team.

We traveled on the U.S.S. Inchon, LPH 12, from Moorehead City, NC to U.S. Naval Base, Rota, Spain, near Cadiz, for a port call. On the way across the Atlantic, I prepared and submitted to the S-3 of BLT 1/2 a list of requests for aerial reconnaissance photographs and intelligence assessments of certain bridges and terrain features, such as the capacity of certain bridges and fordability of certain streams.

We sailed into the Mediterranean Sea and participated in three “turnaway landings” (a type of practice landing in which the LVT’s, landing craft, and helicopters turn back to the ships just as they approach the beach) at Carboneras, Spain, in an underway launch from the well deck through the stern door of the U.S.S. Coronado, LPH 11, in my command amtrac. As the stern door first opened and the ship turned, dolphins were jumping in our wake—a beautiful sight.

Back aboard the Inchon, we sailed to Crete and anchored in Soudha Bay (near Canea, also known as Xania or Xania) with various ships including U.S.S. Guadalcanal, LPH 7, U.S.S. America (an attack aircraft carrier), and H.M.S. Fearless (a British landing ship carrying Royal Marines). We took liberty in Canea. We sailed on the Inchon, accompanied by the Coronado, the U.S.S. Ft. Snelling, LSD 30, and the U.S.S. Suffolk County, LST 1173, which together comprised Amphibious Squadron 10, to Saros Bay, Turkey, in Turkish Thrace, the European part of Turkey south of Bulgaria and north of the Gallipoli Peninsula and the Dardanelles.

I transferred again to the Coronado with my command group and made an amphibious landing in

my command amtrac on October 14 as part of Exercise Deep Furrow, a NATO exercise, which also included British Royal Marines, the San Marco Battalion of the Italian Navy (Italian marines), and the Greek Navy. Turkish Army units including tanks functioned as aggressors mimicking Warsaw Pact forces. NATO dignitaries watched from a grandstand on the beach. We moved inland by road to the city of Kesan, a distance of about 45 miles. For a part of the exercise, the armored force convoyed with an artillery battery including four 105 mm howitzers (the other two being helilifted), 10 trucks, and seven jeeps.

I was assigned a Turkish Air Force F-100 fighter pilot as my Air Liaison Officer, but our radios for his use did not work, and he was reduced to being my translator, shooing errant Turkish civilians out of our way during the exercise. As a Moslem, he was dismayed to learn how many of our C-rations contained pork and in disgust stopped trying to eat them.

Part of the way through the exercise, I made an aerial route reconnaissance in a UH1E “Huey” helicopter and took a look at the Turks’ tank park, attempting to estimate their effective strength and the disposition of their forces.

I left my armored force after four days as the exercise was ending, boarded the Inchon and sailed to Piraeus, outside Athens, for a port call. En route, I wrote an after-action report for 8th MAB on the exercise. I then transferred to the U.S.S. Guadalcanal, LPH 7, where I spent the night, and then by helicopter flew to the U.S.S. Mount Whitney, LCC 20, which was on her first operational deployment, and sailed to Barcelona. On liberty I flew on Air Iberia to Paris for two days, then returned to the Mount Whitney in Barcelona and sailed back to Moorehead City, NC, where I flew by CH-53 helicopter to Camp Lejeune.

While in Paris, I had met the

proprietress of a bookshop on the Champs Elysee who was the sister of the late Bernard Fall, author of *Hell in a Very Small Place* and one of the best-known writers on the Vietnam War. Her brother had been killed by a mine while accompanying Marines on patrol. One day, when I visited the shop for the second time, I saw her speaking to a tall man in a beret. Afterward, she told me that the man had been a colonel in the French Army, that he had lost the use of one arm due to wounds, and that when she had pointed me out to him as a lieutenant in the U. S. Marine Corps who had served in Vietnam, he had said to her, “You had better leave him to his illusions.”

An amusing aspect of the voyage was that the Mount Whitney had mistakenly been designed without reefers (refrigerators) for the Wardroom. Consequently, the Wardroom had to buy its meat from the Enlisted Mess at a premium to what the Enlisted Mess had paid for it. That, of course, made food more expensive. On one exceptional night, when the Enlisted Mess served a choice of steak, duck, or lobster, we in the Wardroom had hotdogs and baked beans.

December 1971-June 1973

On December 16, I assumed duties as Commanding Officer, Co. A, 2d Tank Bn at Camp Lejeune, NC. We rated 105 enlisted men and five officers including me and were equipped with 17 M48A3 (Mod B) tanks. My Company First Sergeant was 1st Sgt. A.R. Cowan, while my Company Gunnery Sergeant (also referred to in the Marine Corps as Tank Leader) was Gy. Sgt. J.L. Banner. Both were outstanding. My former First Sergeant at Delta Company, whose name I no longer recall, presented me with a nameplate for my new desk as a going away present. As he did so, this former Golden Gloves boxer from the South Side of Chicago, who had joined the Marine Corps at the age of

16, got tears in his eyes and, recalling the time I had been at his house for dinner, said something like “You are the only person who has ever stood up when my wife entered the room.” His wife was Japanese.

The entire time that I had Alpha Company, I ran the company in formation three miles every weekday morning with the company guidon bearer to my right and First Sergeant Cowan running to the right of the company singing cadence. Gunny Banner typically ran to the rear of the formation to handle stragglers. On weekends nine months of the year, I would go swim and sit on the beach at Atlantic Beach, NC. Each Saturday I would wash and wax my car. Then on Sunday I would wash and wax my car again. From this description one can deduce how little there was to do while away from the base.

On Friday nights at “Happy Hour” at the Officers Club, I would sit with my officers talking and drinking with the rest of the Battalion’s officers. Afterward, my lieutenants and I would have dinner, accompanied by wine, then talk and drink until about 0100, when we went home our separate ways. Several of my lieutenants commented at how surprised they were that I was always up by 0700 on Saturday mornings.

May 1972

In May, we participated in Exercise Exotic Dancer at Camp Lejeune. On May 25, I made a liaison visit to one of my tank platoons deployed to U.S. Naval Base, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (flying in a C-130 from Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, NC), flying back the following day. As Marine Corps ground units were no longer involved in Vietnam, the most “gung ho” members of my company volunteered to deploy to “Gitmo” as there were Cuban military units on the other side of the perimeter wire, and the place was, seemingly, the closest one could get to going into combat. Marines and Cuban

soldiers in watchtowers used to amuse themselves giving each other “the finger” across the wire.

One day when I was at Camp Lejeune, one of my tanks on a tank-infantry exercise in Gitmo ran over a rifleman, who had fallen asleep in tall grass. Reportedly, the young Marine, who was due to leave Gitmo within a few days, fired his rifle in a vain attempt to attract attention in time, as he was being run over.

September 1972

From September 5–11, I took leave, drove to Washington, took the Amtrak Metroliner to Philadelphia, and rode with Dad to Boston to visit my sister, Abby, and her husband, Andy.

On our return drive, Dad and I visited Rhinebeck Aerodrome in New York State. Upon returning to Union Station from Philadelphia by train, I found that my car would not start. After napping at the desk in the office of a nearby gas station which would begin working on my car the next day, I was invited by a policeman, who was a former Marine, to sleep gratis at a nearby rooming house that he and his wife ran. I did so and drove back to Lejeune late the following day once the car was ready.

October-November 1972

In October-November, I deployed with my company as part of 2d Tank Battalion to Camp Oliver at Ft. Stewart, GA, an Army base, for six weeks of training. We went by chartered bus, while our tanks went by rail on flatcars. Training concluded with Exercise Solid Punch, in which my company served as the aggressors.

During this deployment, members of my 1st Platoon got into a bar fight with Army personnel at the Enlisted Club, which was located mainside. Having heard that our Marines were being brought back to Camp Oliver under Army military police escort, the tank platoon commander and I stood outside awaiting their arrival.

As the Army bus and its Army M.P. jeep escort approached in the distance, Lt. Kelly and I could hear the troops drunkenly but triumphantly singing the Marine Corps Hymn. One of Lt. Kelly’s men, knocked unconscious, had been taken to the base hospital. The following day, after our Battalion Commander passed the word that liberty would be curtailed, he received a call from the Army master sergeant in charge of the Enlisted Club, saying that, although the inside of the club was heavily damaged, he hoped that the Battalion Commander would not keep our Marines out of the club because, since our battalion had arrived at the base, business at the club had never been better.

In January, I was informed by my battalion commander that he had selected me to take my company with the 2d Marines to participate in a cold weather exercise. From January 24–26, I made a liaison trip by CH-46 helicopter from Camp Lejeune to Camp Drum, Watertown, NY, an Army base, with Col. J.W. Marsh, C O. of the 2d Marines, and seven other liaison personnel of the 2d Marine Regiment for a Cold Weather Training Conference. On the trip up, we made an emergency landing in a farmer’s field when an instrument panel fight falsely indicated a hydraulic failure.

From January 30 to 31, I was sent alone from Camp Lejeune to New York City on a liaison visit representing the 2d Marines. I coordinated with three Army National Guard colonels at the historic 7th Regiment Armory at 67th Street and Park Avenue in Manhattan with respect to borrowing New York and New Jersey Army National Guard tracked and wheeled vehicles during the upcoming deployment to Camp Drum. I flew commercially from New Bern, NC to LaGuardia Airport and back.

In early February, the weekend before we deployed, a major snowstorm hit Camp Lejeune with accumulations of 12–15 inches, >>

requiring me to abandon my car one night and sleep three nights in my company office. I deployed by US. Air Force C-141 with my tank company personnel and one radio jeep from Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point to Griffiss Air Force Base, Rome, NY, after which we were transported by bus to Camp Drum. A total of about 2,400 Marines participated including the 95 Marines I brought with me. We borrowed one jeep, 15 M48A3 tanks, two M88 tank retrievers, and one M548 6-ton fully tracked cargo vehicle. The retriever and cargo vehicle were types of vehicles that were not used by the Marine Corps. The temperature at 0700 one morning was minus 29 degrees F. We lived in wooden barracks buildings heated by hand-stoked coal furnaces. Cold weather training was followed by Exercise Alpine Warrior, ending in March. However, because unseasonably warm weather arrived before the beginning of the exercise, Alpine Warrior was conducted in mud instead of snow.

In June, I participated in the Marine Corps Development and Education Command Armor Symposium in Triangle, VA, near Quantico, VA. Maj. R.M. Jordan had

recently become C.O. of 2d Tanks and drove me to the symposium, taking the opportunity in his car to inform me that, as I had been Company Commander of Alpha Company for 20 months, an extraordinarily long period, he was making me his S-3, a change that I did not welcome at all but which I understood.

At the time that I left Alpha Company for the S-3 shop, my Company Office, a great group of people, consisted of Cpl. Losee, Cpl. Schmidt, Cpl. Jones, LCpl. Hornbeck,, LCpl. Morris, LCpl. Noble (my Company Driver), PFC Prestash, and PFC Carlino.

July 1973

After I assumed duties as S-3 (Training Officer), 2d Tank Battalion, Camp Lejeune, NC, I recommended 1st Sgt. Cowan for the Navy Achievement Medal. He was a superb first sergeant.

From July 16-17, I made a liaison visit to Camp Pickett, VA, an Army base, to coordinate future deployment there by a company from 2d Tank Battalion. Upon my return to Camp Lejeune, I wrote a report to the S-3 of Force Troops, FMFLant (Fleet Marine Force Atlantic), the major

command of which 2d Tank Battalion was a part, summarizing my liaison visit. I put into my report everything that I thought a deploying tank company commander would want to know about every aspect of the base's available facilities and support. The Force Troops S-3, a major, told me that it was the finest report of its type that he had ever read. In late summer, Maj. P.F. Lessard succeeded Maj. Jordan as my C.O.

September-October 1973

I deployed with my battalion to Camp Oliver, Ft. Stewart, GA for training. During our deployment, the war between Egypt and Israel took place, and one of our tank companies was placed on alert to be ready to move to the Sinai by ship. The Defense Department went so far as to rent a group of "lowboys" (trailers) in Savannah to be ready to pick up the tank company's tanks at Ft. Stewart and move them to the port of Savannah to meet Navy ships. I went to Maj. Lessard requesting that if he were asked to send a second company, I be permitted to lead it. He promised to do so, but Maj. Lessard was never required to deploy a company. ■

Guest Opinion

Why the Marine Corps should adopt the M10 Booker

(Continued from page 11)

firepower. Its armor, fire control systems, and mobility allow Light Armored Reconnaissance units to survive first contact, dominate key terrain, and provide reconnaissance-in-force capabilities aligned with expeditionary advanced base operations and stand-in force concepts. Unlike legacy Light Armored Vehicle platforms, which prioritized mobility over protection, the Booker delivers both lethality and survivability, enabling reconnaissance marines to maneuver under fire, mass effects, and conduct shaping operations forward of the main force. Much as the light armored vehicles revolutionized mobile reconnaissance during the Cold War, the M10 Booker can redefine it for the peer fight. If the Marine Corps intends to project power as a credible stand-in force, it must equip its reconnaissance

units to see the enemy and close with and destroy him when required. Just as the Light Armored vehicle transformed mobile reconnaissance in the late 20th century, the M10 can define its future. If the Marine Corps is to maintain credibility as a Stand-In force in contested maritime theaters, it must ensure its reconnaissance elements are not just eyes and ears but teeth.

This opinion essay is written by Lt. Col. John J. Dick and Lt. Col. Daniel D. Phillips, the commanding officer and executive officer of the 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. The observations and opinions presented are their own and not those of the U.S. Marine Corps or the USMC VTA. ■

GUESS WHO Photo Contest

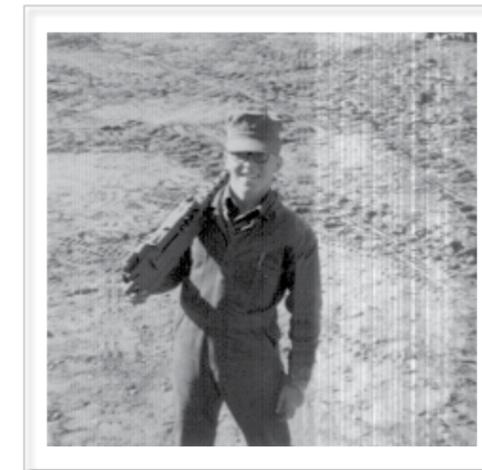
Can you guess who the person is in these two photos?

The first person to contact John Wear at 719-495-5998 with the right answer will have their name entered into a contest for a drawing to win a yet un-named mediocre prize.



Last Issue Winner

Last issue's winner was Guy Everest who called at 9:28 AM on Thursday, July 3 to identify PFC John Wear at the machinegun range at the USMC Tank School in 1967. As an aside: Guy was in the Tank School class just ahead of Wear and they have been buddies for 58 years.



If you feel that you have a photo that may stump the readership, please take a photo of it with your smartphone in ambient light and send it on email to johnwear2@verizon.net

VTA 2026 MINI-REUNION
Kansas City, MO
Sept 10 – 13, 2026

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Thursday, Sept. 10th		Arrival Day – Dinner on your own.
Friday, Sept. 11th	0700	Complimentary Breakfast
	0900	Load buses for tour of the WW1 Museum
	1200	Lunch on your own
	1400	Return to hotel
		Dinner on your own
Saturday, Sept 12th	0700	Complimentary Breakfast
	0900	Open Day
	1200	Lunch on your own
	1800	KC BBQ dinner at hotel paid by the VTA
Sunday, Sept 13th		Departure Day

TRAVEL SUGGESTION:

Fly to Kansas City International Airport – (KCI)
Then take the complimentary hotel – airport shuttle to the hotel

LODGING:

Homewood Suites KC International Airport

7312 NW Polo Drive | Kansas City, MO 64153

Direct to Hotel: 816.880.9880

Special Room rate: \$139 per night + taxes, etc.

Rate includes:

One King or two queen beds

Free breakfast - Free Wi Fi – Free Parking

Room reservation cutoff date: 08/10/26

- 1) You can call the hotel direct at **816.880.9880** to make your room reservation by giving the agent our dates and the code: **“USM”**
- 2) Or you can book a room through this website link: <https://www.hilton.com/en/attend-my-event/csgfbhx-usm-f32c51f1-44f3-47f1-bad9-332b724244cc/>

Please note: This mini-reunion requires all attendees to fill out a reunion registration form (to be provided in the next issue of our magazine) and mail it in along with a \$ 75 registration fee per attendee to help defray the cost of the tour bus transportation; the beverages in the Slopchute and the dinner paid by the VTA one evening.

Full details and the registration form for the 2026 Mini-reunion will be featured in the next issue of our magazine.



SGM

3D MARINE DIVISION (REIN)
FMF, VIETNAM

May 2, 1968

Bobby:

I just thought that I would write you and tell you what happened to me a couple of nights ago.

It started with some ARVN (Southern Vietnamese Army) running into some NVA (North Vietnamese Army) about 2 miles from C-2 where I'm at. They had Delta Co. called out and put onto about 20 tanks, antos (6-106 mm recoilless rifles) and flame throwing tanks. Anyway, we went out to the area on the right flank and we hit the shit. Right at the start of the firefight we lost 3 KIA and many more WIA. We had a tank that we were going to assault with, but they hit it with an RPG (their recoilless rocket launcher or bazooka) and every time they hit it we had more casualties. The tank pulled out and we started moving our casualties to the rear, then the rest of the Platoon pulled out. The NVA slipped up on our right which was in the direction we had to go. They pinned us down with tricoms (Chinese Communist grenades) and AK-47 fire. We formed a 360 defense circle. Somehow, our Lieutenant and Staff Sargent and 1 machine gun team made out. We were left there. We called in tanks to get us out but they were slow because we had to guide them in by their spotlight. This was about 9:30 P.M. We had 5 WIA and 1 KIA and 5 men with rifles and 2 men with 45s on the two radios.

We sat and waited for the tanks praying that they would hurry. It took them about 30-45 minutes to get to us and well, we were all ready for an attack but lucky for us the tank got there first. We were the last troops to leave. Everyone else was already back in behind our line of tanks. We lost all of our gear except rifles and magazines. Now we have 19 men left in my Platoon. A TO Platoon has 45 men in it. I got some shrapnel in the ankle, not enough for a heart, but enough to make it hard walking. Right now we're on standby to go out again.

That's about it. I just thought I would write and tell you about everything that happens in the secured rear. Man, what a bunch of BS. The word was that there were 3 BTN (Battalion)-1 regiment out there.

So long, Gary

Don't go saying anything to my Mom. She doesn't know.

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

USMC Vietnam Tankers Association

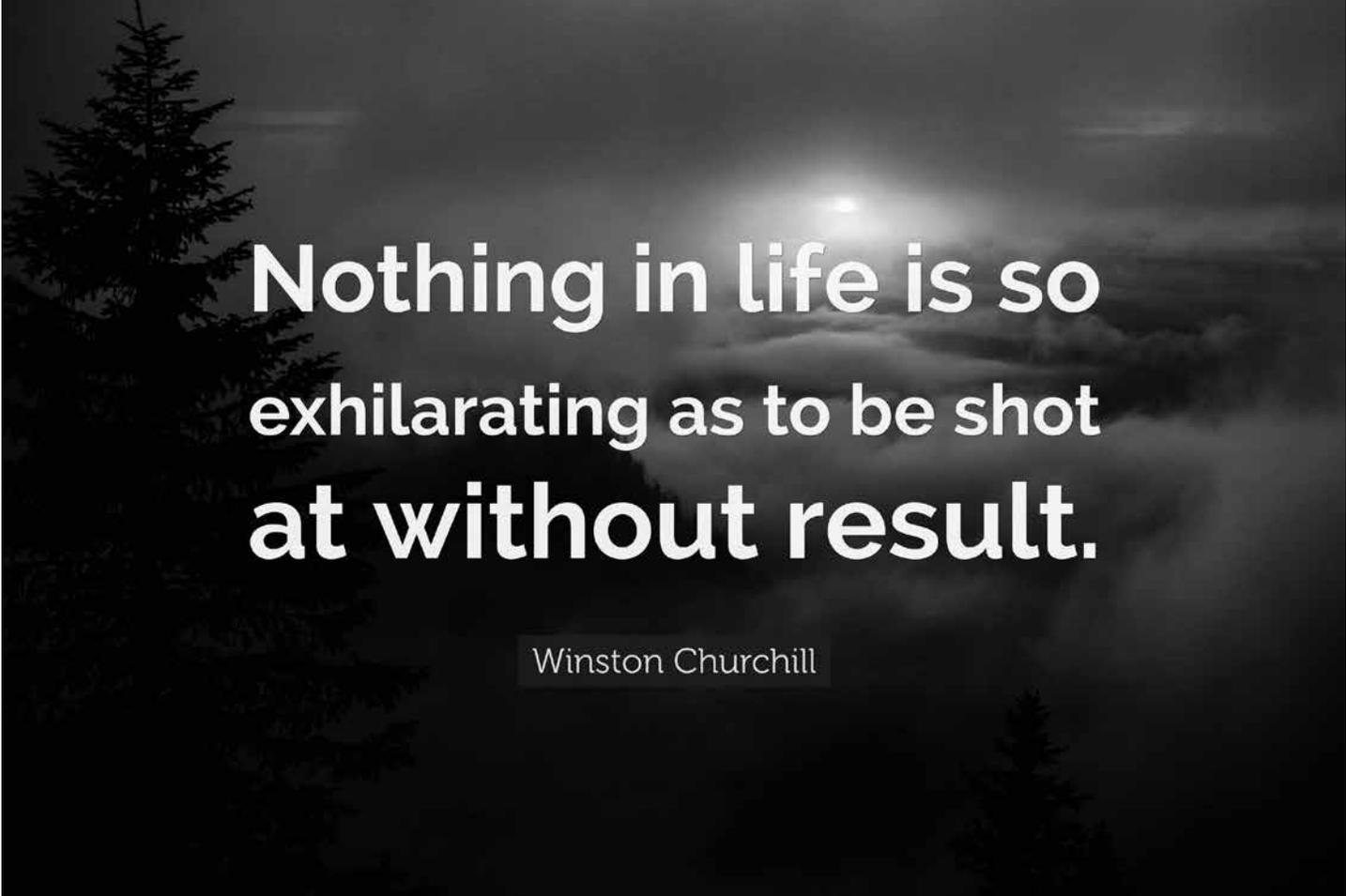
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Please note: If the last two digits of "EXPIRATION:" above your address label is "24" or lower your 2025 membership dues are now past due.

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.**



**Nothing in life is so
exhilarating as to be shot
at without result.**

Winston Churchill