



Sponson BOX

*Voice of the USMC
Vietnam Tankers Association*

Ensuring Our Legacy Through Reunion, Renewal & Remembrance™

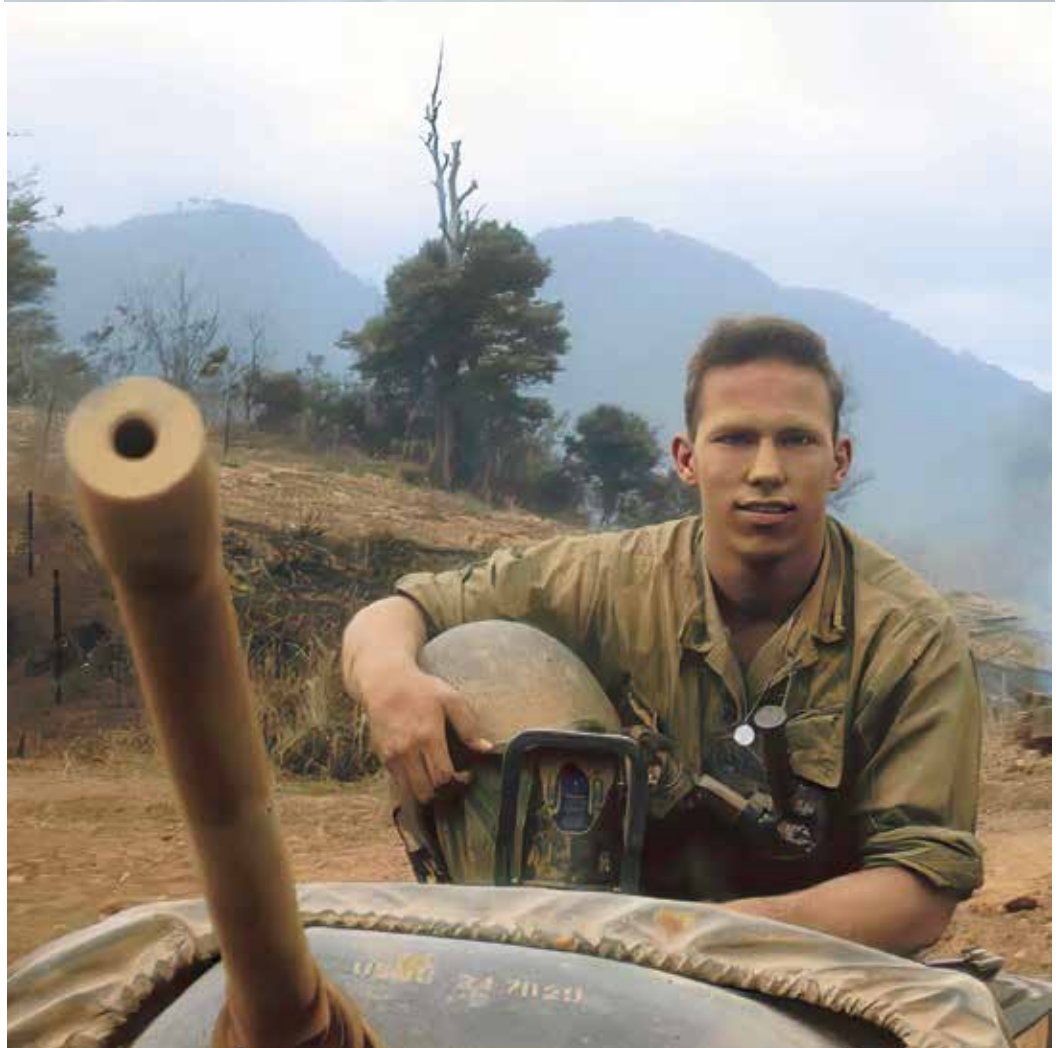
AUGUST 2025

www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck

LEATHERNECK

MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES

**The Birthday Brawl:
Tankers Hold the Line
at Khe Sanh**



Featured Stories:	Cover Story.....	Page 29-37
	2025 Reunion Recap	Page 23-27
	2026 Mini Reunion Announcement	Page 44-47

**OUR VERY OWN VTA HISTORY PROJECT "FORGOTTEN TRACKS" BOOKS ...
ONCE THEY ARE GONE, THERE WILL BE NO MORE!**

GET THEM WHILE YOU ARE ABLE

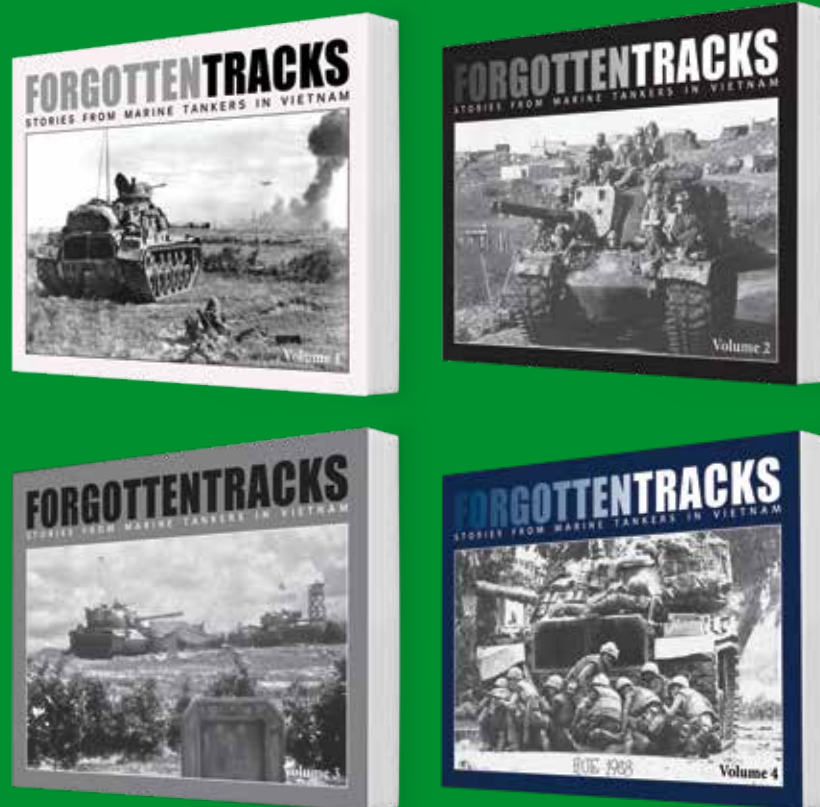
WE REPRINTED BOTH VOL. 1 AND 2 AFTER WE SOLD OUT OF THEM TWICE. WE WANTED TO BE ABLE TO OFFER OUR MEMBERSHIP THE COMPLETE ASSORTMENT. EACH VOLUME IS A LARGE COLLECTION OF USMC VTA MEMBERS' PERSONAL STORIES THAT ALSO INCLUDES MANY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL PHOTOS. OUR GOAL IS TO PRESERVE OUR USMC HERITAGE.

VOL. 1 IS 229 PAGES AND IS \$40 INCLUDING SHIPPING

VOL. 2 IS 215 PAGES AND IS \$35 INCLUDING SHIPPING

VOL. 3 IS 199 PAGES AND IS \$35 INCLUDING SHIPPING

VOL. 4 IS 175 PAGES AND IS \$30 INCLUDING SHIPPING



**SPECIAL: BUY ANY TWO VOLUMES
AND SAVE \$10 FROM THE
REGULAR DELIVERED PRICE...**

**YOU CAN ORDER ON LINE ON
THE VTA WEBSITE STORE AT
[HTTP://WWW.USMCVTA.ORG](http://www.usmcvta.org)
BY USING A MAJOR CREDIT
CARD OR PAYPAL.**

**ALSO AVAILABLE, USMC VTA
COVERS IN THREE COLORS:
\$25 EACH**



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...**

2026 MINI-REUNION: We will be visiting **Kansas City, MO** for our 2026 mini-reunion during which we are planning to visit the **National World War 1 Museum** that is located there. Back in the early 1980's I lived and worked in Kansas City for a few years and I can attest that the city has some of the best BBQ in the world and to prove it, the VTA is planning to sponsor a KC BBQ meal on one evening while we are there. Details of the gathering are on the last few pages of this issue. We'd love for anyone who is planning to attend to please go ahead and register now and please do not to wait until the last minute. As you know the hotel will not charge you until you actually check in and they will allow cancellations up to 24 hours before the start date. As an added bonus, the hotel has a free airport shuttle and free breakfast each morning.

THE FATE OF FUTURE VTA REUNIONS: The VTA Board of Directors is deeply concerned: During our most recent annual board meeting, we spent quite a bit of time discussing the rapidly shrinking number of VTA members who are willing or who are able to attend our biennial reunions. It seems as if many of our brothers are having serious enough health issues that precludes them from traveling and/or their spouses are likewise in ill health. And some are facing mounting financial issues. Way back in the beginning of our organization, we'd have up to 200 members attend... and that number did not include wives or other family members. Back in the day, we might see a total number of 275 people at our Farewell Dinners. In San Diego this past gathering we had just over 100 total attendees with 60 being VTA members. With shrinking attendance numbers, we cannot afford to keep conducting five and six-day gatherings with lots of activities and tours. What to do? We will most likely cut the number of days for our regular biennial reunions and possibly cut the number of outside activities. Please stand by.

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

PLEASE PAY YOUR ANNUAL DUES OR YOUR ANNUAL LIFE ASSESSMENT: Enclosed in this issue is a self-addressed envelope for you to conveniently pay your 2026 dues. Just place a postage stamp on it and enclose your check. If there are any contact information changes for you, please note them on the space provided on the envelope.

ANNUAL LIFE ASSESSMENT: I heard from a newer member who attended a fairly recent VTA reunion for his first time. He went into the Slopchute and found a table to sit with a few other attendees. Two of the men at the table began to bitch and moan that they had paid their Life Membership a long time ago and they expected that would be the only amount of money that they would ever have to pay for their VTA membership. They really felt that the VTA had screwed them royally by making them pay an Annual Life Assessment (of \$20) in order to receive the Sponson Box magazine. They felt that they should not have to pay for it. It is a shame that those disgruntled members are not aware enough to understand that Life Memberships are NOT good for the organization's health and wellbeing and that we should never have offered Life Memberships in the first place. It is the primary reason why the VTA ceased offering that type of membership at least 15 years ago. The problem for the VTA is that after the Life Member pays their \$100 or \$250 for their Life Membership (and that is all that that membership category costs back then), then in 3 or 6 years, the organization is no longer receiving income from that Life Member because so many Life Members never felt compelled to even donate \$1 after they paid for their membership..In fact, it was actually costing the organization a fairly large amount of money to "carry" that Life Member with regard to producing, printing and mailing the Sponson Box magazine to them. Back when we decided to require the Annual Life Assessment of \$20, we had almost 500 members and of that total number of VTA members, roughly 1/3 were Life Members. Based on that second number, the VTA would have run out of funds by now and we'd not only cease producing the Sponson Box but we'd most likely have ceased to exist based on expenses. We truly regret our mistake in offering Life Memberships and we want to thank you for your understanding and continuing to financially support the VTA. Any and all "over and above" donations are always greatly appreciated. As an aside, it may not be common knowledge but the VTA Executive Board as well as the rest of the Board of Directors receive zero compensation for their tireless work keeping the brotherhood up and running.



**Question: What is your greatest wish?
Answer: To have my story told.**

Executive Directors

John Wear, President

16605 Forest Green Terrace, Elbert, CO 80106
719.495.5998 · E-mail: johnwear2@verizon.net

1st Sgt. Richard "Rick" Lewis, Vice President

4904 Mt. Hay Dr, San Diego, CA 92117-4820
858.735.1772 Email: ricklent@aol.com

MSgt Bruce Van Apeldoorn, USMC (Ret.) Treasurer

99 Shoreline Drive, New Bern, NC 28562-9550
585.613.6564 Email: bvanapeldoornsr@gmail.com

Ronald C. Knight, Secretary

6665 Burnt Hickory Drive, Hoschton, GA 30548
678.828.7197 Email: rckusmcvta@att.net

Directors

Lt. General Martin R. Steele, USMC (Ret.)

16331 Ashington Park Drive; Tampa, FL 33647
E-mail: mrsteele46@aol.com

Fred Kellogg

15013 NE 16th St.; Vancouver, WA 98684-3605
360.609.3404 Email: kelloggfr@comcast.net

Greg Martin

21420 N Verde Ridge Drive, Sun City West, AZ 85375
Phone: (360) 480-1206 Email: usmctanker@comcast.net

Col. William (Bill) J. Davis, USMC (ret)

518 Mowbray Arch, Norfolk, VA 23507
Phone: 757.622.6973 Email: billandjandavis@gmail.com

Jim Raasch

3116 1st Avenue NW, Cedar Rapids, IA 52405
Phone: 319.551.1675 Email: jraasch47@gmail.com

Louis Najfus

3255 Town Mannor Circle, Deluca, GA 30019
Phone: 678-779-3255 Email: najfus@hotmail.com

Committees & Chairmen

SgtMajor Bill "JJ" Carroll

Nominating Chair & CRCS/
CR Representative Phone
651.342.0913 CST

Bruce Van Apeldoorn

Audit & Finance
Phone 585.613.6564 EST

Joe Liu

Jerry Clark Memorial Buddy Fund
Phone 801.643.4027
Email: pjliu@hotmail.com

1st Sgt. Rick Lewis

VA Information VTA History Project
Phone 858.735.1772 PST

Louis Najfus

Ontos Marines
Phone: 678-779-3255

Greg Martin

Webmaster National Recruiter
Phone (360) 480-1206 PST
Email: usmctanker@comcast.net

Open

Fallen Heroes

Garry Hall

Last Man Standing Award
Phone: 812.882.1190

Fred Kellogg

VTA Challenge Coin Project
Phone: 360.509.3404

Ron Knight

Member Data Integrity
Phone 678.828.7197 EST

Web Site: www.usmcvta.org

Copyright 2012. USMC Vietnam Tankers Association. All rights reserved. No part of this document may be republished, reproduced, copied, faxed, electronically transmitted or in any other manner duplicated without express written permission from both the USMCVTA and the author or authors.

John Wear – Editor & Publisher – johnwear2@verizon.net

Proof reading – Craig Newberry

Tuyen Pham – Layout and Design

Printed in the USA

New Members

Robert S Tomlinson

PO Box 363
Schenectady, NY 12309
Cell: 518-982-4750
Email: Air_Seth@msn.com
B Co, 3rd Tanks, 1969
MOS: 1802
DOB: 04/01/1945
Recruited by: VN Vets of America

Membership Information Change

Dan Farrell

1891 Hunter Road
Ellensburg, WA 98926

A. Gene "Doc" Hackemack

310 Artesian Park Lane
Brenham TX 77833

Sandino "Sonny" Venturi

Phone: 843.279.1338
Email: VNCV676911@outlook.com



ON THE COVER: Corporal Fred Kellogg seated on his cupola, covered in dirt after riding the second tank in line during a road march.

Our Readers Write

(Formally known as "Letters to the Editor")

Rick Lewis writes:

Yesterday I did the "Legacy of the Corps" with the graduating recruits at MCRD San Diego. One of the new Marines came up and shook my hand and said he learned a lot from what I said today about love of country and love of Corps. He is from Somali and his father told him to join the Marine Corps, that it would teach him more about America and what it stands for. He said he's also studying to become a US citizen while on Active Duty. I told him where to find the questions to study on the computer for the citizenship test. I told him I had downloaded them and it showed me how much I had forgotten about our history. His MOS is Comm. He speaks excellent English. He said his father wanted to ensure he had a very good command of the English language plus had him read good books. I told him he's going to make a good Marine and a good American. Too bad more of his people don't see it that way.

Judy Aitken writes:

Thanks for all you do for our boys. The work you (and others) put into the Sponson Box and the reunions are incredible, so very much time and effort. We really appreciate what you do to organize these reunions, it's absolutely amazing how you do it.

What a wonderful achievement to bring everyone together and see all the military stuff in each town. The memories made during these reunions will stay with these boys for years to come. It's also inspiring to see the new memories created during these reunions. I enjoy hearing the stories that Lee won't talk about at home but will with the boys.

Hats off to everyone who made this reunion such a success. Looking forward to many more joyful reunions to come. See you next year. Again, thank you.

Bob Haller's Doll

Haller has a buddy who plays with AI and made this for him.



Belmo Offers a Correction

Yesterday I received my #4-2025 of Sponson Box and started reading it today but stopped when I saw an error in "Our Readers Write" section. The error is a statement or at least the interpretation of a statement I've previously made regarding a former CMC not being a Marine. Confusion regarding the accuracy of that statement when it comes to 2010 is completely understandable. I'll explain why your research is both correct and incorrect regarding who was the CMC in 2010.

At the beginning of 2010 the CMC was General James Conway. I was introduced to the general in 2009. At the time accompanying the CMC was the Sgt. Maj. of USMC Carlton Kent, a Marine who a family member of mine had served with when they were both "Hats" at MCRD San Diego. You've met that family member years ago at a previous reunion in San Diego ("Mustanger" Lt. Col Flores). There is no question in my mind that both Gen. Conway and Sgt. Maj. Kent are Marines and I'll add that both are outstanding Marines.

Late in 2010 Gen. Conway retired and he was replaced by General James Amos and that is the Marine Corps Commandant (CMC) I was referencing to as being the CMC who many Marines believe failed to earn the right to claim our beloved title and the right to wear our coveted EGA like virtually all of us did. That belief was confirmed by the Executive Officer of a Marine Infantry Regiment shortly after Gen. Amos had retired and that's another story. Here is my story about the CMC who many question as not being a Marine.

General Amos was not the 1st CMC, general or high-ranking Marine that I had ever met in a social setting. I was introduced to the former CMC Gen. Amos by a member of the Marine Corps League Detachment when I was the Commandant of at the time. The Marine introducing me was a retired Maj. Gen and a former CG of our 1st Mar. Div. Also present at the time was another detachment member and well-known prior service Marine, former Sec. of State George Shultz. I believe it was in 2011 or 2012 when that happened. At the time, Sgt. Maj of USMC was still Carlton Kent. As I may have stated in previous email for reasons unknown to me, I just did not view the CMC Gen. Amos as being a Marine. I just did not "feel it was so." None the less respect the uniform, respect the pay grade. As previously noted, my suspicions were later confirmed by the grunt Regiment XO and there is more. A Marine is more than a uniform and more than 20 years wearing it.

Where Gen. Amos is concerned, I question how it was that he was even promoted to the position of >>

Assistant Commandant when there were so many other qualified generals such as Mattis, Paxton and Kelly to name but three. I guess it was politics. Gen Amos strikes me as an intelligent but somewhat arrogant officer. I understand that is a common trait of an Air Wing pilot but because I also have met Generals Mattis, Paxton and Kelly, I know that they too are every bit as intelligent if not more so than any general officer of the time and in spite of their intelligence and positions are very humble as well.

Regarding Gen. Amos there is a question that arose from the general's behavior when addressing a group of Marine snipers having sent what amounted to a "Hallmark card" to the enemy when they urinated on the dead bodies of Taliban fighters, who as I understand, the Marines had just ended a firefight with. The urinating Marines as well as a S/Sgt who, as I understand it, was not even present when it happened, were all severely disciplined and I understand that to have included being busted down in rank and brig time. In that case, as well as a few others, Gen. Amps was accused of having used "Command Influence" and in at least one case that was found to be happening.

Upon his retirement Gen. Amos was replaced by yet another Marine who I had also met and on a couple of occasions, I had one on one conversations with the new CMC who was General Joe Dunford, or as his grunts once called him "Fighting Joe"

After Gen. Amos's retirement and after all of the damage was done, it was discovered that Gen. Amos had used his "command influence" to punish those Marine snipers, some of who it was revealed were innocent of any wrong doing. The judgement against them was vacated, but the damage was already done.

On a more personal VTA connected experience that occurred during our reunion in San Antonio TX, here is something: As I am sure you recall it was at that reunion we had a retired USMC Lt. General as a guest. One evening he was sitting at a table in the Slopchute. As I recall, present at the table amongst other Marines were Rene Cerda and maybe Mike Jiron but, my brain housing group could be confused as to who was there at the table. Other than another Marine noted the Lt General was definitely there.

I was going to welcome what I thought was a "new guy" attending our reunion and found out he was a guest speaker and a Marine Lt. General. I introduced myself and welcomed him. He and I began a conversation and somehow, we got to the subject of Gen Amos and I said that I had a very low opinion of Gen, Amos. The Lt. General's reply was, "Belmo you are a good judge of Character."

I agree and I attribute it to having once worked as a "street cop". Any person who has worked as a "street cop," especially in a metro area, regardless of the time they do it better be a good judge of character as being anything else can and will compromise personal safety.

TANKS



Bob Skeels writes:

I just received the newest issue of the Sponson Box and as with all our publications, it was outstanding! A huge thanks for Including my last Vietnam story, "An Evil Atrocity on Route 9" and your assistance with preparing it for me. For me, this shared true story of mine just once again reinforces the value and benefits for all veterans and USMC VTA members to share their wartime stories as they do immensely help our brother veterans and our future wartime fighters.

Marsha Falk writes:

It's been a while. I hope you are doing well and the latest Sponson Box issue assures me of that. It's 5 am here in NJ and I've had enough rest for a night so I'm sipping hot tea and reading the many stories written and shared in the Sponson Box. It's always a trip back in time when I had no idea as a young woman of the horrors of the Vietnam war. Each story opens my eyes to the courage of the men and women who served. May they never be forgotten.

My children and grandchildren knew their father and grandfather was a Marine who served in Vietnam but the details were never shared outside of photo slide shows that gave them a view of life on the base in Da Nang.

I am grateful for each issue of the Sponson Box throughout the year. It gives me insights and time to pause, reflect, and reset my thoughts about the freedoms I have that should not to be taken for granted. Thank you for your dedication to the publication and to the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association and to all who served.

I also need to say that among the many great articles written, my top favorite is "Living in America" by Clyde Hoch. I'm thinking of making copies to share with family and friends with my Christmas cards. Our country continues to experience such turmoil in many cities of many states, and this article is a reminder of all our blessings. My grandkids need to read it.



Bob Haller on the way to Nam

I was killing time the other day and I thought about how I made the trip from Camp LeJeune to San Diego and then got on this troop transport ship. Thinking that most of the Marines after my time all flew to Vietnam on commercial airlines. So, I Google Earth and typed in "Broadway Pier, San Diego" and to my surprise it appeared including ground level.

Attached is a picture that I took on that same pier which now displays the American flag in the center, the California flag on the left and the LGBT-(xyz) on the right. I would send you a picture of the current pier but I don't know how. Boy! Haven't we gone down the toilet?

I like when I don't have to be careful what I say. That's when you know you're with the right people.

Ron Knight Gives Thanks

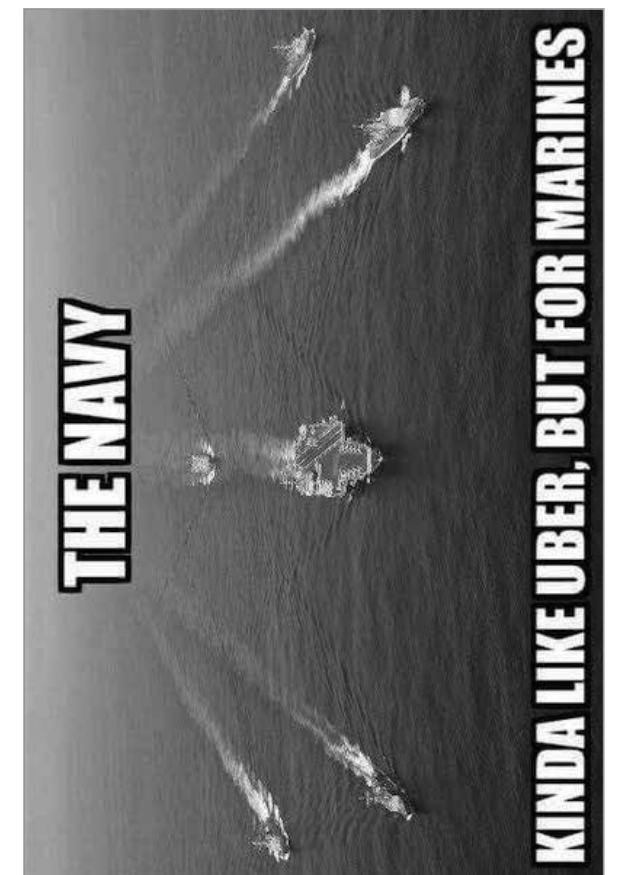
Ron sent a note to our Vietnamese – American graphic designer for the Sponson Box, Tuyen Pham: Thanks for all of your help with the name tags for the San Diego reunion; they really looked great! Also, the event tickets.

Tuyen's Reply: No problem. It's my privilege to have some connection with US Vietnam vets.

Back when gas was cheap, cars had soul, and strangers at the pump turned into friends.



Life moved slower, but somehow felt fuller.



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

Amphibious Warfare is not Dead, Its Only Sleeping

BY GARY ANDERSON-SEPTEMBER 25, 2025

Eighty years ago, U.S. Marines stormed ashore at Iwo Jima, a battle that became immortalized with a statue in Arlington Cemetery. Seventy-Five years ago, they took Inchon in the last great amphibious operation of modern times. Some would-be strategists think it will be the last one in history. I say Not so fast.

When former Marine Corps commandant David Berger claimed that the traditional amphibious operations were no longer possible, he set off a chain reaction of events that adversely impacted national defense in ways that he could not foresee. As was the case in most of Berger's decisions and pronouncements, he was wrong. Berger's decisions to allow the Navy out of its long-standing commitment to maintain thirty amphibious ships and his decision to drastically cut Marine Corps offensive combat power has caused a radical decrease in peacetime readiness and wartime flexibility that the Pentagon leadership and Congress have been slow to recognize and remedy.

Berger defended his decisions by pointing out that missile technology has shown the defense had once more become the stronger form of war using heavy tank losses on both sides and the sinking of the heavy Russian cruiser Moskva in the current Russo-Ukraine conflict as proof of his prescience. Later events in Ukraine, Gaza, and Yemen showed that premature reading of military events as "proof" of anything can be very dangerous. Tanks and artillery -the very things Berger eliminated or drastically reduced in the Marine Corps' inventory- are high on the wish list of the Ukrainians when they ask for western resupply. Tanks remain the key to Israeli combat power in the Gaza war.

Likewise, despite firing scores of ant-ship missiles at U.S. combatant vessels by the Houthis, not one has been seriously damaged or sunk in the waters bordering Yemen. These are the kind of subsonic missiles Berger and his successor Eric Smith bought to "modernize" the Marine Corps at the expense of ground combat power that Marines will need in

any long-term war with a modern foe such as China.

Serious military planners in China and the United States -Berger and Smith are not among them- are thinking in terms of hypersonic weapons. The Chinese planners hope to keep the U.S. and its allies at arm's length as they pursue their goals in the South China sea using their reconnaissance-strike (R-S) complex to threaten the American Navy in any future conflict. Conversely, the Navy and Air Force plan on using hypersonic weapons to degrade that R-S system to a point where it is possible to project U.S. combat power ashore to retake territory or reinforce threatened allies. That will almost certainly require amphibious operations. That power projection will likely come from over the horizon in small, but powerful distributed attack packages. In the last years of the last century, the Marine Corps was working on an operational concept to do just that. It was called Operational Maneuver from the Sea (OMFTS). In his panic over the missile threat Berger abandoned that for a very questionable concept called Force design that is rapidly showing its combat impotency with obsolete equipment while other services pursue real modernization.

The pieces needed to correct the mistakes of the past six years and rebuild an amphibious warfare capability through OMFTS exist, but the current leadership of the Marine Corps has shown itself to be incapable of seeing the world as it is and reversing course before a shooting war shows it the error of its ways. It will take a combination of congressional and civilian leadership, but that cannot be done if we continue to allow people like Berger and Smith continue to emasculate our finest warriors.

Amphibious warfare is not dead; it has been asleep. It is time to wake it up.

Gary Anderson retired as Chief of Staff of the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab. He served as a Special Advisor to the Deputy Secretary of Defense.

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

VFW to Washington Post - Veterans' Disability Benefits are Not 'Loopholes' to Exploit

THE FOLLOWING LETTER FROM THE VFW NATIONAL COMMANDER WAS SUBMITTED TO THE WASHINGTON POST ON OCTOBER 07, 2025

To the Editors of The Washington Post,

Your recent article, "How some veterans exploit \$193 billion VA program, due to lax controls" (October 2025), is not just a disservice to veterans — it is a dangerously misleading piece that feeds into damaging stereotypes and ignores both the moral and legal foundations of the Department of Veterans Affairs disability system.

Let's be absolutely clear: veterans' disability benefits are not charity. They are compensation owed for injuries and conditions incurred in the line of duty — promised by a government that asked men and women to risk their lives and health, often irreversibly, on its behalf. These benefits are not some "loopholes" for opportunists to exploit; they are the very least this country can do for the people it sent to war repeatedly, especially after more than two decades of sustained conflict without a draft.

Your article leans heavily on inflammatory anecdotes and edge cases, portraying veterans as system abusers, while ignoring the structural reality: combat wounds are not the only occupational hazards of military service. The daily grind of service — exposure to toxic environments, repeated concussions, sleep deprivation, moral injury, sexual trauma, constant stress, and grueling physical demands — leaves lasting scars.

Just because a veteran wasn't blown up by an IED doesn't mean they aren't disabled.

Invisible injuries like PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and toxic exposure-related illnesses are not "new" or suspect; we just finally stopped ignoring them. Every generation of veterans before this one suffered in silence, and many died without care or acknowledgment. To now say that recognizing these conditions is proof of fraud is not only illogical — it is cruel.

The article also seems to misunderstand how VA disability ratings work. The system doesn't compensate based solely on whether someone can work. It compensates based on how a service-connected condition impairs a veteran's average ability to function in life and society. The fact that a veteran can hold a job doesn't mean their disability doesn't make daily life harder, more painful, or more isolating. If VA ratings were based solely on complete incapacity, we wouldn't see skyrocketing rates of veteran suicide, addiction, homelessness, or divorce — all of which are fueled not by fraud, but by the very real and too often dismissed cost of military service.

Lastly, let's not ignore what this article really reflects: veterans make an easy scapegoat for the elites of this country. We're a small percentage of the population. Many Americans are disconnected from the wars they authorized or ignored. It is politically and socially convenient to question the integrity of veterans rather than confront the true cost of 25 years of war. But the cost is real. And the obligation to those who bore it is not optional.

If your investigative team wants to find waste and fraud, start with the contractors who overbill, the generals who fail upward, the executives of squandered programs, or the politicians who wave flags while gutting oversight. But don't you dare turn on America's sons and daughters who carried the burden of service and now ask only for the care and compensation they were promised.

We veterans kept our end of the agreement and will continue to demand that those who asked us to defend our nation do the same.

Sincerely, ■



To the Great Tank Park in the Sky

“Our dead are never dead to us, until we have forgotten them.” – George Elliot

Charles G West 1946–2025



We are sad to announce that on October 29, 2025, at the age of 78, Charles Gafford West of Luverne, Alabama passed away. He is survived by: his wife Paulette Owens West; his children, Randall West (Jane), Renee Marchand (Dustin) and Rebecca McGough (Thomas) and a whole bunch of grandchildren, cousins, nieces and nephews and a huge amount of friends.

Charles’s life was all about service whether it was to his community, his state, or his country. He started in the Vietnam War as a corporal with the United States Marine Corps. He wasn’t afraid to shed his blood for his country (with a Purple Heart to show for it) as he was part of the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Hue, and he was awarded a Bronze Star for his heroic service in combat. After his honorable discharge, he next spent 25 years with the Alabama Bureau of Investigation’s Narcotics Department. Finally, in retirement, Charles just couldn’t sit back on his laurels when there was work that needed to be done so he ran for sheriff of Crenshaw County in 1998. He would go on to be the first sheriff to be elected to and serve four complete terms.

John Wear writes: Charlie was my first TC in Vietnam. He was a “good old boy” from Alabama and while he talked slow, he was smart, kind and thoughtful. And he was a long-time member of the USMC VTA.

Donald M “Sgt Grit” Whitton 1949–2025



Donald Michael Whitton passed away at his home, surrounded by family, on July 2, 2025. He was a husband, father, brother, ‘Sarg,’ friend, Marine, and ‘Sgt. Grit’ to many. He was so loved. Don was born August 26, 1949 in Oklahoma City to Dr. Randel F. Whitton and Joan Whitton. He graduated from Classen High School in 1968 and enlisted in the United States

Marine Corps. He served as a radio operator with the 11th Marines, stationed outside of Da Nang in Vietnam from 1968–1971 earning the nickname “Sgt. Grit.” As Don told it, “I’d like to say it was my John Wayne persona, but it was really because I was an Okie.”

Don and the love of his life and wife Sherre founded Sgt. Grit Marine Specialties, which began with one t-shirt and became the largest Marine Corps purveyor in the world. He loved being teased mercilessly by his employees. Running ‘Grit’ was one of his proudest achievements. He sold the business in 2016 and retired to Grand Lake, Oklahoma with Sherre. Thank you for being a part of his very full life. Oorah, Semper Fi, and, as Don would say, “For cryin’ out loud.” We’ll love you and miss you forever, Dad.

John Wear adds: Don was a good friend and a financial supporter of the USMC VTA. Starting in 2005 and continuing for five or six more VTA reunions, Don sent a large amount of Sgt Grit merchandise and two employees to man their Sgt Grit PX store. He also paid for and donated special reunion hat pin for all of those same reunions. He could not do enough for his Marine veterans. Rest in peace Marine.

Rick Lewis writes: I remember when Don first called me, he was getting Sgt Grit off the ground. He asked me where I got my Marine Corps hats and shirts. I told him that I lived in San Diego and the PXs carry some but not a lot. He asked me if I had a catalog full of Marine Corps goodies would I order from it? I told him back then not a lot of us wore much USMC items out in town because we remember how we were treated after VN and so most of us were still keeping a low profile when it came to wearing Corps items. Also, just about that time a plane was hijacked by a terrorist group and one of the passengers was a Navy Seal and was wearing a Seal t-shirt so they shot him and tossed his body out on to the runway. The word then came down keep a low profile while traveling and not to advertise your military service. But even with all that craziness Don built a great business. I know Craig Newberry stopped by his place and talked with him. I hope after he retired that he got the motor home and took off to see the US. Several years ago, he had asked me a ton of questions about RVing. God Bless him and Family!!

Lee F. Dill 1948 – 2025



Husband, father, friend, and Marine, Lee Dill, passed away on August 30, 2025. His closest friends will remember him

for hosting many annual events and parties; especially, for Kentucky Derby, The Longest Day, and The Shortest Day. Lee had an eagerness for helping others and demonstrated it regularly with his organization of Scout Troop 451 trips, as well as later becoming the Eagle Scout Advisor. He helped many boys attain their Eagle Scout Rank through his help and guidance

Lee was a Marine, who spent two tours in Vietnam as a tanker. He enlisted at 17 and would forge life-long friendships with fellow Marines. He could usually be seen wearing a Marine Corps hat or shirt and he always was proud of his contribution to his country.

In his passing, Lee will join his late-wife, Eileen Dill, who passed June 17, 2022; they were two soulmates who were best friends through their entire marriage. Lee leaves behind a son, Tim, a daughter-in-law, Kimberly, and his siblings, Keith Dill, Paula Caruso, and Mark Dill Sr.

Lee was a very active member of the USMC VTA writing many personal stories to share in our quarterly magazine, the Sponson Box.

We got this text from Lee Dill’s brother: John this is Keith Dill. I came to the reunion in Colorado with my brother Lee Dill. Several years ago, Lee was diagnosed with Parkinson’s from the Agent Orange in Nam. He passed August 30, 2025. He will be missed.

Robert (Bob) Fornwalt 1947 - 2025



From Facebook: We’ve been informed through a classmate’s conversation with Bob’s daughter, that Bob Fornwalt passed away last week on September 22 at his home in Manheim, PA. There will be no obituary and there are no plans for a service at this time. Bob is survived by his daughter, Tracy. “Yankee Bob” Fornwalt was a serious motorcycle collector. Ron Koring found this article online and I’d like to think it speaks to the life Bob lived in many ways. So, in his honor, since it fills in some blanks about Bob’s life and attitude, and includes some nice photos of Bob, I’ll let this great story from six years ago act as Bob’s obit: <https://>

vintagemotortees.com/yankee-bob/ - After Corporal Robert Fornwalt, USMC returned from Viet Nam in 1969, after a tour as an M-48 tanker, he embraced two primary goals. The first was to become an engineer, to which end he enrolled in Penn State University. The other was to collect vintage motorcycles. He attained both. Bob was an active member of the USMC VTA.

Teddy Jay Quackenbush 1949 – 2025

Posted on his obituary site: Ted was a good friend from the world of auto racing, specifically the Indianapolis 500. He introduced several drivers to racing and was an innovator in sponsorship. He had a long relationship with Menard Racing. A veteran of Vietnam war, he was acutely aware of issues that veterans had and worked to alleviate them. He was a caring generous man and a wonderful partner to his wife Judy. He was truly a man who made a difference in the lives of many. May he rest in peace. Unfortunately, Ted had resigned from the USMC VTA in 2009.

William Herstowski 1947–2025



My name is Bonnie Herstowski. I want to let you know a new member has recently passed away. My husband William Herstowski. He has a book he wrote called “For the Love of a Girl” by William Hiles. You need to read if you haven’t. It’s in Amazon or at Trafford.com. The Ontos is in it. You can contact me at 715.616.2056 (cell) or

benita123@frontier.com. For anything you need. He passed Aug 18 2025 of a heart attack due to agent orange. He also had lung, kidney and pancreas cancer from Vietnam. Thanks. His story needs to be told please help me get it out.

John Wear adds: Bill was a comm guy with C Co, 1st ATs in 1967. He was from Hiles, WI, which is where he got the name for the author of his book. And as an aside, I purchased a copy of his book and so far, it’s a really good read. ■

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.

Another Sad Story About a Vietnam Marine Veteran Who Never Found the VTA and Never Recorded His Own Story

Editor's Note: Below is an email that we recently received from the widow of a USMC Vietnam tanker who unfortunately passed away before he found our brotherhood.

From: Claire Broussard
Sent: Thursday, February 13, 2025
To: USMC VTA
Subject: Terry James Broussard

Hello, sir, my name is Claire Broussard. I am writing this to say that my husband was Cpl. Terry J Broussard back in 1967 in Vietnam. He was a tank driver with Charlie Co. 3rd Tanks at Camp Evans, if I am correct. I have visited your website and this is where I got some of this information that I am including in this message. You see, I am heartbroken to say that he passed away from lymphoma cancer on July 1, 2024.

The way in which I became aware of your tanker's association was when I was looking up more information on Anthony H Bennett, who my husband told me was a friend of his since they went to boot camp together in California. And he also told me about the horrible day that Anthony was killed in the bomb explosion. I saw the pictures on your website of that incident. If I remember correctly, Terry told me, many years ago, that he was driving the first tank to go through the choke point and his tank made it through. But Bennett drove through the choke point and a bomb went off that obliterated his tank, and that there wasn't much of Bennett's body to recover. That's all he ever told me long ago and never talked about it again.

I also have seen Terry in a few of the pictures that are posted on the website of Charlie Co. 3rd Tanks. I am

completely devastated with regret that he and I had no idea of this Tankers Association while Terry was alive. I can tell you with absolute certainty that he would have loved to gather with his brother Marines to reminisce about his time in Vietnam, the good and the bad. He fought lymphoma in 2006 and beat it until it returned in 2021. He took every treatment there was, but nothing worked for him. We were happily married for 55-1/2 years and he was the love of my life. I waited for him through his entire time in the Marine Corps. He was a good, hardworking family man, loved by many. A Marine to the end.

I am wondering if any of the men he served with would remember him from that time, and could tell me a little more of that day Aug. 16, 1967. He told me very little about it. He was very young at that time, only 18 years old.

I'm sorry for this long email but I had so much to say. I thought that someone would like to know what became of Terry. I very much look forward to hearing from you or someone, who remembers him, from your association about what I have written to you today. Thank you so much!

Editor's Note: We put Claire in touch with Ray Scheurich who was on the tank retriever "Bodacious Bastard" directly behind the tank that Terry was driving and just in front of the tank that unfortunately became the "Upside-Down Tank." Also, very happily Claire has joined the VTA as an Associate member.

August 17, 1967—The Upside-Down Tank

BY RICHARD "DICK" CAREY

I was one of the (FNG) new guys at H&S Company, 3rd Tanks, (Gia Le) Phu Bai, South Vietnam; having arrived in Vietnam some time during the month of July 1967. I held the MOS 2141 (tank mechanic), but had been stationed on Okinawa at Camp Hansen since August 1966 with the 3rd Force Service Regiment, Tank Maintenance Battalion as a 0161 (postal clerk) for the battalion.

I got the job because I could use a typewriter—a rare skill in the 60's in the Marine Corps. Even when I was Stateside, I worked as a 0141 (office clerk) in the tank maintenance office at Camp Le Jeune. At Schools Battalion before I went to tank repair school, I was nabbed for the troop intake processing office and was a 0141 (office clerk) and served as a troop handler for all new incoming "student" Marines. I was still a Private, but was promoted to PFC before entering tank school.

Here it was, 21 months into my enlistment, and I was in Vietnam as a Lance Corporal. At the age of 21, I had never actually worked in my MOS. That was not about to change right away, even though I was assigned to H&S Co., Maintenance Platoon. Upon arriving at Gia Le, I was assigned to the tool room during the day and drove the forklift. At night, I was doing perimeter guard duty, night patrols and the infamous listening posts. I also served with the reactionary rifle company at the Gia Le firebase that entailed doing convoy security as an M60 machine gunner on the back of a 6X6 truck, taking supplies from Phu Bai, through Hue City and to places like Camp Evans and other points on and off Highway 1.

The convoys would go out every day and I would go on them every other day. Every other time I would go on the

convoys, they would get hit in ambushes along Highway 1. On August 17, 1967, a day I will never forget, I was on one of those convoys. On that morning as the sun rose, I got on the back of the 6X6 truck to await the complete formation of the long convoy of jeeps, trucks, quad fifties, dusters, tanks, men and supplies. The wait would be about 90 minutes. For an August day, the weather was not too bad for Vietnam. It was a little overcast and partly sunny.

The trip up to Hue City was quiet, and nothing out of the ordinary happened which was not unusual for that stretch of the road. When we got to Hue, the young children were there along the curb yelling "chop, chop" (begging for food), as they always did. Today, they were not counting the number of vehicles in the convoy so, we knew that there was no ambush planned between Hue and Camp Evans, our destination. As expected, we got to Camp Evans around 1300 hours and had lunch from the box of C-rations that were issued to us as we boarded the trucks for the day. At the gathering point for the return trip, a tank from the convoy was parked close to the truck I was on. The crew had just mounted the tank and was getting ready to take the lead for the convoy and its return trip to Phu Bai. I decided to go over and see if I knew any of the crew. I did. I knew the loader and the gunner.

L/Cpl. Richard R. Smith from Hopewell Junction, NY, and L/Cpl. Kenneth R. Spohn of Portland, OR, were the two crewmembers I knew from Schools Battalion in 1966. They were surprised to see me and we exchanged some friendly snide remarks as we had always done. After a few moments of conversation, the tank commander, Sgt. Joseph M. Hallas of Youngstown, OH, told the driver, LCpl. Anthony H. Bennett of Tulsa, OK, to fire up the tank as it was time to leave. As the tank engine started, I turned and walked away, never giving a second thought as to what was about to happen.

Within a couple of minutes, there was a horrific explosion that seemed to shake the ground. Immediately a voice screamed: "The tank hit a mine!!!" I was about to see an image I will never forget. I ran to the bridge "bypass" leading in and out of the Camp Evans area where the tank had hit the mine. My mind was blank as I tried not to think or imagine what could have happened. It was the worst scene I would ever see of a destroyed 52-ton M48-A3 tank. When I got there, the first thing I knew was that the four crew members were dead. Hallas, Bennett, Smith and Spohn died in a fraction of a second in that explosion.

I noticed the hull of the tank was on its top and almost all the wheels and tracks were blown completely off. The underside of the hull was facing up, and it appeared to me that someone had taken a huge can opener and cut right down the center of the hull. The next thing I saw was the 37-ton turret that was blown away from the main hull and laid about 50 feet from the point of detonation. As I turned to get away from the scene, I caught out of the corner of



my eye a body on the ground. I don't remember seeing any blood but I do remember the body was completely void of any clothing or equipment. I returned to the convoy gathering point and was instructed to get on the truck. I don't remember the return trip to Phu Bai other than the fact that we did not get attacked.

Within the month, I was transferred to Bravo Co, at Camp Carroll. Here I would continue to do perimeter guard duty and listening posts. I would eventually be promoted Corporal and became the first and second platoon's maintenance man and tank commander of Bravo 23 at the Rock Pile, running road sweeps and convoys from Khe Sanh to Cam Lo on Highway 9. After one year, seven months and three days of overseas duty I returned to the United States. It was the first week in April, 1968. On my way home, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

Editor's Note: As most of us know, Dick Carey was the founder and the first president of our brotherhood. The above story first appeared on the USMC VTA Facebook page in October 2017 and it was also a feature in the "Fallen Heroes" presentation during our 2017 reunion in St Louis. We very much regret that we had not featured Dick's own version of the story in our magazine before Dick checked into the "Great Tank Park in the Sky" about two years ago. ■

GUESS WHO Photo Contest

Can you guess who the person is in this photo?

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 was

Last issue's winner was Dickey Russell who called at 2:38 PM on October 8, 2025, to identify Guy Wolfenbarger.

Just a reminder: "Wolf" passed away in 2024



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

Above & Beyond

Recognizing those members that have made financial contributions above and beyond their normal membership dues to help our organization grow and prosper.

We are extremely grateful to the following members who reached deep into their pockets and made a financial contribution to the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association this past year that was above and beyond their normal membership dues in order to help our organization grow and prosper. You are the lifeblood of the brotherhood and we thank you very much.

Auclair Sr. Gregory M	Flynn Kevin D	Sausoman James E
Barnhouse Robert E	Fornwalt Robert G	Schlieben George T
Belisle Michael	Gulbranson Robert H	Schultz Ned L
Bisbee William A	Hackemack Aubrey G	Shapiro Myron
Blanchette Eddie M	Hackett Timothy G	Shaw George S
Bohlen William M	Hancock Jr. John C	Shears Maxim B
Bolick Reed T	Henderson Rodney A	Singer Robert F
Bonderud Robert J	Herstowski William P	Skeels Robert F
Buning Richard J	Hightshoe Janet	Soncrant Gary E
Carmer Richard A	Hildabrand Theodore K	Stayton James R
Carroll William F	Hunter John M	Thoms Guy E
Castillo Michael A	Hunter Terrance C	Tierney Edward B
Cercone Edward A	Kelley Gregory L	Tomlinson Robert S
Cerda Rene	Kellogg Fred R	Trantham Janice W
Chassereau Jr. Joseph E	Knight Ronald C	Traynor Jr. Andrew F
Christensen Harry C	Knox Clyde F	Tubbs Charles B
Clavan Robert E	Knox Adrain C	Tyson, Jr. Joseph P
Clavan Robert E	Kreiger Raymond J	Ullmer Leland L
Coan James P	Landaker Joseph C	Van Apeldoorn Bruce C
Colucci Carolyn T	Larsen James W	Van Dusen Dyrck H
Cowman James H	Luli Roger B	Vaughn Michael B
Cummings Charles V	Mabe John T	Voss Martin A
Dahl Kenneth R	Manson James E	Wahl Jerry K
Dahl Kenneth R	Mastrangelo Giuseppe	Warrior Reunion Foundation
Danner David J	McCleery Geary L	Waters Michael D
Davis William J	Mefford Gary D	Wear John F
Diggs Buster	Moorhead Mark W	White Jerry W
Dill Lee F	Newberry Craig R	Williams Stanley J
Dodd Robert P	Nichols Timothy a	Wolfenbarger Carol
Duck Eli J	Nicodemus David A	Young Vernon W
Everest Guy L	Parshall Larry C	Zebal Kenneth W
Farrell Dan S	Raasch James L	Zitz Kenneth W
Fenerty Thomas F	Raasch James L	Zobie William J
Fierros Robert	Rasner William S	
Fischer Michael F	Rienschke Harold A	

****If we have inadvertently left off a name of a donor, please forgive our oversight****

What Members Are Doing

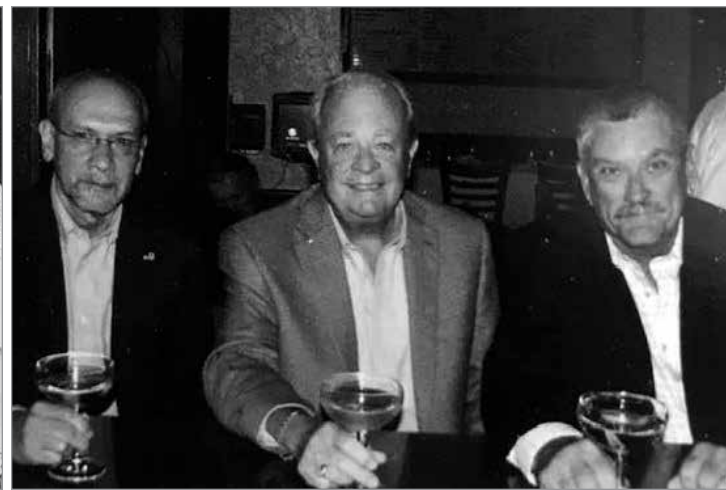
Corvette Father-Son Adventure on the Tail of the Dragon



A scenic — and twisty — ride through the Smoky Mountains.

Bruce Van Apeldoorn (2017 Grand Sport) follows Brian (1992 Corvette) through the 318 curves of the Tail of the Dragon. Bruce and his son Brian took their Corvettes to one of America's most thrilling drives — the legendary Tail of the Dragon. Stretching 11 miles through the Smoky Mountains and packed with 318 curves, this road challenges both driver and machine.

Brian led the way in his 1992 Corvette, with Bruce close behind in his 2017 Grand Sport. Drawing on lessons from their time at the Corvette Test Track in Bowling Green, Kentucky, they tackled every turn with precision, passion, and plenty of father-son teamwork. It was more than just a drive — it was an unforgettable experience that celebrated family, performance, and the enduring spirit of Corvette enthusiasm.



Joe Vernon writes: 1967, Josh Santana, Joseph Vernon, Michael Hermes in Honolulu Hawaii, R&R from 1st Tanks, Da Nang, Vietnam. And 50 years later at Carmines in Washington DC. There is a dozen or so that served together, boots on the ground at the same time. Marines who still try to see each other every year or so. These guys will always be loved. We had each other's back then, and now. If this virus gets one of us, and it might, we will all be together once again to say "See ya" to our brother, we've lost only a few so far, Jim, Fox, Obe, Kurtz, Welker, Jack, Disicoro, and some we just never located, RB Chaney, Roger Stephens, all still brothers forever



Ed Hiltz writes: This is my daughter and son-in-law's dog and our grand dog which my wife and I raised as a puppy while my daughter and her husband went to work each day. Then after work they came and got him. It was basic training when we had him.



John Wear, Bob Minetto and John Perry

Almost 60 years ago, one of my closest US Marine buddies, Bob Minetto, was KIA in a fierce firefight that took place along the DMZ in Vietnam while he was serving as a tank commander with A Co, 3rd Tank Battalion. Of course, I was deeply emotionally fraught over his death that has lasted far past return home and my discharge from active duty.



(L to R): Matt Booth and wife Shersti Minetto Booth (oldest child); Steve Minetto (younger brother of Bob and the father of these "kids"); John Wear; Katelin Minetto Braghini (#4 child, youngest daughter) and husband Joseph Braghini; Tyler Minetto (#5 child) and his wife Sydney Minetto.

The VTA has since featured several articles in the Sponson Box about his and my close relationship as well as a few stories from other members of his heroic but tragic death. Well over a year and a half ago, I received an email from a young woman (Katelin Minetto Braghini) thanking me for my heartfelt dedication post that I had written as a fond but sad remembrance of her "Uncle Bob" in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial website. Her email prompted a fairly long string of emails that she and I shared over the ensuing year. And, praise the Lord, about six months later, she indicated that her family was going to be visiting Colorado Springs to witness the baptism of one of her nephews whose family lives there. On a beautiful sunny Sunday in August of this past year, I sat down with a large portion of her family including Bob's younger brother (the kids' father) and we talked about "Uncle Bob." They sat in rapped attention while I told them about their wonderful brother / uncle and how he is still deep inside of my heart even after almost 60 years have passed ... and how he will always be there. They also asked heartfelt questions that were fairly easy to answer. I have to tell you that I have never had this kind of experience before and I will readily admit that it was not only heartwarming but I know for a fact that it did us all a tremendous amount of good both physically and emotionally.

A True Event from Heaven

John Wear writes: Many, if not most, of us have a good buddy who was KIA in Nam. And many of us most likely have thought about trying to contact the surviving family members just to tell them how much their lost son meant (and still means) to us. Unfortunately, most of us never make the effort to reach out to them ... mostly because of two or more issues. One being that the family might not want to be reminded of the death of their loved one ... or that contact could very well cause us to suffer emotionally all over again. It is so much easier to just move on without making the effort and/or face that ghost of the past.

Memorial Day, 2025

Armando Moreno writes: Memorial Day, 2025. Commandant Dan Cadena and wife (Dora) at the Santa Maria cemetery. Armando is second from the left. ■



Prologue to “Together We Served”

BY BILL SHEEHAN

Stories from combat Navy corpsmen serving in the Vietnam jungles.

I have been writing for many years now. But I have been thinking about writing this for many more. Now fifty-four years after the fact, how do I go about remembering what happened and how do I go about telling those stories? Since my combat experience, I had not been in communication with most of my comrades, with the exception of one, and he and I hadn't spoken in many years. That was all by choice. My choice. I didn't really try at all to stay in touch. Certainly not because I wanted to forget about my buddies, but because I wanted to forget all of 1968 and 1969. I mean all of it. In fact, after I was discharged, all of my uniforms, Navy and Marine, were put in a trunk along with my many picture albums I had put together.

Over the years and many moves, they disappeared. I don't know if they were given away or donate or junked. I wanted distance from that experience. Whenever I went home, I never looked in that trunk.

My Dad was a Pharmacist's Mate (former Hospital Corpsman) on board the USS McCoy Reynolds in the Pacific

during WWII. He never spoke about his experiences. Now I know why. He encouraged me to go into the Hospital Corps when I decided to enlist in the Navy. I did. I was never sorry for that decision. When I returned from Vietnam, he never asked me about my experiences. I was never sorry the he didn't. I never wanted to talk about my experiences either.

Over the years, eventually I saw a change in the attitudes of the American public regarding our military on their return from battle. Operation Desert Storm, 1990 – 1991, Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003 – 2011 and the War in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2021. The men and women returning were greeted differently than the Vietnam veterans. Suffice to say that I was very happy to see our veterans return to open arms and treated as the military warriors they are.

I slowly realized that maybe my experiences are stories that should be told, to reflect on and to learn from. Further, I met and befriended an Iraqi veteran through the Gary Sinise Foundation as we began to communicate. He told me his story. I read his book. I wrote a screenplay

adapted from his book. He inspired me to talk about my combat experience.

I decided to move forward with my idea. I started to put together an outline and decided to try to find my old Navy comrades to see if they would also like to contribute to a book, exclusively about Vietnam, all true stories from Navy Hospital Corpsmen, who served in combat with the Marines.

Some of us returned with Purple Hearts for wounds we received in combat. Some of us were awarded Bronze Stars and Navy Commendations for extraordinary service, some of us were honored by our Marines with the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement medal, but all of us would have rather come back without any of those. If we were all asked about the awards, I'm confident that we would all answer, “We were just doing our job.”

To our Marines, “Thank you for always putting us (Corpsmen) first and protecting us above all else. You were the reason that we were there. We couldn't save you all, but we did our best.

This One Gets Me Every Time

SUBMITTED BY RICK BEIRNE

A nurse took the tired, anxious serviceman to the bedside. “Your son is here,” she said to the old man. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened. Heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack, he dimly saw the young uniformed US Marine standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers around the old man's limp ones, squeezing a message of love and encouragement.

The nurse brought a chair so that the Marine could sit beside the bed. All through the night the young Marine sat there in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man's hand and offering him words of love and strength. Occasionally, the nurse suggested that the Marine move away and rest awhile. He refused. Whenever the nurse came into the ward, the Marine was oblivious of her and of the night noises of the hospital—the clanking of the oxygen tank, the

laughter of the night staff members exchanging greetings, the cries and moans of the other patients. Now and then she heard him say a few gentle words. The dying man said nothing, only held tightly to his son all through the night. Along towards dawn, the old man died. The Marine released the now lifeless hand he had been holding and went to tell the nurse. While she did what she had to do, he waited.

Finally, she returned. She started to offer words of sympathy, but the

Marine interrupted her, “Who was that man?” he asked.

The nurse was startled, “He was your father,” she answered.

“No, he wasn't,” the Marine replied. “I never saw him before in my life.”

“Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?”

“I knew right away there had been a mistake, but I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn't here. When I realized that he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, knowing how much he needed me, I stayed. I came here tonight to find a Mr. William Grey. His Son was killed

in Iraq today, and I was sent to inform him. What was this Gentleman's Name?”

The nurse with tears in her eyes answered, “Mr. William Grey...”

The next time someone needs you ... just be there.

A Life Regret

BY JOHN WEAR

It is the middle of February '68 and our three H&S Company tanks have just left the fighting in Hue City after being relieved by a reenforced platoon of tanks from Alpha Co, 1st Tanks. A day and a night later we end up at the Dong Ha boat ramp on the Cua Viet River. We off load from the LCTs and we find our way to the 3rd Tank Battalion tank park and maintenance facility. As I climb out of the tank, who is there but my old stateside platoon commander, Lt. Jim Spalsberry. I really like this “mustang” officer. He is one of us...an enlisted man who went to Officers' Candidate School (OCS) as a Staff Sgt. He got his commission after serving quite some time in the Corps. As soon as he sees me, he smiles a big old smile, walks up and shakes my hand. He invites me to accompany him to his tent and to join him for a few cold beers. I am quite nervous with this situation since we weren't really “buddies” in the World. I mean, he is an officer and I am a scummy enlisted man. I do recall that he had been fishing buddies with one of my stateside company NCO's, Sgt. Ken Pozder and a with a tank school pal of mine, John Perry. These three used to go out often drinking beer and fishing. I was never invited and was a little bit jealous that Perry got to pal around with them.

One of the first things that I notice as the LT and I are walking toward his tent is that there is thick red dust/dirt everywhere. It has claimed every flat surface and fixed object in the area. It has made everything a red-colored barren plain of nothingness.

The tents should be Marine green but they are dusty red. The sandbagged bunkers should be green or brown but they are dusty red. Some of the “red lined” tanks...that cannot be readily repaired...are sitting in the maintenance yard and are covered in a thick red dust. Many of the men standing around have red stained utility trousers that should be Marine green. Red mud, red dirt, red dust and it's amazing! When we walk along, we are up to our ankles in red dust. I can picture that funny little kid in the Peanuts comics, “Pig Pen” with his cloud of dust following behind him. That's me!!!

We enter his tent and as I sit down on his rack, the LT hands me a cold beer and a copy of Time magazine to read an article that is about the fighting we just came from. The LT and I drink a few cold beers but for some sad reason we end up having a fairly stilted conversation, I wanted to just sit around and casually shoot the shit with this man but I did not know what to say. We really did not have a lot in common and I am too stupid to think of anything to carry on a good conversation.

So, I feigned tiredness and leave his tent and head to the transit tent where our gear was dumped. An hour later after going to noon chow at the 3rd

Motor Transportation Bn mess hall, I went back to the tent where they assigned our platoon and I took a long nap until evening chow.

As I look back, it is such a shame that the stilted conversation with Lt Spalsberry took place at all. The main reason that I feel that way even today is that eventually the good LT came back to the World, he drank way too much, his wife eventually divorces him and he was diagnosed with cancer. The most tragic event is that he ended up killing himself with is USMC-issued .45 pistol...but I did not hear about this awful situation until thirty years later in 1999 during the first reunion of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association in Washinton, DC when retired Sgt Major RB English told me of the LT's untimely death. God rest his soul.

Bob Skeels writes: This photo was given to me at a USMC VTA recent >>



reunion and is just one more reason why we Vietnam tank warfighters should not never forget to attend our every two-year reunion...precious photos that allow easy flashback stories attached to them.

Behind this photo of Bob Skeels, Dale Sandifer and the amazing, Sgt. Al Soto, of 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Marine Division. It was taken on a day in February 1969 just before our 3rd

Platoon assisted a grunt company of 2nd Bn, 9th Marines on an operation to neutralize or take out a nearby gook mortar site that was harassing them every night near their jungle position just 5 miles northwest of Cam Lo village before you meet the jungle terrain that extends north to the DMZ and 30 miles to the Laotian border.

We patiently waited with the grunts and then observed the early

evening enemy mortar flash and it took only "one" 90 mm HE round from an M48A3 to ruin the NVA mortar crew's evening. I looked over to TC Sgt. Soto's tank, and observed the familiar Sgt. Soto grin.... no Marine tanker in history was better at ranging out that first 90 mm tank round than him.

upon very close to the hot air diesel exhaust. This act would result as a selling benefit to them that the lunch chickens wouldn't have to be cooked for the noon lunch soup (which by the way, I had to eat with this ARVN leader group many times). The soup included every part of the chicken in boiling water including eyes and then mixed with rice

All this was really funny stuff from a Marine tanker point of view as

you can imagine how these all-white chickens appeared after been dragged through that dense brush on a rope close to the diesel engine exhaust ... chickens that were all black from diesel exhaust with bulging eyes, featherless and not much meat left on their bodies.

So, this all obviously left these ARVN officers really teed off, but it did get them to stop this practice and change their options for lunch on

combat sweeps in a war zone.

And so, this controversial, divisive, civil war in Vietnam went on and on until the final slaughter of the ARVN forces of the Republic of South Vietnam in April 1975. God bless the US military forces for honoring the SEATO treaty and trying to assist them in their quest for freedom. We Marines are proud to have answered the call to duty for a treaty member!

No Way to Run a War

Traumatized lunch served with chickens that were M48A3 diesel roasted

BY BOB SKEELS



When we were tasked with working with the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) in the Marines' "Leatherneck Square" area (Northeastern I Corps) in 1969 to reinforce their 200 man sweep patrol single column operations in the area with my five Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, M48A3 tanks, I was constantly in fear of being observed and then busted as a lieutenant, tank platoon leader to a PFC rank and then sent back to the Marines' grunts for the way we allowed with these ARVN troops to operate.

Some of the challenges:

* They wouldn't operate and complete their mission when or if it started raining.

* They insisted on halting their 200-man patrol columns in that dense, shoulder-high manzanita brush every thirty minutes for bare-assed, full body leech checks

* They insisted on taking their very distraught, noisy live white chickens along on the patrols for lunch

The "I Corps" sector, 3rd Marine Division's, General Ray Davis, would occasionally buzz around this DMZ area in a small, yellow bubble top helicopter to observe and check on the many DMZ fire support bases (Con Thien, Gio Linh, Oceanview, etc.) and to check on his Marine units operating in the Leatherneck Square area. From his aerial lens, it couldn't have been pretty with all the noisy chickens running around the tanks & bare assed troops ... it certainly was not up to Marine Corps standards for common sense, grit and noise discipline in a dangerous war zone!

From our tanker's perspective, it was all without having to say it, a bit humorous and as the Marines just finally loving an opportunity for a bit of humor in a war zone. So,

we decided to take the initiative to correct the situation and insist to the ARVN "Dai Wi" lieutenants that all these noisy chickens would be able to accompany the ground sweep operations for food purposes, but they had to be "tied up behind our tanks" and not running around creating all the clucking noise allowing the enemy to hear them and then prepare for our advance toward them.

The ARVN surprisingly agreed to allowing them to be tied up and obviously none of us Marines liked this situation plus we knew we had to stop it permanently. So, with the adapting and overcoming ethos in mind, I remember that two of the absolute best Marine tankers in my platoon (and probably even in the whole Corps) ... Al Soto and Larry Parshall recommended employing the old short rope trick. That meant these noisy chickens would be tied

I feel compelled to tell this story. At a recent discussion of a Bible Study session about the definition of the Soul has motivated me. I also feel the current culture in our country today is no longer as religiously structured as our early history going back as far our Declaration of Independence / Constitution. That is a sad commentary for our country whose Constitution / Bill of Rights that were directly connected to our countries religious values. The history of the removal of a religious connection at the beginning of the school day via liberal agendas has been the beginning of negative divergent change in our American historical values. Please work for a return to our original standards established in our American history. A very religious history via a gift from our Forefathers.

I was at a conference of Viet Nam Marine Veterans about six years ago. At the beginning of the conference, we had a meeting related to educating writers of articles in the association's periodical. Just before the start of the meeting a Marine came into the meeting in a wheelchair. He told us about his combat history that resulted in his wounds and disability. I was immediately transfixed to his history as he told us the story. I cannot recall his name and he has since passed. I feel compelled to relay this history to you as it has an

obvious religious connection which needs to be told.

He was severely wounded in combat near the DMZ. He was taken to an adjacent area of the battlefield where they had placed the bodies of the KIA Marines. Some of which were already in body bags. We have a Creed in the Corps that we respect and value our dead. To make sure the bodies are properly recovered for future service and burial with our families at home. At times that Creed was utilized by our enemy as they tried to exploit and kill Marines during the recovery process of our KIA and WIA. Typically using snipers or other methods at the end of combat activity.

As he laid there among the dead, he said he dropped in and out of consciousness. Then he experienced a scene that he described to us. He saw a black stallion with a being who was the most beautiful creature that he had ever seen. Obviously, an Angel as he told us the story. Now my mind was scrambling to understand all that he was telling us. At first, I was perplexed trying to absorb and understand all of it. It was a significant story with numerous elements.

So, as he continues, he tells us the Angel has a bag or pack. The Angel was going to each Marine body and was taking something and placing it into the pack. Then

the Angel approached him. The Angel told him; he was not going to die and that he was going to recover from his wounds. The Angel then mounted the black stallion and left. He did recover and he told us a brief history related to his medical treatment and recovery, but he ended up disabled.

I may have told this history to a few friends. However, now I feel compelled to write about it. The religious connection to Angels and God is obvious. What that Angel was taking from each of those KIA was their Soul. In my belief the Soul is a tangible and real entity that we all possess. It is the heart, mind, spirit, consciousness and very core of our being that is given to us at or before birth by God. Our Soul is a real and tangible gift from God.

In closing I am relaying this very sensitive history and my understanding of this religious and sensitive subject. In writing this it also brings into play Pro Life issues. I'm not sure when God gives us our Soul. So, the thought and timing of abortion and issues of life are very significant. It also answered for me what the definition is for a Soul. It is a very tangible and valuable item that is just ours. The Soul is the heart, mind, body, spirit and consciousness of each of us. >>

Romancing the Marine

BY GARY MCDANIEL

Long years ago (I usually interject when Lincoln was in the White House and General Lee was fighting the Yankees, but I won't), Dad was an avid fisherman. Not that he was able to spend a lot of time fishing because he was a glassworker and had to work rotating shifts to put food on the table for the four boys and Mom. But on his off days, he would be found at a farm pond or small lake, casting for small or largemouth bass. And, because he had the drive and patience, he usually brought home enough to feed all of us. Oh, if I only had Mom's recipe, because she could put some delicious fried fish on the table! When I was at Camp LeJeune and being served the obligatory Friday meal of seafood, I often thought of those meals of fried bass, hush puppies, and sweet tea.

While I was at LeJeune, Mom and Dad moved to a new neighborhood and Dad became acquainted with Mr. Scott, who lived just around the corner. He and Mr. Scott became good fishing buddies, if you know what I mean. If they were not in Dad's 10 ft Jon Boat beating the waters of Mr. Dozier's ponds, they were driving to a small lake about twenty miles down the road. These trips were made in Mr. Scott's old green 1951 Plymouth (I think it was a Cranbrook, if memory is working).

Being some six hundred miles from home at the time, I lost track of their fishing trips and only heard about them via the mail. And, being so far away, I never really got to know Mr. Scott. I do remember one letter I received that made me laugh: Mr. Scott had gone to the waste disposal plant and paid them to bring a truckload of treated sewage and spread it on his lawn! For weeks he

was an outcast to that part of town.

Years passed and the young Marine came home from Vietnam. The two fishermen were still making their trips. Still going to and from in that green Plymouth. But the young Marine no longer wore utilities and was working six or seven days a week to provide for his family.

Consequently, I never really got to know Scott, even though I would see him working in his yard when I visited my folks. He was an active senior citizen, then in his eighties.

Now Scott was a China Marine. He was in China during the 1900-1920's before retiring. Dad told me that after retiring, Scott went to work at a local landmark, H&R Point. H&R stood for Housing and Receiving and it was where many in our area got a first taste of military life because we took our physicals there. Those of us who were local spent the day; those from out of town got one or two days to include being supervised by military personnel, even to the point of "holding a clean sweep-down, fore and aft." It was said that Scott retired from that position before going on to other employment.

In addition to being twice retired, Scott was also a bachelor and apparently did a good job of "living beneath his means". So it was that this eighty-something, twice-retired, financially secure man made his trip to a local store to buy some fishing supplies. It was there that a forty-something lass fell in love with him.

The neighborhood was rather close-knit, so it was no time at all until the "love affair" became common knowledge. Many folks just laughed, others wished Scott good luck, and

quite a few went so far as to tell him "Beware Scottie."

The fishing trips became a thing of the past. Dad had to fish by himself. Scottie was seen more with a lady than with his fishing buddy and neighbors. Then, for a week or so, no one saw Scottie at all. One day, Dad's telephone rang. It was the local judge. The China Marine was on the verge of being committed to a mental facility. Dad and several neighbors put "one and one together" and made their way to the courthouse to make statements. Scottie returned to the neighborhood, financially intact, and much wiser.

As a postscript to this story, I should add a couple of things:

There is a splendid article in the November 2005 Issue of "World War II Magazine" that gives a lot of info on the China Marines! And, there are several good articles to be found on the internet. Simply insert "China Marines 1900-1920, Personalities/Portraits".

And, as an aside: In 1942, the Army sent an expedition from India, across Tibet, and into China, apparently to ascertain the feasibility of a road (at the time, the Army Air Corps was "flying the Hump" delivering supplies to the Chinese Army). This was led by a Major Tolstoy (I think a grandson of the author) and a Captain Dolan. A large amount of information on this is also available on the internet. Readers will note (by glancing at the photos) how much China has changed in the 80-plus years!

As I look back on all of this, I see the American People united for almost four years in winning a war. Comes Vietnam, and we are bled for better than 10 years; nearly 58,000 young men and women lost, and no victory.

Ode to the Grunts

BY ROGER LULI

I know we will all agree that tankers are the deadliest, meanest, and most fearsome group of misfits the

United States Marine Corps has ever assembled. But we need to recognize a group that was right beside us in times

of battle. Here is my best effort:

(Continued on page 28)

2025 USMC VTA Reunion Recap

San Diego, CA
Sept 10 - 15, 2025



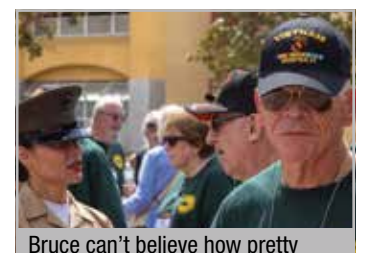
The welcome meeting



Ben conducts the election



Jim talks about the auctions



Bruce can't believe how pretty the BAMS are



The Sgt Maj and the 1st Sgt



Old buddies reunite after 57 years



1st timer Bob Tomlinson



Larry and Mike Parshall



Reva & Ed Boyette



The Unland's on the bus



The long trek to the stands



1st timer John Voss with Bill Davidson



Lee & Judy Aitken rode from AZ to the reunion

2025 USMC VTA Reunion Recap



In the grand stands at MCRD

2025 USMC VTA Reunion Recap



The crew at the Tracked Vehicle Museum



Tony Sims



The Aitkens



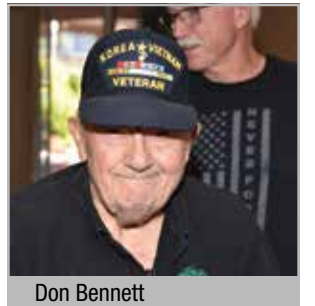
The Auclair's



On the bus to Camp Pendleton



The Pipkin's



Don Bennett



Bravo Co, 3rd Tanks



The Banditos



Bravo Co, 3rd Tanks



Nikki & Fred Jr



The Douville's



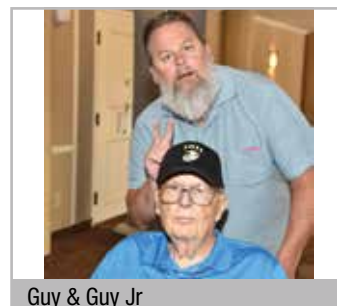
Kalanick's



Dudeck's



Chris and Ron Knight



Guy & Guy Jr



Jim & Bonnie



Say Cheese



Sezar's



McCleary's



Claven's



Blues and Sherman



Taco Dinner on the patio



The welcome meeting



MCRD Edson Range



Our Guest Speaker



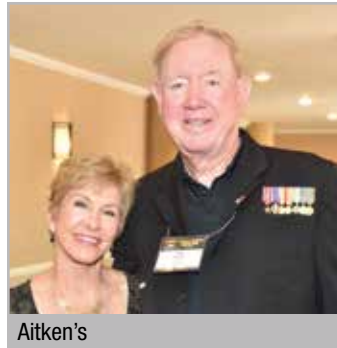
The Khe Sanh Doctor



Guest Speaker's Table



Young Marine counting cash



Aitken's



Simm's



VanDusen's



Raasch's



1st Timer Richard Tomlinson



1st timer John Voss



Frank Cardile



Greg Auclair and family



The tank crew together again



The Boyette's



Carmer not Kramer



Soncrant's



The Heino's



VTA 2025 MCRD Graduation - Getting ready for the ceremony



Three generations of Costello's



Edson Range

Capt. Huon was a guest at the VTA's 2025 San Diego Reunion

Captain Justin B. Huon, USMC was a guest of Ken Zebal at our reunion this year. He is well acquainted with Ken & Liz Zebal through his father O. Ray Huon. Ray and Ken worked together at the Global Positioning System (GPS) Joint Program Office (JPO) at the Los Angeles Space and Missile Systems Center (SMC) in the 1990's. Although Ray passed away a few years ago Justin's association with Ken & Liz over twenty plus years somehow ended up with him becoming a Marine Officer. Justin is an Arizona State University (ASU) graduate who was accepted into their Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps program where he elected the Marine option. He successfully completed the demanding Platoon Leaders Course (PLC) at Quantico. At Justin's commissioning Ken pinned his old 2/Lt bars on Justin when he took the oath in front of ASU's Old Main in 2020. Justin is currently serving our Corps as an Air Support Control Officer (7208) at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Miramar. He owns a home, is a physical fitness fanatic, has a truck, races motorcycles and drives his dad's sports car. Ken & Liz are justifiably proud of Justin.



MCRD Graduation



Blade tank



MCRD Graduation



Sherman



Ontos



Otter

Short Stories
(Continued from page 22)

The flyboys drop death from the treetops

Artillery can clear the whole scene
And the tank with its' rumble and roar
Is a very fine fighting machine
But when the battle is over and

The defense has held just fine
Here's to those souls down in the holes
In the mud and the blood of the line

New Member John Effingham writes:

What a small world. I was just listening to your video interview about Hue and flames and your time with A Co, 3rd Tanks. My unit was A Co, 1st Tanks. I had my hands on every one of those A Co tanks just a few days prior to getting them ready for the landing at Hue. They pulled me the night before they left Da Nang because I had less than two weeks left on my tour and they didn't want to deal with a short timer up there in Hue. I was so occupied with war I didn't realize that I was short.

We were somewhere in the Quizon Valley(?) not sure of that near Cambodia and got orders to move out in 24 hours. Heading to meet a ship in Cam Ron Bay. Then it was a two day march, It was huge. A reinforced infantry BN with a company of tanks and a platoon of 155's and I don't know what else. I had my M-51 retriever dead-lined for the entire time that I was commander due to a turbocharger seal

sucking oil out of the crankcase and putting it into the exhaust, but they would not listen. Everything goes we were heading to make an amphibious landing in Hue if it has problems, we will blow it up.

My driver and I put a 55 gal drum of engine oil on the front spade hoping it would survive but due to a separate issue during the march, it didn't Then we left the retriever in a rice paddy (in pieces) and they decided not to blow it because the USMC only owned 23 of the hauls so I was given 30 minutes to remove all sensitive equipment and load it on the flames that you saw in Hue. There's more but between that time and being told I was not going; I lost my driver, my boss, and my 1st platoon mechanic. What a mess. Not to mention an ambush. Trust me you do not want ambush this kind of fire power unless you're suicidal. It looked like a wall of tracers in every direction for several minutes. Later the Army

flew in someone to inform us that the village we had just destroyed was a "friendly" village.

A couple of days in Da-Nang to load the tanks and install fording gear. It was up to me alone with the crews to make the tanks ready for loading the landing craft the next day. They brought me three brand new 2nd Lt's to brief on the status of their new vehicles then I was pulled away. That was when I was called to the command bunker at 1st Tank BN and informed that I was being replaced. A couple of weeks later I was on my way home. I was spared and have always felt just a bit guiltily as do so many others as you know. Very interesting,

John Effingham
P.O. Box 538
Christmas Valley, OR 97641
Cell: 541.815.4004
johne97641@yahoo.com

If you were born between 1930 and 1946

If you were born between 1930 and 1946, you belong to an incredibly rare group: only 1% of your generation is still alive today. At ages ranging from 77 to 93, your era is a unique time capsule in human history.

Here's why: You were born into hardship. Your generation climbed out of the Great Depression and bore witness to a world at war. You lived through ration books, saved tin foil, and reused everything—nothing was wasted.

You remember the milkman. Fresh milk was delivered to your door. Life was simpler and centered around the basics. Discipline came from both parents and teachers, with no room for excuses.

Your imagination was your

playground. Without TVs, you played outside and created entire worlds in your mind from what you heard on the radio. The family gathered around the radio for news or entertainment.

Technology was in its infancy. Phones were communal, calculators were hand-cranked, and newspapers were the primary source of information. Typewriters, not computers, recorded thoughts.

Your childhood was secure. Post-WWII brought a bright future—no terrorism, no internet, no global warming debates. It was a golden era of optimism, innovation, and growth.

You are the last generation to live through a time when:

Black-and-white TVs were cutting-edge.

Highways weren't motorways. Shopping meant visiting downtown stores.

Polio was a feared disease. While your parents worked hard to rebuild their lives, you grew up in a world of endless possibilities. You thrived in a time of peace, progress, and security that the world may never see again.

If you're over 77 years old, take pride in having lived through these extraordinary times. You are one of the lucky 1% who can say, "I lived through the best of times."

(Continued on page 37)

COVER STORY

The Birthday Brawl: Tankers Hold the Line at Khe Sanh

BY: KYLE WATTS—POSTED ON JULY 15, 2025



Featured Image (Top): Cpl Fred Kellogg seated on his cupola, covered in dirt after riding the second tank in line during a road march. Kellogg arrived in Vietnam in January 1968 and was quickly promoted to his role as TC. (Courtesy of Fred Kellogg)

First Lieutenant Harris Himes stabbed holes around the side of an empty C-ration can. He ignited a heat tab inside and warmed his breakfast over the flame. The alien aroma of beans and weenies flared his hunger pangs, gratefully supplanting the reek of diesel fumes thickening the air. Two of his tanks idled on the road nearby. Himes commanded the 1st Platoon of "Bravo" Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, with five tanks under his charge. Infantrymen bustled about the area preparing for the mission at hand. Each had begun their day long before dawn. Now, a tired sun stirred on the eastern hills, reluctantly ascending over the battle-scarred landscape of Khe Sanh Combat Base.



An M48A3 Patton tank in Vietnam: 1stLt Harris Himes' platoon operated five of these armored giants. Note the TC's cupola

attached above the rest of the turret, with the TC standing exposed in his hatch. A ring of rectangular vision blocks surrounds the bottom of the cupola, offering limited visibility from inside. Also, note the factory-installed machine gun inside the cupola has been removed and replaced with a "sky-mounted" gun on the exterior. (Courtesy of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association)

Corporal Fred Kellogg waited impatiently outside the supply hooch, holding his M3 submachine gun. A line of grunts formed ahead. The sergeant in charge doled out bullets like a munificent millionaire dispensing Halloween candy from the portico of his mansion. When his turn arrived, Kellogg approached with his antiquated weapon extended, an empty bucket desperate for a treat.

"Good morning, Sergeant. I really need some new magazines for this grease gun. The springs are all worn out. They won't hardly feed anymore."

The sergeant glared at Kellogg. This was not the first time the tanker had come whining about his worthless weapon.

"Corporal, if the Marine Corps wanted you to have new magazines, it would have given you new magazines! Now get the hell out of my tent!"

A litany of profanity hounded Kellogg back to his tank and trailed off below the rumbling diesel engine. Kellogg climbed aboard and dropped into the tank commander's (TC's) hatch, tossing the grease gun aside with a slew of opinions about the supply sergeant. He ignored the looks from the rest of his crew as he prepared to roll out.



Marine engineers repair a bridge along Route 9 near Khe Sanh. In April 1968, Operation Pegasus successfully relieved the beleaguered combat base and reopened Route 9 for traffic. (Courtesy of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association)

Kellogg positioned his tank, call sign B-12, on point leading out the Khe Sanh gate. Cpl Adrian "Buzz" >>

shrubbery punctuated irregular patterns of bomb craters in every direction. The road out of Khe Sanh led directly through this no man's land, linking up with Route 9 in the surrounding hills. Uncle Ho's expected birthday violence hung heavy over the column. How far would the convoy make it this time before the NVA attacked? The Marines pressed on, their incipient sense of disaster kindling.

The grunts worked their mine sweepers back and forth. Less than half a mile outside the gate, Kellogg's radio crackled to life.

"Charles is in the area."

Every Marine knew "Charlie," the commonly held term for enemy, but "Charles?" What was the radio operator trying to say? An AK-47 opened up from a hedgerow in prompt explanation. Less than 100 feet away, concealed NVA sprang the ambush. Kellogg dropped into his seat. A ring of vision blocks sur-rounded the bottom of his cupola offering limited visibility outside. Grunts in the kill zone hit the deck, cut down by enemy fire or taking cover. Kellogg shouted through the intercom to Williams.

"Let's go! Kick it in the ass and get us up front!"

The 50 ton machine surged forward. Bullets ricocheted off the armor as Kellogg directed Trinidad into the bushes. The canister round boomed, devastating everything in its swath. Kellogg toggled a switch, changing the trigger controls from the main gun to the coaxial-mounted machine gun. Trinidad unleashed .30-cal. rounds as Lehman removed the spent 90 mm brass and inserted another main gun round.



Marine tanks support infantry clearing a stretch of Route 9 near Khe Sanh. (Courtesy of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association)

Kellogg triggered his .50-cal., spraying five-round bursts along the hedgerow. Maliciously on cue, the machine gun jammed. His efforts to correct the problem proved futile in the constricted cupola. Mayhem enveloped the tank. Dozens of NVA soldiers attacked from bushes and bomb

craters at point-blank range. Kellogg directed Trinidad as he fired another round through the main gun, while simultaneously guiding Williams around the Marines exposed outside. How could they possibly fire, or even move, without killing one of their own?

"Traverse right."

The thought breached Kellogg's internal monologue without prompting, an overwhelming premonition without explanation. He obeyed. He clutched the TC override controls, arresting command from Trinidad, and spun the turret right as fast as it would move. When the main gun stood out at a 90-degree angle, the tank rocked violently as an RPG detonated on the turret. Kellogg's intuition saved the tank. The well-aimed shot hit squarely on the gun shield, the thickest point of armor.

Smoke cleared from the vision blocks. Trinidad's frantic voice screamed through the headset.

"I see them! I see them! I see them!"

The enemy RPG team stood in the open, taking aim once again. The tank's gun pointed directly at them, loaded with a high explosive round. Kellogg estimated the range; they looked too close. Internal safeties prevented rounds from detonating before they reached a specified distance from the tank. Kellogg instantly decided he had to fire first. He squeezed the trigger on his override controls. The round blasted into the dirt at the RPG team's feet, reaching bare-minimum range to explode. The enemy soldiers vaporized into pink mist.

Back inside the combat base, Himes wrapped up his morning routine brushing his teeth. His blouse clung to his sweaty back as he bent and spat out the toothpaste. To live in Vietnam was to endure habitual humidity. The sun had yet to perch on its high, oppressive throne. Staccato small arms echoed in the distance. The quickening tempo bade each Marine within earshot swivel and stare. Finally, the unmistakable crescendo of a tank's main gun tolled. Barely half an hour passed since the mine sweep departed. Lance Corporal Jack Butcher sprinted up as the battle reverberated with a fever pitch.



1stLt Harris Himes, shortly after arriving at Khe Sanh in early May 1968, is pointing to the spot where an RPG detonated on the turret

next to his cupola during an ambush along Route 9. Just days after arriving at Khe Sanh, the tankers battled through an attack while escorting the platoon they relieved back to Ca Lu, their tanks in desperate need of repairs (Courtesy of Harris Himes).

"Lieutenant! One-Two and One-Three have really gotten into something! I was monitoring the radios, and it sounds like it has really hit the fan!"

Himes ran with Butcher back to his tank, B-15, and climbed into the cupola. He ordered Cpl Rene Cerda, B-15's TC, to collect his crew and crank up the engine. Himes grabbed a helmet. The battle played out through his headset in excited spurts.

"... over to your right ..."

Machine-gun fire smothered the words.

"... a whole load of 'em in the bushes ..."

A 90 mm roared.

"Bravo One-Two, this is Bravo One, over," Himes chimed in on the net. Heavy breathing followed a long pause.

"Bravo One ... this is One-Two ... over."

Kellogg's reply sounded more animated than ever.

"One-Two, what's going on out there?"

"Looks like we woke somethin' up. Started out small, just a couple of shots after the grunts ..."

Static interrupted the words.

"... then we got into the show and all hell broke loose."

"One-Two, you're breaking up. How are you doing?"

"OK so far. Busy."

"Roger, keep at it. Keep me informed when you can."

"Roger, One-Two out."

Himes raised Conklin's tank.

"Bravo One-Three, this is Bravo One, over."

"One, this is One-Three," Conklin replied. "SITREP the same. Lotsa enemy scramblin', over."

"Roger. Do it to 'em. Let me know. Out."

Himes stood on the TC seat, half exposed above the cupola. Cpl Cerda awaited further instruction.

"Rene, get over to the comm shack and try to raise someone from regiment," Himes ordered. "We need permission to get out there and help Fred and Buzz right now!"

Himes dropped back inside the turret with the radio. Another quarter hour ticked by, the battle raging within earshot dreadfully narrated through his headset. Cerda had still not returned. Himes ordered his platoon sergeant to get the remaining tanks ready to roll, then took off for the comm shack. He found Cerda exasperated, radio in hand.

"They're still looking for someone, Lieutenant. Nothing yet. Not sure regiment even knows what's happening out there."

"Stay with it."

Himes walked back towards B-15. His remaining tanks occupied the road. Infantrymen staged in silent company listening to the chaotic show. What the hell was taking so long?

B-12's main gun thundered once again, spraying canister fire through a row of bushes. Kellogg squinted through the vision blocks searching for additional targets. Miraculously, numerous Marines outside survived the onslaught thus far. To avoid running them over, Kellogg knew, would be the greater miracle. A lone grunt flashed into the scene framed by his vision block. Haggard, bleeding, and armed with nothing but his Ka-Bar fighting knife, the Marine charged head-long into a bomb crater full of NVA. He stabbed and slashed in a frenzy of gory violence until the tank turned blocking Kellogg's view, the grisly scene jettisoned in its wake. A bush rotated into the picture. As if on cue, a World War II-vintage "potato masher" stick grenade arched up and away from the bush, landing in front of the tank near a scattering group of Marines with the fuse still burning.

"Drive over it!" Kellogg shouted.

Williams stopped the tank on top of the grenade, smothering the blast between the road wheels. The tank pushed forward unfazed to the bush where an NVA soldier ducked away into a spider hole. Straddling the hole, Williams threw the tank into a neutral steer, one tread moving forward while the opposite moved backward, rotating the machine in place. The treads dug into the earth, snagging the enemy soldier and crushing his hiding place. Williams shifted both treads forward, dragging the doomed enemy out of his hole and through the tread's rear sprocket.

Enemy fire increased from B-12's opposite flank where B-13 sat motionless on the battlefield. Through the drifting smoke, Kellogg noted his sister tank's main gun blast deflector canted at an odd angle, damaged by an enemy RPG or mortar. Firing the main gun in this condition could mean catastrophic failure for the Marines inside the turret. Kellogg raised Conklin on the radio.



Marine tanks support a convoy along Route 9. The varying terrain enabled enemy ambushes at numerous points along the road. (USMC)

"Bravo One-Three, this is One-Two, over."

No response. He tried several more times. Conklin finally responded.

"One-Two, this is One-Three."

"One-Three, your main gun looks like it was hit >>

and may be out of trunnion.”

“Roger, well I’ve been shot, and I’m not stickin’ my head to take a look!”

Unknown to Kellogg, Conklin somehow had been shot in the face, a wound that would result in the loss of one eye. B-13 sat defenseless against the renewed wave of NVA. Kellogg keyed his internal comms.

“Get us over there behind Buzz!”

Williams wheeled around to the other side of B-13, placing B-12 between Conklin and the bulk of enemy fire. Grunts hugged the dirt, pinned down across the front. A radioman directed B-12 toward a group of enemies attacking from bomb craters less than 50 feet away. At that close range, Trinidad could not depress the turret low enough to bring his guns to bear. With his .50-cal. out of commission and his turret-mounted guns useless, Kellogg resorted to the only weapons he had left.

He ordered Williams to hold course along a line of enemy-held craters, then snatched his grease gun and a handful of grenades from the rack behind him. Kellogg stood, half exposed above the cupola. The muffled sounds of gunfire inside the turret erupted into a deafening roar. Bullets zipped and cracked and pinged all around the tank. Kellogg flipped his grease gun upside down and opened fire. He prayed his unconventional firing technique might enlist the force of gravity to aid his faulty magazines feeding the bullets into the weapon. The tank approached the nearest crater. Kellogg pulled the pin on a grenade and lobbed it into the hole. He ducked as the explosion killed or stunned the sheltering NVA soldiers. Kellogg resumed firing his grease gun upside down at near point-blank range. The next several bomb craters dotted the earth in an approaching batch. Kellogg steered Williams along-side, then tossed a grenade apiece into the holes until each fell silent.

Several stubborn enemy targeted Kellogg from a small crater in the tank’s path. Kellogg returned fire until the tank drove immediately alongside. He leaned out and dropped a grenade down into the hole. As the bomb exploded, Williams performed another neutral steer, crushing and grinding the dead and dying NVA beneath them.

Kellogg expended all 19 grenades wiping out enemy-held craters. His heart threatened to pound through his sternum as he collapsed back inside the tank. Some-how, despite the terrible toll the Marines exacted, NVA fire only increased. More than two hours had passed since they left the combat base. How much longer could they possibly survive?

Shell casings piled up inside B-12, further constricting the cramped turret. Trinidad sighted in another target. Lehman slammed in another high explosive round. Kellogg waited to observe the destruction his team efficiently wrought. A violent yellow flash suddenly blinded him. A terrific impact struck like a major leaguer’s bat to the chest. Kellogg folded on the turret floor. As he lay in utter silence, his memory inexplicably recalled a story from his youth of

a relative who stopped breathing for several minutes in the hospital before doctors brought her back to life. Resurrected with the relative were the wonderful, luminous descriptions of the heaven that she witnessed while suspended between this life and the next. The sun-bathed glory she described had always impressed Kellogg. Now, he lay freezing, drowning and staring into a barren, black abyss.

“Oh, hell, I’ve gone to the wrong place.”

Cerda gathered his tankers in the road next to B-15. He lost track of how long Himes had been gone. When regiment finally located someone with authority, they denied the lieutenant’s request to support B-12 and B-13. Cerda never witnessed Himes lose his bearing, but this morning Himes was livid. After multiple requests, delays and denials, Himes stormed off to address the regimental office in person.

“The lieutenant said as soon as we get permission to go out, he’s riding in our tank as TC,” Cerda told his crew. “I’m going out with him. That means one of you has to stay behind.”

No one volunteered. Cerda made the Marines draw straws. Jack Butcher, his loader, came up short. Cerda assumed his spot inside the turret while LCpl John Cox took his place as B-15’s gunner and LCpl Clayton Larabell dropped into the driver’s seat.

Himes finally returned with orders. B-15 and B-14 were tasked to reinforce the beleaguered mine sweep along with the remainder of Fox Company. Himes instructed grunts to board his vehicles. The sun, now teeming with radiant fury, broiled the infantrymen crowding on top of the tanks and baked the crews hemmed inside. Cerda inspected his ammo racks and weapons. Sweat dripped from his nose as he leaned forward and rolled both pants legs to his knees. He stood in the open hatch above his head. Himes stood to his right in the TC hatch shouting orders into his headset and gesturing to the grunts swarming the road. A dozen Marines surrounded the turret, holding on wherever they could. A dozen more clung to B-14 behind them like barnacles to a ship’s bottom. The remainder piled into a 6x6 cargo truck or spread out on foot.

B-15 lumbered forward. Before lowering into his hatch, Cerda noticed a flak jacket tucked into the rack on the outside of the turret. Somehow, at some point, Butcher commandeered an army-style vest, more snugly fitting and a superior construction to Marine-issued flaks. Cerda normally shunned the extra weight in the crowded interior but snatched the jacket and fastened it over his torso before wriggling down into his position. Just before 10 a.m., the two tanks and depleted infantry company surged out the gate.

The RPG penetrated B-12 through the side of the turret, detonating inside with the crew. Kellogg absorbed the brunt of the blast. He lay in a pile of shell casings drowning in his own blood. Trinidad slumped in his seat, alive >>

but incapacitated. Lehman remained the only crewmember inside the turret able to fight. Ignoring his wounds, he struggled into a position around Trinidad and took over the trigger, laying down suppressive fire. He glanced at Kellogg. Surely, the TC was dead. When the gun ran dry, Lehman moved back to reload.

“One-Two, One-Three, this is Bravo One, over,” Himes hailed on the radio.

“This is One-Three,” Conklin replied.

“One-Two,” Lehman called in Kellogg’s stead as he fed a belt of ammo into the gun.

“Get back to base. We’ll take it from here. Well done.”

B-15 and B-14 halted near their fellow stricken tanks. Grunts leaped from their sides and streamed out of the truck behind them. Himes ordered B-15 into the assault and commenced firing as soon as the grunts were clear. B-14, commanded by Cpl Pat Baddgor, followed into the fray.

Lehman poked his head through the loader’s hatch. Bullets cracked by and bounced off the steel around him. A blazing fire in the exterior cargo rack seared his face. The acrid smoke drove him back inside, hacking up black phlegm.

“Williams, the cavalry has arrived! Get us out of here!”

With his periscopes cracked, Williams operated the tank virtually blind. He threw the tank in reverse, backing away from the battle. The tank pitched suddenly forward, tossing Lehman across the turret. Without stopping, the tank abruptly pitched backward before leveling out. Lehman stood in his hatch. The frame of a 6x6 truck lay ahead of B-12 in the road, hastily left in the tank’s path as the grunts poured into the battle, now flattened like a rolling pin. Lehman stooped inside the tank and gulped a breath of fresh air. He stood exposed, once more guiding Williams in reverse all the way back to Khe Sanh’s gate.

Now nearly three hours into the battle, the NVA escalated their effort in even greater proportion than the Marines. Enemy soldiers materialized seemingly everywhere. They dashed into the fight with polished parade uniforms wrapped in plastic and stowed in their backpacks, ready to don for their anticipated victory parade. They fought with fanaticism, as though Ho Chi Minh himself watched from a nearby hilltop impatiently waiting to collect his promised birthday present. Mortars and recoilless rocket fire rained down.

Within minutes of reaching the battle-field, Himes looked helplessly on as a mortar exploded in a group of Fox Company Marines, knocking out several officers and senior enlisted leaders. The company commander was quickly shot and killed. While Cerda, Cox and Larabell maneuvered the tank and poured continuous fire from the main gun, Himes remained exposed, hanging out the TC hatch and screaming to leaderless elements of grunts, directing them toward the enemy.

Cerda lost all sense of time as he loaded round after

round into the main gun. Spent casings piled so high so quickly inside the turret that the hot brass burned his bare calves and singed the hair on his shins. A rapid succession of bullets thudding unsuppressed off metal above him stole his attention. His hatch stood wide open, leaving Cerda vulnerable.

“Would you look at that!” Himes shouted, as much to himself as to anyone else. “Those Marines are fighting hand-to-hand!”

Desperate for a glimpse, Cerda jumped up. The world outside brimmed in savage chaos. Marines and NVA soldiers collided in craters with butt strokes and bayonets ordaining the victor of each individual struggle. Cerda returned to his seat after fewer than 30 seconds. Less than 30 seconds later, an RPG round detonated on the hatch still open above him. The concussion slammed him down to the turret floor. Shrapnel stitched across his back, absorbed by the flak jacket. His ears rang, his eyes watered uncontrollably, and his nose bled. He wiped his face until his vision cleared then lurched upward and secured the door.



Napalm explodes on NVA positions during the battle on May 19, 1968. Marine pilots dropped their ordnance dangerously close to Marines, finally breaking the enemy’s will to fight. (Courtesy of Peter D. Hoban)

B-15 fought on unhinged. Cerda maintained a relentless pace, feeding ammo to the insatiable guns while Cox tore the enemy apart. Ricocheting bullets pinged off the exterior armor in a never-ending cacophony. The sharper thuds of ricocheting RPGs signaled more imminent danger. Several times, shell casings piled so high they blocked Cerda’s access to additional rounds and interfered with the rotation of the turret. Cerda opened his hatch long enough to shot put the empty shells through the opening.

Himes rotated in his cupola calling out targets. He pivoted just in time to witness an enemy RPG team staring down the sights directly at him. Before Himes could react, the NVA soldiers exploded into pieces. B-14, situated on Himes’ flank, spotted the enemy and the tank’s gunner, Cpl Rick Oswood, obliterated them with a high explosive round.

“One-Five, this is One-Four,” Badger called. >>

Conklin commanded B-13 in line behind him. The remainder of Himes' platoon staged behind in a separate supply convoy. The two lead tanks would accompany an advance party of grunts from Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, sweeping ahead in search of mines laid overnight or an enemy ambush lying in wait. Today, of all days, that prospect felt surely to become reality.

It was May 19, 1968, Ho Chi Minh's birthday. Intelligence reports streamed in over the preceding week. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) around Khe Sanh seemed hell-bent on blocking the road out of the base and perhaps, after months of siege warfare, finally overrunning the American encampment as a gift for their leader.

The infamous siege of Khe Sanh was already over in the eyes of the world. The combat base and surrounding hill outposts had held. The NVA had failed. Much of the air support so critical to sustaining life through the siege was diverted. Virtually all the media attention shifted elsewhere. To the Marines who remained, however, a steady dose of enemy rockets and mortars belied the prevailing attitude.

Just the month prior, American commanders organized Operation Pegasus for the overland relief of Khe Sanh. Marines and 1st Cavalry Division soldiers struck out westward from their base at Ca Lu, while the defenders of Khe Sanh surged from their fighting positions in a coordinated effort. By mid-April, engineers cleared or rebuilt the impassable stretches of the main supply route between the two combat bases, called Route 9.

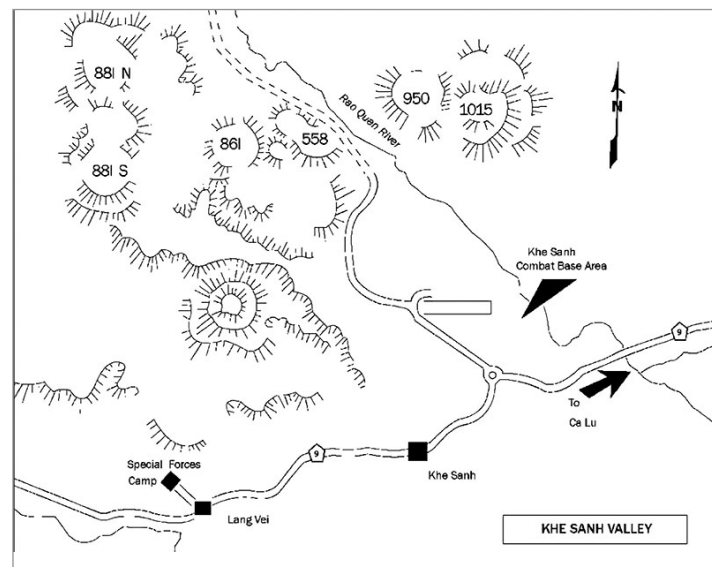
Even after the official conclusion of Pegasus, Route 9 remained a tenuous 16-kilometer gauntlet. Himes' platoon spearheaded the armored relief of Khe Sanh, arriving at the combat base at the beginning of May. Within days, the tankers battled through an ambush along Route 9 while escorting the platoon they relieved back to their home base in dire need of repairs. Himes' mission now was to protect convoys moving along the treacherous route.

Himes issued assignments to his Marines the night before the May 19 supply run, placing Kellogg and Conklin with the mine sweep and two additional tanks with the main column that would depart once the advance party returned. Nearly his entire platoon held a role in the day's mission. Himes served not only as the lieutenant in charge of the tankers, but one of the most experienced. He arrived in Vietnam in July 1967. That August, Himes was seriously wounded while commanding a tank in combat and was evacuated to a hospital ship. He returned with his arm still in a sling to finish his tour. Much of his platoon rotated home at the end of the year and a fresh batch joined in January 1968. Several newcomers, like Kellogg, arrived as green lance corporals but were promoted and assigned as TCs in short order. Their limited combat experience notwithstanding, Himes trusted their instincts and judgment.

Kellogg tested B-12's internal comms. Charles Lehman sat to his left as loader, servicing the tank's main gun and

coaxial-mounted .30-caliber machine gun. Carlos Trinidad sat in front of Kellogg as the gunner and Stanley Williams occupied his own compartment forward as the driver. Kellogg loaded bullets into his faulty grease gun magazines. He placed the weapon in the rack behind his seat with the tank's cache of hand grenades. He counted 19, an unusually high number. Since the M48A3 Patton tank possessed a 90 mm main gun, tankers rarely found the need to pop out of their hatch and toss a grenade.

Kellogg inspected the .50-cal. machine gun mounted inside his cupola. The space was so cramped that nothing more than a 50-round belt of ammo would fit preloaded into the weapon. Worse, some engineer back in the States decided to save space by mounting the gun on its side, oriented to fire in a way it was not designed. Tankers cursed the weapon and its tendency to jam even before the paltry 50 rounds fed through. The gun's most valuable purpose served as an additional block of metal in front of the TC's face. This "additional armor" saved Himes' life when he was evacuated the previous fall, shielding him from a direct hit by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG).



Courtesy of the USMC History Division

Lehman extracted a 90 mm canister round from a honeycomb storage rack and shoved it into the main gun's breach. Experience thus far proved these tank-sized shotgun shells most effective at disrupting an enemy ambush. Fox Company Marines moved ahead with their mine sweepers. Kellogg waited for them to exit the wire. He turned back, surveying Conklin's tank and the rest of the convoy readying behind him. Himes stood in the road, breakfast in hand. He flashed a smile and thumbs up. Kellogg returned the gesture as the tank throttled up and rolled out.

It was 7 a.m. Innocent morning rays illuminated a pristine blue sky, clear and fresh before the midday heat. Preceding months of conflict left the area barren. Ghoulish trees cast gangly shadows across exposed red earth. Emaciated

"You've got Charlie climbing on your tank!"

Himes peered through his vision blocks. Several NVA soldiers mobbed the vehicle, scaling the rear away from the main gun.

"Roger One-Four," Himes replied. "Scratch our back!"

The crew inside B-14 loaded a canister round while the turret rotated. Oswood locked B-15 in his sights and pulled the trigger. More than 1,200 steel pellets erupted at close range. The shrapnel ripped the radio antennas from the outside of B-15 and destroyed everything left in the exterior racks. The unfortunate, brave NVA soldiers who mounted the tank fell to the ground in mangled heaps of flesh.

B-12 reached Khe Sanh with the fire still burning in its cargo rack. Marines extracted each member of the wounded crew. They placed Kellogg on a stretcher awaiting immediate medical evacuation. Doctors assigned a Navy corpsman to remain by Kellogg's side to keep him alive. NVA mortars exploded around the landing zone, forcing helicopters away. The corpsman and a battalion surgeon plugged the worst of Kellogg's bleeding holes and started four IVs, one in each arm and leg, replenishing the tanker's system with a barrage of fluids. A monstrous sense of helplessness overwhelmed Kellogg as someone finally loaded him onto a chopper. Door gunners opened up with their machine guns as they lifted off, showering the floor with spent brass rolling around Kellogg's stretcher. All four fluid bottles ran dry. The corpsman looked frantic as he hooked up four more, clearly concerned he might fail to keep his charge alive.

A flurry of doctors met Kellogg aboard the hospital ship and rushed him down to surgery. Someone leaned over Kellogg's battered face as they ran alongside his stretcher wheeling across the deck.

"Do you want a priest?"

Kellogg never considered himself especially religious but knew enough to understand that last rites were usually reserved for those crossing death's doorstep.

"Do I need one?"

The battle outside Khe Sanh raged beyond midday. Time conspired against the Marines. Cerda swapped barrels on the .30-cal. when it overheated. He ran low on 90 mm rounds. An RPG detonated on the turret next to him. The metal inside glowed with bright orange spalling, barely containing the brunt of the explosion. Still, shrapnel blasted through the turret, peppering Cerda's side. The flak jacket again saved him from catastrophic injury. Hot metal sliced through the communications cord attached to his helmet. One piece dug into his wrist, cutting cleanly through his watch band. Another RPG penetrated the turret, wounding Cerda a third time along with the rest of the crew. Exhausted, dehydrated, dis-oriented and bleeding, the tankers fought on.

The armored giant became the favored target of every RPG within range. Multiple penetrations into B-15's engine crippled the transmission and ruptured the fuel

tanks. Unable to move and running low on ammo, the tankers persevered. When an RPG damaged the remote firing mechanism for the coaxial machine gun, Cerda took over triggering the weapon. When the turret lost all electrical power, Cerda worked the hand crank, manually traversing the main gun. Smoke suffused through the rear of the turret from the engine compartment. Within minutes, the Marines inside choked down every breath.

"Put your gas masks on!" Himes ordered.

The tankers donned their masks and continued fighting. The infiltrating smoke soon morphed into licking fire. Himes called to his Marines through the smoke and kindling flames. Cerda leaned over the .30-cal., looking more dead than alive. Cox and Larabell, muffled by their gas masks, sounded in nearly as rough of shape. B-15 faced the irreversible end of its role in the battle. Himes weighed their options aloud.

"OK gents. Looks like we've got two choices. We can either stay in here and burn up with the tank or jump out and get shot. What do you want to do?"

Each crewmember threw off their gas masks and scrambled outside. Cox and Larabell leaped down and sprinted toward a nearby bomb crater. Himes discovered Cerda nearly limp and stuck inside the turret, severely weakened from blood loss. Himes grasped his arms and hoisted him out onto the fender. Cerda drifted in and out of consciousness, lying in the open while Himes jumped to the ground. Enemy fire poured on unabated. Himes snatched up Cerda over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Grunts lay down a barrage of covering fire as Himes plodded toward the crater with Cerda's weight exacerbating painful shrapnel wounds in his legs. He stumbled and fell into the hole, his entire crew miraculously intact.

The tankers joined the grunts in shooting, armed only with pistols and a grease gun. A jeep zipped past the bomb crater laden with ammo. When it circled back empty of cargo, Himes clambered out into the driver's path with arms waving over his head. The driver halted long enough to load the wounded tank crew aboard, then sped back toward the combat base.

B-15's crew underwent the same rapid triage as the B-12 tankers. Another med-evac chopper swooped in, lifting Himes and Cerda away. Elevated high above the battlefield, Himes spotted B-14 still under heavy bombardment. B-15 remained conspicuously paralyzed like a forbidding monument erected in memory of the tankers' heroic deeds, a conflagration beneath a billowing plume of black smoke.

After nearly six hours of fighting, the battle's outcome remained undecided. B-14 suffered multiple penetrating RPG hits, severely wounding crewmembers in-side before finally returning to base. The platoon's fifth and final tank, B-11, deployed with another reinforcing wave of Marine infantry. Despite everything he already endured driving Kellogg's B-12, Stanley Williams returned to the >>

battlefield driving B-11. Golf Company, 2/1, advanced from Khe Sanh, along with Echo 2/3 sweeping in from another direction.

The fresh wave of infantry waded through a thick field of carnage. Dead bodies clogged the ground along their path. Discarded and damaged equipment littered the ravaged landscape. The Marines rearmed themselves along the way, commandeering machine guns and bayonets cast aside. They steered clear of B-15, still burning with rounds cooking off inside. They pushed into the fray, close enough to hear NVA jeers in accented English hurled their way alongside the bullets. The grunts fired back with, “Ho Chi Minh sucks!” and a serenade of machine guns.

Napalm finally broke the enemy’s back. A-4 Skyhawks streaked in so low the grunts could see the pilots’ faces as they dropped their terrifying ordnance. The firebombs exploded dangerously close to Marines scattered across the field, some as close as 50 yards away. The Marines shielded themselves and gasped for breath as the flash inferno sucked the oxygen from the air and burned the enemy soldiers alive.

Both contestants embroiled in the birthday battle outside Khe Sanh suffered dearly. Eighteen Marines from 2/1 died, with several dozen more wounded. One of the KIA, PFC Patrick Riordan, would posthumously receive a Silver Star for his heroism. Lieutenant Colonel William R. Duncan, the battalion commander of 2/1, also received a Silver Star. The whole battalion received a Meritorious Unit Citation. According to the 3rd Tank Battalion command chronology, May 19 cost the NVA 165 confirmed KIA. The number of dead dragged away or wounded to escape the battlefield will never be known.

In terms of percentages, the tank platoon withstood perhaps the most shocking casualties. Eleven tankers received Purple Hearts, more than half of the platoon. Six of these required medical evacuation. All five of Himes’ tanks absorbed at least three RPG hits each, with B-15 incinerating on the battlefield as a complete combat loss. Miraculously, every tanker survived.

Surgeons counted 73 shrapnel holes spread across Kellogg’s body. They extracted the largest pieces and stitched over the rest. Kellogg recuperated on the hospital ship for two weeks before stabilizing enough for a flight to Japan. He spent nearly a year fully recovering back in the States. The Corps assigned him as an instructor at the tank schoolhouse in Del Mar, Calif., to finish out his enlistment. For his role in the battle, Kellogg eventually received a Bronze Star with combat “V.”

Himes returned to the unit following his recovery. He walked with a cane but was determined once again to be with his Marines. After 10 months leading a tank platoon in combat and two harrowing medical evacuations, the battalion ordered Himes to finish out his tour in the rear. He remained on active duty following his time in Vietnam

for another two years, eventually retiring as a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve.

Cerda shuffled through multiple hospitals after May 19. He spent several days fighting a blinding headache before doctors at a U.S. Air Force hospital finally X-rayed his head. They discovered a large chunk of metal embedded in his skull and rushed Cerda into surgery. Like Kellogg, Cerda finished out his enlistment and left active duty. In recognition of his part in the ambush, the Marine Corps presented Cerda with the Silver Star.

The passage of time has clouded the memory and significance of May 19. Today, the ambush exists in the shadows of larger events that took place around Khe Sanh. The exception lies within the battle’s survivors, who lived their lives in memory of their fallen brothers and defined by the experience. Kellogg endured decades of vivid nightmares that began before he was even evacuated from the battlefield in his semi-conscious state. He was convinced he had accidentally run over Marines during the battle. The compressed chaos surrounding his tank made the possibility inevitable, he believed. He refused to discuss the battle, despite its inescapable grip and undeniable impact on his later career in law enforcement. Not until 2003 at a reunion of Vietnam tankers did, he begin to open up. The decision ushered in a new phase of camaraderie, understanding and healing.

Kellogg eventually connected with veterans from 2/1 who also survived the battle. He met a grunt who watched Kellogg’s tank in action throughout the engagement from less than 20 feet away. The veteran confirmed that Kellogg never ran over any Marines. For Kellogg, the news washed over like a cleansing rain. His nightmares vanished.

In 2008, Himes led an effort to reunite survivors on the 40th anniversary of the battle. Marines gathered from around the country at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va., to reminisce and fill each other’s gaps in understanding. Himes, Cerda, Kellogg and many others from the platoon all joined numerous others from the infantry units that played a part. The resulting picture of May 19, 1968, proved more complete than ever before.

“A focused mission that can cost you your life is something that will forge a relationship that deserves to be kept,” Himes reflected during the reunion. Those relationships forged nearly 60 years ago persist even now.

The medals for valor some of the tankers received were downgraded from Himes’ original recommendations. Himes submitted Cerda to receive the Navy Cross. The rapid disintegration of his platoon also led to awards less than fitting for the heroism exhibited. Himes penned Kellogg’s award citation in the days following the ambush, largely unaware of the depth of courage and specific actions Kellogg had taken through-out the engagement. Those details would only be filled in over the ensuing decades. Eventually, Himes learned that Cox and Conklin both received the Silver Star, Larabell a Bronze Star with “V,” and



Veterans of the May 19 battle sit for an oral history interview at a reunion of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association in Colorado Springs, Colo., in 2023. From left to right: Doc Michael Pipkin, a U.S. Navy corpsman assigned to Fox Co, 2/1; Fred Kellogg, B-12 TC; Harris Himes, platoon commander, 1st Platoon, Bravo Co, 3rd Tank Battalion; Rick Oswood, B-14 gunner and Rene Cerda, B-15 tank commander. (Courtesy of The USMC Vietnam Tankers Association)

Badger and Oswood both a Navy Commendation Medal. To this day, Himes remains convinced the valor of his men deserves much higher recognition.

“Heroism is just doing your job even though it’s scary and sometimes you’re a little scared,” Himes stated today. “The circumstances just pile up and it’s the aftermath that says whether you’re a hero. As far as I’m concerned, all my men are heroes.”

Author’s bio: Kyle Watts is the staff writer for *Leatherneck*. He served on active duty in the Marine Corps as a communications officer from 2009–13. He is the 2019 winner of the Colonel Robert Debs Heintz Jr. Award for Marine Corps History. He lives in Richmond, Va., with his wife and three children

This article was first published in *Leatherneck* magazine in August 2025. Reprinted with permission. ■

Short Stories

(Continued from page 28)

The Nam

“Every war is different, and every war is the same.”—Anthony Swofford

Vietnam veterans often refer to Vietnam as “The Nam” when discussing their experiences during the war. This tells us that the Vietnam they remember was almost a living thing; an entity if you will, as much as a place.

And it was, in fact, an entity. As the war moved along, things were constantly changing, regarding politics, missions, goals and tactics. This ever-changing dance card meant that what was true one day, was not true the next. What you did according to orders one day, was not according to orders the next. Who your ally was

one day, may have been your enemy the next. It was confusing and chaotic.

So, what year you served in Vietnam, and even what month of that particular year influenced your perspective of that experience.

And where you were in Vietnam also contributed to the myriads of experiences to be had over there. Those in the coastal regions had a far different view, than those further inland. And those along the Northern DMZ, had a much different perspective than those in the Central Highlands, and those in the Mekong Delta, and vice versa.

And what you did in the Nam, varied greatly, even with those having

the same MOS (duty classification) in different parts of the country and different times.

And of course, Vietnam was a crazy place in its own right; a foreign country which had been at war for decades. “The Nam” was a little, and in most cases a lot different for all of us who served there, especially compared to any other place we had ever seen or heard of. But our collective memories help define those experiences, as to where we were, what we did, who we were, what we saw... and who we are now.

It was “The Nam.” ■

Editor's Note: I am not too sure how we obtained the following story but unbelievably it is a grunt's view of the cover story that we feature in this issue of our magazine. And as an aside, the author attended the first day of our 2025 reunion in San Diego but he got sick and had to return home.

The Worst Day in My Life

OPERATION PEGASUS
BY SSGT CHARLES V. THOMPSON USMC
FOX COMPANY, 2ND BN, 1ST MARINES
VIETNAM 1968
SERVED 1962-1972
EMAIL: FEUCHUCKHAMCSO@AOL.COM

On April 1, 1968, I was platoon sergeant and acting platoon leader for the 3rd Platoon, Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. My Platoon had the honor of leading the attack down Highway 9 when Operation Pegasus opened. I had a tank attached to my platoon and we would use its cannon fire on likely ambush sites. Most of the time it was the 3rd platoon that would lead our company. Captain Oliver would put my platoon in the lead on moves. I was excellent at reading maps and can proudly say we were never ambushed while the 3rd led, and we never got lost or off track, where the captain wanted us to go.

We had to guard a bridge that we had captured on Route 9. We were to guard it overnight until our attack could be resumed. Well into the night we kept hearing noises from under the bridge. So, we fired M-79 rounds and threw grenades under it to deter the enemy demo teams. Then in daylight I crawled under the bridge to investigate and came face to face with a 15-foot python snake which I promptly shot three times in the head. A picture was taken of the dead snake being held by Lee Atimo Viao [misspelled] from my platoon (a Samoan) standing by a Route 9 milepost.

We are now at the Khe Sahn base and my platoon has the lines at the wreckage of the C-130 transport plane. The Company was living on the perimeter's edge, looking out into the killing fields. Some NVA bodies were still visible because we could not get a party out to bury them without NVA artillery hitting us. A no-man's land, tangle foot barbed wire crisscrossed the ground, with tripwire flares to warn of enemy movement at night and C-ration cans filled with rocks hung also along the wire. Buried in the ground were 55-gallon drums full of C-4 plastic explosives, diesel fuel and old dirty ammo, which we connected to detonating devices in our fighting positions. Mines were buried and claymores were in position in front of us.

The bunkers were both home and fighting areas. They were stockpiled with ammo and hand grenades. The trenches had emplacements built with sandbags and timber; you could almost walk around the whole base in that trench unexposed and was it muddy when it rained. The base was heavily damaged, blown-up bunkers left gaping holes, both ammo dumps had been blown in the past, casting explosive rounds about. Most of the sandbags around the bunkers

were torn and tattered fluttering in the breeze, making it look shabby. The Marines were pretty rough looking with ripped, dirty clothes, unshaven, smelly, but friendly.

We needed our morale boosted so I called for volunteers on different occasions and about five of us would sneak thru our defenses loaded with 4 to 6 grenades each. We would get on line and heave them all at once than rush back into our lines. It was quite exhilarating and a hell of a rush.

We now rotated platoons from the main supply route (MSR) minesweeping Route 9. Then did convoy and bridge security plus I would take out a 4-man killer team every so often and squad patrols within sight of the base.

On the morning of May 19th, I was ordered to prepare to engage an enemy ambush on the main supply route (MSR) within sight of the combat base. 3rd platoon led out with Company CP (Command Post) following and 1st Platoon bringing up rear. As we approached the ambush site, I went with 1st squad up the middle with 2nd squad on the right and 3rd squad on the left (on line and in echelon), and began assaulting the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) line of trenches.

By this time one tank was smoking and immobile and the second tank had been hit but still moving. My assault had reached a point that had passed all friendlies including a tank and truck that were hit by RPGs (rocket propelled grenades). 2nd squad 3rd platoon got pinned down by a volume of heavy fire. Now, 1st squad was getting hit with the same heavy fire. We took cover in a crater near the center of the road and up higher than most of the NVA trenches that dug the night before with interlocking trenches, covered by machine guns, plus RPG crews, and B-40 Rockets.

My 3rd squad, commanded by Corporal Terry Molyneux from Utah was instructed to work its way up towards my left flank. So, as to be on-line as much as possible with the NVA trenches which (some) were within 15 meters to relieve some of the fire on my position. The 2nd squad's position where they were pinned down was just too far back and too the right to be of help to either my position or the CP's position. At that moment about seven RPGs and B-40 rockets overshot the remaining tank and landed in my 3rd squad's position and killed all but Corporal Terry Molyneux and a black kid named Alexander. Immediately after that, the last tank was hit by multiple RPG fire. There was a Six by Six truck that had been hit and knocked out sitting off to our right rear that had a 50-caliber ring on it and a Marine was still firing the 50 cal. when the tank was hit. The tank drove up the rear of the truck and the Marine had to jump off. He was hit three times in the chest but later I heard he lived. We had him in our crater that we were fighting from and Doc Pipkin was tending to his wounds.

I was on the radio calling in mortar and air-strikes but someone on the radio said that it was already being done. We were pinned down by an enemy machine gun emplacement which proved to be the enemy's furthestmost

position across the MSR. I asked my 1st squad leader if he had a LAAW (66mm disposable rocket). We had to look around for one and a grunt said, "Sarge I been carrying this for three months, please use it."

The enemy machine gun position was about 75 meters up the road, almost level with our position. I took aim and (there were so many incoming rounds) my guys were yelling for me to hurry up and fire. I was popping up and down and will never know how but, that LAAW fired and exploded on a tree just above the gun. I thought I missed but, the blast killed the three NVA and the gun never fired again.

We were being assaulted and someone had taken over calling in missions so, we were repelling (killing NVA) coming into our zone. The Company CP had been over-run and all killed to a man. I still regret to this day not being able to help Captain Troy Robert Oliver Jr. and the CP group. I did not realize at the time we assaulted into the ambush that we had about 25 yards of trench to our right that held NVA that we had crossed their front and they were now to my right rear firing on the CP group even as we were pinned down by a terrific volume of machine gun fire, small arms and RPG's and B-40 rockets.

The fighting went on for 8 hours with three assaults by the NVA which were repulsed by my fighting hole which contained seven Marines plus three wounded. Golf company must have linked with Colonel Duncan's CP and also the rest of Fox company. But that was 200 yards from where my Marines were fighting for our lives.

Each time we were assaulted we pushed them back by killing them sometimes not once, but twice. I remember firing my grease gun and hitting the NVA rushing to get within grenade range and as the .45 caliber bullets hit them, they would fly backwards. And, one I really remember because I hit him in the chest with three 45's and then the next round hit him in the elbow. His elbow and arm were dangling almost off and after hitting the ground he was still struggling to get up on his feet and kill me.

Some of them would struggle to get up again as if they were on drugs and their wounds did not matter. It was quite un-nerving to watch this but, of course in a pitched battle is quite un-nerving in itself. So, we had no choice but to keep shooting at them till they were dead and stayed that way. The ones that got around our fighting position would find our dead and dying Marines and shoot them multiple times.

We had been in continuous combat for about 8 hours and I realized we were almost out of ammunition. Even though I didn't understand it, I realized that day just what we were up against here in Vietnam. They were dedicated to their ideals. They were single NVA soldiers that would attempt to crawl up as close as they could to toss grenades on us. They had no other weapons on them. And, to my way of thinking that was either stupidity or total dedication. But whichever it was, it sure was an eye opener for me. Also, they used radios to communicate. I fired at one who had a

radio on his back but when we went to find his body the radio was gone.

As the NVA were throwing grenades and shooting at us, I hollered, "Fix Bayonets!" We all looked at each other and began to laugh hysterically for a moment because, we never carried bayonets, as they were impractical in the jungle. We then got back to the business at hand.

We were running dangerously low on ammo so I got on the radio and requested a tank to support and reinforce my position because I could see it sitting on the road from the intersection of Route 9 and the road to the base maybe a 1/4 mile away. After asking for the tank to support us it began moving towards us (very slowly) and about 40 meters pass the NVA machine gun position I had destroyed with a LAWW rocket which was their anchor for their horseshoe style ambush, I began to move towards the tank so I could direct it's fire on the remaining NVA in the trenches.

During the battle we had been supported by gunships, jets with napalm, artillery, mortars and the North Vietnamese Army were still confronting us in battle. I knew where the enemy was and wanted to show the tank as a show of strength. But I did not want a repeat of Corporal Fred Kellogg's tank being missed by numerous RPGs and B-40 rockets and killing any remaining 3rd platoon Marines in the process.

I didn't know that back in 1966 they had removed the radios from the rear of the tanks which they kept in a small box. It was there for grunts like me to direct the tank where to fire. Anyway, I was up and running for it, praying I wasn't mistaken for the enemy. Also, I was worried that the RPGs and B-40 rockets being shot at the tank wouldn't miss and would get the tank and me at the same time.

I pointed to the NVA trenches and the tank pivoted to the right and began firing flechette rounds and HE at the trenches. The incoming enemy rounds began to noticeably decrease in our direction. Wasn't long before the tank crew was hard-pressed to find a target and the rest of my platoon began to mop up what we saw. We moved along and finished off what NVA remained.

This wasn't a One Marine Show. But what has bothered me all these years was why it took so long for the two Marine company's and tanks to get to us. We were under intense fire for about 8 hours and what I didn't realize was we had assaulted through the original ambush platoon and my sister platoon was still getting into assault position with our brave Skipper between us. And when he said attack, we went full force into the heart of the NVA.

I was never asked for a statement of this action and this is my first time since May 19, 1968 that I sat down and wrote down what I recalled about that terrible bloody day in May. That is why I have to change some of it, because my 3rd squad leader contacted me to correct me about not losing my whole 3rd squad.

Hell! I didn't know I was being awarded the >>

Bronze Star with Combat V until I was Medevaced while out in the field on another operation (November 10, 1968) when I collapsed into a coma. I woke up in a Hospital on Guam recovering from Japanese B Encephalitis (Sleeping Sickness) with a general placing a Bronze Star with Combat V on my robe.

CHARLES V THOMPSON
[SSGT] 2007387 USMC 1962–1972

**THE BATTALION S-3 COMBAT RECORDS (DECLASSIFIED) STATE:
PAGE 318 (1968: THE DEFINITIVE YEAR)**

An even bigger fight was yet to come. During the night of 18–19 May, the enemy moved a battalion to within two kilometers of the combat base. At about 0400, an enemy platoon attacked Company H, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines southeast of Khe Sanh along Route 9. Assaulting from all sides with heavy small arms fire, grenades, satchel charges, and RPGs, the North Vietnamese killed three Marines and wounded three others before retreating. They left behind eight dead. Almost simultaneously, an enemy company, using 60mm mortar support, probed Company I, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 552. After a short fight, the Marines heard the North Vietnamese digging in. Exchanges of fire continued throughout the night. In the morning, the Marines assaulted the nearby enemy, driving them from their positions with 42 enemy dead and 4 taken prisoner. Four Marines suffered wounds.

At 0710, 19 May, while Company I was still fighting near Hill 552, a platoon of Company F, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines and two tanks headed south from Khe Sanh along the coffee plantation road, sweeping ahead of a convoy bound for Ca Lu. About 300 meters from the road's intersection with Route 9, the Marines triggered an NVA ambush at a range of 25 meters. An enemy company, dug in, forced the Marines to take cover under a storm of automatic weapons fire, RPGs, and grenades. The Marines attempted an assault, but the enemy repulsed them, adding a heavy barrage of mortars to the Marines' discomfort. The rest of Company F, waiting at the combat base with the convoy, immediately reinforced the endangered platoon, then assaulted with the entire company. The Communists not only threw back the Marines a second time, but even left their own positions to counterattack. This time, it was Company F's turn to hold fast, and the Marines repulsed the enemy assault. Lieutenant Colonel Billy R. Duncan, the battalion commander, recalled that by this time he had arrived at the scene with a small command group. The company commander, however, had been mortally wounded and "contact during the next hour was mixed with serious probes by both sides."

Company G advanced south along the road to join the fight, killing three North Vietnamese who had sneaked to the rear of Company F. After the two companies linked up, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan asked for napalm air strikes.

According to Duncan, the enemy was anywhere between 35 to 50 yards distant from the Marine positions and too close for artillery support, therefore the call for napalm. While some of the Marines accidentally were covered by napalm jelly, the fixed-wing strikes broke the enemy "will to stay and fight." As the enemy retreated. Company E, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines struck the NVA from the flank. With the ambush site cleared, the rest of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines went to the field and searched the area south-southwest of the combat base trying to regain contact until 22 May, but met only minor resistance. During the operation, eight Marines died, including the commanders of companies F and G, and 34 fell wounded. The battalion captured three North Vietnamese and reported killing 113, of whom 69 were found in the ambush site.

The enemy troops killed and captured by the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines were described as "clean, well dressed, and neatly groomed." According to Lieutenant Colonel Duncan, one of the prisoners stated the enemy mission was to "stop all movement along Route 9." This did not match the depiction of the enemy forces in the Khe Sanh area as defeated and on the run.

To realize that my Marines and I lay under fire for almost 8 hours because some higher ups were holding back our ground and tank support because they were afraid of a bigger NVA attack on the base is very disturbing to me for this reason. How could the higher ups hold back support for over 8 hours while we were in a continuous firefight thinking the base would be hit? Wouldn't it stand to reason that my unit was stopping any enemy movement towards the base. I have talked [by e-mail] with a tanker and a 2/1 company CO. and both apologized for not being able to come to our aid that day.

One of my sister companies was twice moved on the base perimeter and could hear the firefight and are still disturbed to this day that they could not come to our aid. The tanker that I talked to was in a tank at the base and was held back from helping my unit. The tank that finally came to our aid is the one I saw down the road and requested by radio for aid and said on prc-25 Fox net, "I can see a tank down the road, can he assist us due to my unit being almost out of ammo." And only then did the tank start moving towards my position and finally reached us and began its fire which broke all the rest of resistance.

I do not mean to sound bitter but deep down I guess that I really am because I feel some of my comrades might still be alive if ... and that's where I stop with "IF." That's a big word in combat and to use it afterwards is not right. What happened, happened, because that is the way it is in a firefight or a battle that's fought and 'nuff said.

CHARLES V THOMPSON
[SSGT] 2007387 USMC 1962–1972

THE TRIP OVER

BY RICHARD C HECOX, II (RVN CLASS OF 1967)
12 APRIL 2025

SUMMARY: Many USMC tankers traveled to Vietnam by commercial aircraft as individual replacements. However, our tank platoon traveled aboard ship. This is an attempt to revisit some of the adventures experienced along the way.

OCS: My Marine Corps experience started as a student at the Colorado School of Mines, Golden CO. The college was a land-grant school and Army ROTC was required for all U.S. freshmen and sophomore men. One day in the ROTC building, I noticed an announcement on the bulletin board about a USMC OCS program, the Platoon Leader's Class. I contacted the Officer Selection Office in Denver CO and ended up joining in 1962. I had no idea what adventures were ahead! Normally, two six-week training sessions were spent in Quantico VA during summer breaks and a commission awarded at college graduation. However, in the second PLC summer session, a severely sprained ankle on the infamous Hill Trail cost me two weeks on crutches and a return to Quantico a year later to repeat the session after college graduation.

BASIC SCHOOL: After commissioning, new officers attended The Basic School in Quantico for six months. However, since Vietnam was ramping up, the program was shortened to five months. At Basic School, we saw demonstrations from various MOS specialties including tanks. I was impressed enough to request tanks and fortunate enough to be assigned to tracked-vehicle school after Basic School.

TANK SCHOOL: 12 lieutenants from our Basic School class were assigned to tracked-vehicle school at Camp Pendleton CA, specifically Camp Delmar on the Pacific Ocean. No one knew ahead of time who would be selected for tanks or amtracs. Seven of us were assigned to tanks and five to amtracs. Most had orders to WESPAC after tracked-vehicle school, meaning Vietnam.

WESPAC ORDERS: Part way through tank school at Camp Pendleton, our orders were changed and four of us were sent to brand-new A-Company, 5th Tank Battalion at Camp Las Flores in Camp Pendleton. The new company didn't have tanks yet but sixteen new or rebuilt M48A3 gun tanks, three M67A2 flame tanks, plus a dozer tank arrived a couple weeks after we did. Trucks, Jeeps, a truck wrecker and tank retriever also arrived.

FIFTH TANK BATTALION: Personnel from around the Marine Corps were being transferred to the new A Company, Fifth Tank Battalion, Fifth Marine Division. Capt. Pete Byrne was the Company Commander, 1/Lt Dick Ruhlman the XO, 1/LT Mike Smith the Supply Officer, CWO-4 "Ace"

Drummond the Maintenance Officer. 2/LT Bob Larkin was the First Platoon Leader, 2/LT Paul Goodine the Second Platoon Leader, 2/LT William "Torrie" Cole the Headquarter Platoon Leader, and I was the Third Platoon Leader. GySgt Jerry Mittelstadt was the Third Platoon Sergeant, S/Sgt Coleridge Williams Jr the Heavy Section Leader, Sgt L. H. Folkers the Light Section Leader. About half of the Third Platoon were draftees and, in my opinion, the best of the group.

TRAINING: As soon as the new vehicles arrived, we began training at Camp Las Flores, often from dawn to well after dark. Once we became familiar with our equipment, we also started training with infantry companies from 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines at Camp Pulgas. Our platoon even ran the hand-grenade range at Camp Pulgas one day for the entire battalion. Everyone was required to throw a live hand grenade prior to Vietnam. Prior to deployment, mechanic Corporal Morris and I attended a three-week embarkation training course at Camp Pendleton taught by Navy instructors from San Diego. I didn't realize it at the time, but the embarkation class would become quite useful later.

26th MARINE REGIMENT: A-Company First Tank Platoon was attached to the 1st Battalion 26th Marines and deployed to Vietnam with BLT 1/26. Second Platoon was attached and deployed with BLT 2/26. Our tank company headquarters deployed with 26th Marines Headquarters to Okinawa. My Third Tank Platoon deployed with BLT 3/26 in September 1966. Each BLT rotated overseas sequentially about 6–8 weeks apart. >>



Curiously, after BLT 2/26 deployed overseas, I found a new Winchester M14 rifle in an empty barracks wall locker at Camp Pulgas while on weekend duty.

SHIPS: After embarkation school, Cpl. Morris and I were each assigned an additional MOS and placed in charge of loading Navy ships which carried most of our battalion vehicles, including tanks and amtracs. Our first loading plan was for the USS BELLE GROVE (LSD-2), a WW2-vintage amphibious ship with a cruising speed of about 13 ½ knots. I drove to San Diego to get the ship captain's signature on the plan prior to loading. The captain was quite alarmed when he saw the large quantity of high-explosive ammo we were planning to carry inside our vehicles. I finally convinced him there wasn't room for it anywhere else and he said "Well, at least if we blow up, we'll go in style!" and signed the loading plan.

LOADING: At overseas deployment, Third Tank Platoon equipment consisted of five M48A3 gun tanks, one M38A1 Jeep with trailer, one M54 five-ton truck with trailer, and a 2 ½-ton fuel tanker. Personnel included tank crewmen, truck drivers, radio operators, and mechanics. All BLT 3/26 vehicles were staged at Camp Delmar on the Pacific coast and loaded on the USS BELLE GROVE, anchored off shore. We traveled from shore to ship in Navy landing craft and coordinated loading using radios between ship and shore. I was responsible for loading five different amphibious ships before arriving in Vietnam, our final destination. The earlier embarkation class was put to good use.

LONG BEACH: After boarding the BELLE GROVE and sending my wife and parents home to Nebraska, we steamed north up the California coast and docked at The Port of Long Beach for three days. Another ship, an AKA cargo vessel, was to convoy overseas with us but wasn't finished loading. After the AKA was finally loaded, we headed west in September 1966 and watched the USA horizon slowly disappear in the distance, a weird feeling. Four Marine officers were on board the USS BELLE GROVE. The CO of troops was 1/LT Donald "Buck" Egan, Anti-Tank (Ontos) Platoon Leader. Marines on board conducted physical exercises and running laps around the ship but soon stopped after light bulbs began breaking in the CPO quarters below decks. The ship's Gunnery Officer once broke out several Thompson .45-caliber submachine guns and we shot at empty milk containers floating by. Some of us were also introduced to the "sea bat", a strange creature captured and viewed inside a bucket.

HAWAII: The first stop was Pearl Harbor, where we manned the rails and saluted the USS ARIZONA in passing and a Marine band greeted us at the dock. We spent the first day playing touch football near the ship, or as the platoon sergeant call it "organized grab-ass". A day or so later, the ship's doctor, Navy LT Mike Cheney and I rented a Volkswagen and scuba gear and went diving in nearby Hanauma Bay. Later that evening, I looked up a former

college roommate who lived in Honolulu, hoping to get a tour of the city. However, he was more interested in the ship so we ended up touring the USS BELLE GROVE instead.

PACIFIC TYPHOON: We departed Pearl Harbor after three days and headed toward Okinawa along with the AKA sister ship. About halfway to Okinawa, the ship received weather reports of two or three typhoons in our path. The convoy attempted to navigate between storms but ran smack into the middle of a large typhoon. We experienced 100-foot swells, 40 feet above the bridge, and spent an entire day using all the ship's power just to maintain our heading into the fierce wind. The ship was rolling up to 46 degrees and a Navy Beachmaster Unit bulldozer broke loose in the well deck slamming side to side with each roll, shaking the entire ship. The dozer blade eventually cut a gash in an inboard water storage tank so we were immediately put on fresh-water rations for the duration of the trip. Each ship lost one radar in the storm but fortunately the AKA had two radars and was able to keep track of both ships to avoid a collision. Try sleeping in a ship's bunk while rolling 46 degrees! I had the run of the ship and went around taking pictures with my Kodak 8mm movie camera. I assumed this must just be the typhoon part of a typical trip! Oddly, I don't remember any of us getting seasick.

OKINAWA: We arrived in Okinawa without further incident and disembarked from the BELLE GROVE. The ship's officers had given us a nice sendoff by serving baked Alaska for our last meal on board! We were met at the dock by Capt. Byrne who rode on my tank through local villages to the A-Company headquarters camp. We had a brief inspection and found no serious damage to our vehicles during the typhoon. Several days later, we loaded on another ship I have forgotten the name of and headed toward the Philippines.

PHILIPPINES: We arrived at the Subic Bay Navy Base and unloaded once again. We stayed in new barracks with no bunks so we slept on air mattresses on concrete floors. Liberty was granted in nearby Olongapo City with its' unique exotic odor. I even tried my hand at skeet shooting on the base. We did have an opportunity for a couple days of excellent live-fire training at Red Beach Training Site on the west shore of Subic Bay. One tank became seriously mired in a swamp and it took several tries to pull it out using all four other tanks connected together. One of our Forward Air Control Officers asked if he could drive a tank and was super impressed when I let him drive while I rode next to him. We were called back from Red Beach a day early to have Thanksgiving turkey with the infantry battalion. I would have much preferred another day or two of live-fire training!

MINDORO: Each Marine BLT was required to conduct a practice amphibious landing exercise prior to arrival in Vietnam. The island of Mindoro in the Philippines was the location for our landing. Since tanks are notorious

for destroying terrain, our platoon was flown in by UH-34 helicopters to be aggressors—our tanks remained aboard ship. GySgt Mittelstadt took half the platoon to one location and I took the other half to another hideout where we spent four days harassing the BLT 3/26 infantry companies on shore. My group had only two M14 rifles to fire blanks so we spent most of the time sneaking around and sniping at the infantry. We wore soft covers to look somewhat different from the infantry and helicopters were always overhead looking for us.

AGGRESSOR CAMP: We slept on the ground next to a small house where an older Filipino man lived alone and claimed to have been a guerilla fighter against the Japanese in WW2. He treated us as guests and invited the troops to camp fires at night and swapped stories. Most of the troops slept in his house on the last night of our stay. One day, a tanker aggressor noticed Filipino outrigger canoes nearby and proposed an idea that was too crazy to pass up. Two of our men got in two outrigger canoes covered by palm branches. In exchange for two C-ration meals, the outriggers paddled out to the helicopter carrier where our two aggressors jumped in the water and attached an empty C-ration box to the hull of the ship. The box was marked "50-LB BOMB". The two were captured shortly after, but the bomb was still attached to the ship. As a result, helicopters stopped flying for the remainder of that day – their landing platform was "disabled".

HIKE: After the landing exercise, we helicoptered to the 3/26 battalion perimeter where I reported we had four rifles and 22 pistols. The battalion XO told us we should return to the ship. On the way out of the perimeter, I grabbed two cases of C-rations for something to eat during the hike to the ship, several miles away. None of us were keen on a long hike plus it was getting dark. GySgt Mittelstadt then exchanged both cases of C-rations to two Filipino Jeepney drivers for rides to the ship. Each Jeepney carried 13 plus driver—Gunny and I rode on the front fenders. It was a slow drive but it beat a long hike, especially at night!

SUBIC BAY: Our ship returned again to the Subic Navy Base where we unloaded vehicles and reloaded on another ship within a 24-hour window due to tight schedules. I was overseeing loading when I heard breaking glass and metal crunching behind me. I turned just in time to see a flat, crumpled pile of metal emerge from underneath one of our tanks. Unfortunately, in the haste to offload and reload ships, one of the tanks backed over the Shore Party Platoon Leader's M422 Mighty Mite quarter-ton vehicle! He was not pleased but fortunately, the vehicle was unoccupied at the time. The only salvageable part was the spare tire. A fork lift picked up the flattened wreck and laid it in a shed nearby—that's the last I ever saw of it. A later investigation concluded the incident was an accident! After we were finally loaded once again and anchored in Subic Bay, I went ashore on a liberty launch and overheard two Navy

submarine officers discussing aggressors that bombed a Navy helicopter carrier in a recent training exercise. I just smiled—apparently the word was out in the fleet!

SOUTH CHINA SEA: After leaving The Philippines for the last time, we convoyed with two different ships to the South China Sea off the coast of South Vietnam. We were officially Special Landing Force 3/26, available for rapid response to any units requesting assistance ashore.



Camp Carroll

We cruised offshore for a few weeks, coming just close enough to Vietnam for the Navy crews to qualify for combat pay! The monsoon season was starting and apparently not enough action required our rapid response so we disembarked from the ships and detached from BLT 3/26.

DONG HA: The ship anchored off the northern coast of I Corps where landing craft ferried detached platoons up the Cua Viet River to the Marine Base at Dong Ha. We were met by 1/LT Ray Kinkead, A-Company 3d Tank Battalion XO. We spent the first night in Dong Ha listening to nervous, green troops from 3/26 shooting at imaginary shadows infiltrating the perimeter! The next day we convoyed several miles west of Dong Ha along Vietnam Route 9 to Camp Carroll where we took up residence in the monsoon mud. We were informed by Company Commander, Capt. Arn Facklam, that we were now First Platoon, A Company, Third Tank Battalion. It was December 1966 and the real adventure for us was about to begin. Unfortunately, LT Egan, Sgt Folkers, and S/Sgt Williams did not survive the Vietnam adventure. This story is dedicated to them.



Built By Kansas Citians, Embraced by the Nation



Soon after World War I ended, Kansas City leaders formed the Liberty Memorial Association (LMA) to create a lasting monument to the men and women who had served in the war. In 1919, the LMA and citizens of Kansas City raised more than \$2.5 million in just 10 days. The equivalent of more than \$40 million today, this staggering accomplishment reflected the passion of public sentiment for the Great War that had dramatically changed the world.

In 1921, more than 100,000 people gathered to see the supreme Allied commanders dedicate the site of the Liberty Memorial. This was the first time in history these five leaders were together in one place.

Construction on the classical Egyptian Revival-style monument was completed in 1926 and the Liberty Memorial was dedicated by President Calvin Coolidge in front of more than 150,000 people.

In the years following its unveiling, the Liberty Memorial proved to be a dynamic addition to Kansas City's cultural offerings. Over time, however, the physical structure of the Liberty Memorial deteriorated, and it was closed in 1994 due to safety concerns.

Once again, Kansas Citians voiced their support for the Liberty Memorial and, in 1998, they passed a limited-run sales tax to support the restoration. In addition to revitalizing the Memorial, plans took shape to expand the site by building a museum to better showcase the WWI-related objects and documents the LMA had been collecting since 1920.

Thanks to the support of the City of Kansas City, the State of Missouri, the United States Government, and generous individual donors, more than \$102 million was raised for the restoration and expansion.

In 2004, the Museum and Memorial was designated by Congress as the nation's official World War I Museum, and construction started on a new 80,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art museum and the Edward Jones Research Center underneath the Liberty Memorial.

The Liberty Memorial was designated a National Historic Landmark on Sept. 20, 2006, recognizing the monument as a nationally significant historic property. It is a distinction given to less than 40 historic properties in Missouri and slightly more than 2,500 in the United States.

The National WWI Museum and Memorial opened in 2006 to national acclaim. Since then, more than two million people have visited the museum, including Former Vice President Dick Cheney, General Colin Powell, President Barack Obama (as a presidential candidate in 2008), Senator John McCain and actor and singer Kevin Costner. Additionally, Frank Buckles, America's last surviving WWI veteran, visited the Museum and Memorial over Memorial Day weekend in 2008.

In 2014, the Museum and Memorial received a second designation from Congress, effectively recognizing it as the National WWI Museum and Memorial.

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 –	BBQ dinner at hotel paid by the VTA
Sunday Sept 13th	Departure Day	

TRAVEL SUGGESTION:

Fly to Kansas City International–(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:

Two queen beds

Free breakfast- Free Wi Fi – Free Parking

Room reservation cutoff date: 08/20/26

- 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/csgf-bhx-usm-f32c51f1-44f3-47f1-bad9-332b724244cc/>

Please note: This mini-reunion requires all attendees to fill out and mail in a reunion registration form and to pay 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 for one evening.

USMC VTA 2026 MINI-REUNION
September 10 – 13, 2026
Homewood Suites KC International Airport
7312 NW Polo Drive | Kansas City, MO 64153
Phone: 816.880.9880

Please Print All

Name: _____

Guest's Name (s): _____

Address: _____

Town: _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Cell Phone _____ Home Phone: _____

E-mail Address: _____

Would you like to participate in our video interview program? Yes _____ No _____

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

Please note that this is a mini-reunion for three days. We will not be conducting any special events other than visiting the National World War One museum and catering a BBQ dinner at the hotel. All other meals will be on your own.

To cover the bus transportation, the one dinner and the Slopchute beverages, please pay: **\$75 per person**. Mail completed form and your reunion registration check to:

USMC VTA
c/o Ron Knight
6665 Burnt Hickory Drive
Hoschton, GA 30548-8280



2026 USMC VTA
MINI REUNION
KANSAS CITY, MO
September 10 - 13

The fully restored National WWI Museum and Memorial re-opened in 2006 to international acclaim. Since then, more than 600,000 people visited the Museum and Memorial each year.



World Famous Kansas City BBQ cannot be beat, anywhere!

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

USMC Vietnam Tankers Association

16605 Forest Green Terrace, Elbert, CO 80106-8937

Please note: If the last two digits of "EXPIRATION:" above your address label is "25" or lower your 2026 membership dues are now due.

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

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

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

You can use the enclosed self-addressed business envelope...

