

**The following material has been excerpted from  
*NO KIDS, NO MONEY AND A CHEVY:*  
*A Politically Incorrect Memoir*  
By Chuck Mansfield  
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## **Part II. The Vietnam Era**

*I have come to know that the tears of a veteran seldom dry and are rarely seen. They teeter precariously on the rims of aging eyes, spilling mostly at the time of remembrance, borne from pride and the responsibility entrusted to them as they made their way through the horrors of combat.*

*Flashbacks emerge from the simplest stimulants. They are images that aren't remembered until one accidentally brushes up against them, like hitting a forgotten wound that hadn't quite healed. A wound that shouldn't heal. Is there such a thing? A wound that shouldn't heal?*

*- A Daughter of a Veteran*

# 7

## **Marine Corps Officer Candidates School 26 July – 4 September 1965**

*Some people spend an entire lifetime wondering if they made a difference. The Marines don't have that problem.*  
- President Ronald Reagan

**G**eneral Charles C. Krulak, the thirty-first Commandant of the Marine Corps, has said: “The Marines really provide only two essential services to our nation: We make Marines; we win battles.”

General Carl E. Mundy is “Chuck” Krulak’s immediate predecessor as commandant (from 1991-1995). I had the pleasure of meeting him for the first time in Quantico, Virginia, in 1992 at the retirement ceremony of my friend and fellow Chaminade alumnus, Major General Matthew C. Caulfield. General Mundy and I met again after his retirement at a Marine Corps University Foundation luncheon in New York City a few years later. He has written words that are inspirational, whether one has served in the Corps or not.

Being a Marine is a state of mind that comes from an imbedded belief that he or she is, in fact, unique, a cut above. A Marine is, most of all, part of an organization that demands a difference – and delivers excellence beyond others in all it is and does.

Being a Marine comes from the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor that is tattooed indelibly on the innermost being of those privileged to earn the title. It is a searing mark, one that does not fade over time.

Few who have borne the title fail to identify with it throughout their entire lives.

These are words I applaud but then they are from Marines and I confess to a certain pro-Marine bias. Consider what Rear Admiral Paul T. Gillcrist, USN (Ret.), a 1946 Chaminade alumnus, says about the Corps:

...becoming a Marine is probably the best thing that (a) young man could do with his life regardless of how long he stays in (the Corps).

There is simply no other form of discipline that molds a young man's sense of purpose and personal accountability as well as service in the Marine Corps...and that from a former Navy man should be viewed as a great compliment. He can't go wrong.



In the spring of 1965 Lieutenant Colonel Donald McKeon, USMC, was the Marine Corps Officer Instructor at the Navy R.O.T.C. at Holy Cross. In addition to teaching us "Marine Science," he was preparing us for our first true taste of Marine Corps training. I refer to Officer Candidates School (OCS), which is located at the Marine Corps Development and Educational Center (then called Marine Corps Schools or MCS) in Quantico, Virginia, about forty-five minutes by car south of our nation's capital.

Lt. Col. McKeon took pains with us to explain the ins and outs, the dos and don'ts, of OCS. He also recommended that our group of "candidates" travel to Quantico together and, more importantly, report for training in a group, which would virtually guarantee our being in the same platoon for the seven weeks of boot camp for would-be officers. It worked.

Those from my Holy Cross class who went to OCS that summer included Roger Hunt, Bob Lund, Ed Matthews, Dick Morin, Steve O'Neill, Bill Sheridan, Jim Stokes, Frank Teague and me. All of us were assigned to OCS's Sixth Platoon under the command of Staff Sergeant William Surette, Jr. USMC, alias Wild Bill, already a Vietnam veteran. A native of Olean, New York, he was salty (an old hand), much as the vernacular of some of those in his charge would soon become.

The platoon consisted of some forty-two young men, approximately twenty-one years of age, from all over the country. None of us knew what to expect, except that OCS would not be a picnic. And therein lies a story.

President Lyndon B. Johnson was in office and his younger daughter, Luci Baines Johnson (who shared her Dad's initials, along with the rest of the family, Lady Bird, the president's wife, and Lynda Bird, his elder daughter), was dating her future husband, one Patrick Nugent, who was an Air Force enlisted man. The president, however, encouraged her to make

the rounds of various military installations as a goodwill ambassadress, if you will, to encourage our men in the military. After all, the conflict in Vietnam was escalating substantially, and many of those in uniform at the time could use a generous helping of encouragement.

Well, one weekend, the young and charming Luci made her way to a picnic that was held on the base at Quantico. Some officer candidates, including our own Ed Matthews, attended – in uniform, of course. An iffy day weatherwise, the sky was overcast and some precipitation appeared likely.

At the very moment Ed shook hands with the president's daughter, he and she felt the first drops of rain. After exchanging pleasantries, Ms. Johnson commented on what a lovely time she was having and how much she appreciated the presence of the Marines at the picnic.

Completely unwittingly, I am convinced, Ed offered the following: "It's nice to be here with you too, Miss. Too bad it had to fuckin' rain."

Her eyes suddenly glazed over like those of a deer caught in headlights, Ms. Johnson quickly let go of Ed's hand and excused herself.

Relative extrema, anyone?



One of the first things that happened at OCS was the ritual of having our heads "shaved." As a former barber, I can say with some confidence that administering this haircut required no tonsorial expertise whatsoever. All that was involved was the application of electric clippers to the entire scalp; it was, in essence, a shearing. Thus, one's hair was cut as close as possible without actually being shaved. Each sitting for this service took approximately forty seconds. Thereafter, we were to keep our haircut "high and tight," although it was permissible to let it grow out on top, which wouldn't be excessive, given OCS's 41-day duration.

Next we candidates had to report to an outdoor area paved with concrete and surrounded by a six-foot-high chain-link fence. Here each of us was given clothing that included summer service uniforms, covers (military hats called "piss cutters"), utilities (fatigues), combat boots, "Mickey Mouse" uniforms and "782 gear."

The Mickey Mouse apparel consisted of a red baseball-type cap with a yellow M stitched on its crown, a bright yellow shirt with the letters USMC emblazoned in red on its front, red gym shorts with a small pocket and a round Marine Corps eagle, globe and anchor insignia patch stitched to the right front, and sneakers.

The 782 gear was decidedly more military: canteens, entrenching tool, ammunition belt, ammo pouches, helmet (both the steel pot and the light-weight silver liner worn under it, or by itself), bayonet, and various other items essential to the would-be trained killers we aspired to become.



Gunnery Sergeant Tolson was the “Gunny” for all of OCS, then possibly the senior enlisted Marine in the organization. He was so tough that it was said he held his socks up with thumb tacks. Be that as it may, one of his collateral duties was personally to make a presentation to all officer candidates on the importance of a message that is ubiquitous today: Don’t drink and drive. At that time, the military services were losing too many men from drunk driving accidents.

Well, it was apparent from the outset of his talk on this subject that the Gunny was not accustomed to public speaking. Yes, he would generally get his message across but he lacked poise and had a tendency toward malapropisms. Perhaps he was just nervous. Anyway, as his presentation reached its crescendo, his message lost some of its potential impact when he stressed the urgency of “not drinking under the influence.”

*There are two types of people: Marines and those who wish they were. – Bumper Sticker*

At 5:25 each morning our platoon was awakened by Wild Bill Surette, who would switch on the bright overhead lights in our squad bay (living quarters) and shout us out of the rack (bed). From that moment all forty-two of us had five minutes to wake up, don our Mickey Mouse gear, visit the head (bathroom) and be outside in platoon formation for PT (physical training). PT consisted of calisthenics and a run of, say, a mile or two just to get the blood

circulating well prior to morning chow and the main work of the day. Ed Matthews dubbed the still sleepy platoon formation “The Symphony,” his classic code for the amazing volume of audible flatulence that was forthcoming from the candidates as they waited to be called to attention.

*It is best for flatulence to pass without noise and breaking, though it is better for it to pass with noise than to be intercepted and accumulated internally.* – Hippocrates, circa 420 B.C.

Of OCS, Staff Sergeant Joseph Gilkerson, USMC, has written that “A candidate will be pushed to his maximum potential and will be evaluated every moment of every day, but there is no brutality – except brutal honesty in appraising one’s performance.” His comment is nowadays presumed true, but there were a few instances at OCS in the summer of 1965 that could have been termed “brutal.”

One of Wild Bill’s platoon leader peers was a certain Sergeant Puida, a former DI (drill instructor) from the Marine Corps boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. (The oldest training center for Marines, which is located there, has the proper name of Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island.) “Puida the Red-Headed Pervert” was his nickname. “Pervert” is probably too strong a term but he *was* brutal to some of those in his platoon, often getting fist-physical with some candidates.

Of Parris Island, General Mundy has written, “Through this gate, and others like it in San Diego, California, and Quantico, Virginia, thousands of young Americans pass to accept the challenge to become a Marine.”

“During the weeks in this forge,” as Mundy has portrayed it, “young bodies harden, maturity emerges, minds focus, confidence grows, brotherhood takes form, and pride begins to tingle. At their conclusion, ‘recruit’ or ‘candidate’ becomes ‘Marine’... The new Marine knows that he or she has passed through a trial that others have not dared, and has gained acceptance in a storied band of brothers: The few...the proud...the Marines.”

**Marines.com**, the Corps’ web site, has its own inspirational language that, not surprisingly, is focused on recruiting:

ONE MUST FIRST BE STRIPPED CLEAN. FREED OF ALL THE FALSE NOTIONS OF SELF.

IT IS THE MARINE CORPS THAT WILL STRIP AWAY THE FAÇADE SO EASILY CONFUSED WITH SELF. IT IS THE CORPS THAT WILL OFFER THE PAIN NEEDED TO BUY THE TRUTH. AND AT LAST, EACH WILL OWN THE PRIVILEGE OF LOOKING INSIDE HIMSELF TO DISCOVER WHAT TRULY RESIDES THERE.

UNHAPPINESS DOES NOT ARISE FROM THE WAY THINGS ARE BUT RATHER FROM A DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY THINGS ARE AND THE WAY WE BELIEVE THEY SHOULD BE.

COMFORT IS AN ILLUSION. A FALSE SECURITY BRED FROM FAMILIAR THINGS AND FAMILIAR WAYS. IT NARROWS THE MIND. WEAKENS THE BODY. AND ROBS THE SOUL OF SPIRIT AND DETERMINATION. COMFORT IS NEITHER WELCOME NOR TOLERATED HERE.

YOU WITHIN YOURSELF. THERE IS NO ONE ELSE TO RELY ON, AND WHEN THE SELF IS EXHAUSTED, NO ONE TO LIFT YOU UP.

BUT FINALLY WE WAKE TO REALIZE THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO GET THROUGH THIS, AND THAT IS TOGETHER.

THERE IS ONLY DETERMINATION. THERE IS ONLY SINGLE MINDED DESIRE. NOT ONE AMONG THEM IS WILLING TO GIVE UP. NOT ONE AMONG THEM WOULD EXCHANGE TORMENT FOR FREEDOM. FINALLY, THEY JUST WANT TO BE MARINES.

ONCE YOU'VE WALKED THROUGH FIRE AND SURVIVED, LITTLE ELSE CAN BURN.

BUT FIRST, A FINAL TEST WILL TAKE EVERYTHING THAT IS LEFT INSIDE. WHEN THIS IS OVER, THOSE THAT STAND WILL REACH OUT WITH DIRTY, CALLUSED HANDS TO CLAIM THE EAGLE, GLOBE AND ANCHOR. AND THE TITLE UNITED STATES MARINE.

WE CAME AS ORPHANS. WE DEPART AS FAMILY.

The training itself might be described as brutal but only by those who don't understand the Marines' mission or discipline. For example, my OCS class underwent training with pugil sticks. Designed to simulate hand-to-hand combat with a bayonet-fixed M-14 rifle, a pugil stick was approximately four-to-five feet long and had thick padding on each end. Wearing helmets,

two candidates of similar size and weight would be selected to fight each other with these improvised weapons until one of them was on the deck (ground), vanquished but definitely not unconscious. In actual combat, the loser invariably would suffer a terminal bayonet thrust, or be captured.

*The Marine confronts his enemy as a fierce, depersonalized warrior.*

- *The Marines*, Marine Corps Heritage Foundation

I remember well my own feeling of reluctance – not trepidation – as I went up against a fellow candidate from neighboring Fifth Platoon, a candidate I happened to like and respect. To this day I can still see his face. (I'm quite sure his last name began with a P but that's the best I can do after thirty-seven years.) He and I squared off and, on command, began our interpersonal battle. It didn't last long but, after some initial sparring, we went at it with a vengeance. I managed to strike a solid blow to the left side of his head and knock him down, surprising myself in winning the contest so quickly. I helped him to his feet and we shook hands; I'm confident there were no hard feelings. To me this was our Corps at its finest.

*First to fight for right and freedom, and to keep our honor clean, we are proud to claim the title of United States Marine.*

- From *The Marines' Hymn*

Another OCS highlight – if it can be called that – was, unlike the pugil-stick exercise, not directly interpersonal. The Hill Trail, as it was known, is a topographical nightmare, at least in the view of some of those who have experienced its exceptional challenges. Hardly a hill-and-vale environment, it is a series of very steep parallel ridges.

On a wickedly hot and humid July evening, Sgt. Surette led his platoon on a forced march in full combat gear up and down the Hill Trail for miles – I don't recall how many but it was a long, arduous procession in wilderness and unforgiving terrain.

More than a few candidates, some of them vomiting, fell out along the route of march. Others suffering from heat stroke or heat prostration or sheer exhaustion were evacuated to sick bay (the infirmary). Six-bys (Marine troop transport trucks) with corpsmen were situated on the

ridge lines with trash cans full of ice to treat the serious heat casualties. In sum, the Hill Trail is so grueling that men have actually died attempting to negotiate it.

Suffice it to say that, when we reached our destination in a clearing on a hilltop in the middle of a wooded Quantico nowhere, I immediately consumed *both* of my canteens of water, a half-gallon, I believe. I did it with ease, and haven't done it before or since. Each of us who completed the Hill Trail was awed by what he had just endured, and elated it was over. In fact, some candidates called it "brutal."

Upon reflection I came to comprehend that this test of one's physical limits was negotiable for me in no small part because of Coach Joe Thomas's football drills at Chaminade. Indeed, they were my first experiences with grueling physical exercise. Thus, Coach had unwittingly prepared me for the Hill Trail four years beforehand.

As for Sgt. Surette, he seemed inexhaustible and unaffected.



Wild Bill was a comedian, albeit maybe unwittingly. During at least one outdoor rifle inspection, he endowed us with images that are, for those of us who witnessed him in action, indelible. Sgt. Bill Surette's performances were remarkable, and many qualify as excellent examples of relative extrema.

The semi-automatic 7.62mm M-14 rifle, which was about to be replaced by the Corps with the 5.56mm M-16 fully automatic weapon, was then touted as a Marine's best friend. Thus, even today, every Marine, enlisted or officer, is trained as a rifleman first and foremost, and must qualify annually on the rifle range. As Francis Parkman once wrote, there is "no better companion than the rifle."

A big part of this companionship is the care and maintenance of the rifle itself. The weapon must be regularly disassembled and its parts cleaned and lubricated. The piece's bore (barrel) must also be cleaned, especially after firing, to remove any carbon deposits therein. In the rifling grooves inside the bore, however, minute carbon deposits can become trapped and hidden. Any movement – marching, for example – can dislodge one or more of these tiny

particles, which can easily be seen in the light of day, especially against an otherwise clean and shiny bore. To be sure, some guys thought a clean rifle was nigh impossible.

I am certainly not picking on Ed Matthews but I believe it was his rifle that evoked one of Wild Bill's most memorable denunciations. There again on a stifling summer day was our hapless candidate face to face with his drill instructor.

"Present arms!" commanded Sgt. Surette. Ed quickly and crisply obliged.

Again on command, Candidate Matthews next presented his rifle to Sgt. Surette for actual inspection, at which, of course, the latter was long accomplished.

With a keen eye Wild Bill examined the bore of Ed's M-14, in which, alas, he spied a speck of carbon.

"*Who...shit...in...your...bore, Matthews?*" Wild Bill queried, slowly for effect.

Our platoon sergeant spoke with sufficient volume to enable all of us to hear his question. As you can well imagine, despite the seriousness of a rifle inspection in Marine Corps culture, for us it was difficult in the extreme to keep a straight face in such circumstance. Be that as it may, even a smirk on one's face, let alone laughter, would earn the errant candidate extra duty or outright punishment for his infraction of military discipline. In fact, it was also Marine Corps tradition that, if a candidate or recruit screwed up, the entire platoon would frequently receive group punishment for the misdeed of just one. This could result in the administration of a "blanket party" (a pummeling) while the offending platoon member slept.

Quite possibly on the same day, another candidate in our platoon had a similar run-in with Wild Bill. His name was Carl Houle, whose surname is properly pronounced *hool*. From the beginning of our six weeks at OCS, our illustrious platoon sergeant insisted on calling Carl *hoolee*.

As he eyed the bore of Carl's weapon, Wild Bill saw therein a small insect, whereupon he declared, once more in full voice, "*Hoolee, there's a h o m e s t e a d e r* in your bore!" I thought Carl was going to convulse.

Once more, all of us almost lost it.

*To err is human, to forgive is divine. However, neither is Marine Corps policy.*

– Bumper Sticker

Speaking of penalty for violation of Sgt. Surette's or OCS's rules, I had an interesting confrontation with our platoon's supreme leader over, of all things, a loaf of banana bread. Please bear in mind that, until this incident, neither Sgt. Surette nor OCS nor the Marine Corps itself had any proscription against a candidate receiving, or being in possession of, banana bread in any quantity. But all this may have changed since 1965 and my unfortunate receipt then of the offending loaf.

Mame mailed me a banana bread, which she had baked herself at home. It was meant as a loving gesture, which I would, in retrospect, perhaps more fully appreciate under normal conditions, for which Wild Bill Surette's Quantico would simply never qualify. By the way, Mame's banana bread is the best on the planet. On this point Bob Lund has reprimanded me, at least lightly. He maintains that "categorizing the banana bread as the best on the planet raises all kinds of credibility issues. It may well be, but how would you know without the kind of exhaustive research that would probably bankrupt you, unless, of course, you received a grant or something." Incredible.

Late one afternoon, Sixth Platoon had just returned to its squad bay to change uniforms and get ready for evening chow (dinner). During this brief but savored "down" time, I received word that I was to report immediately to Sgt. Surette's office. This instilled in me a sense of foreboding similar to that I had felt upon being summoned to Father Charles Dunn's office two years earlier.



"I think you have a helluva nerve for not writing in over a week. Just because I called you up, doesn't mean you can stop writing. – Okay, I'm finished. But no kiddin' – why don't you write more often. And also why don't you send me some cookies, crackers or fruitcake...!"

Those words were written on Sunday, August 30, 1942 by my Dad while stationed at Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, shortly after he was drafted into the Army, in a letter to his stepmother, Alice Kirkwood Mansfield. Alice obliged – and often, according to other letters my father wrote that summer.

With that as background, I will now compare the Army and the Marine Corps regarding their respective handling of 'fruitcakes' and recipients thereof, albeit some twenty-three years apart.



Following standard operating procedure, I stood at attention outside Sgt. Surette's open office hatch (door) and "knocked," which, according to Marine Corps protocol, consisted of striking the hatch frame vigorously with the heel of one's right hand. This knock was to be followed by an announcement of one's presence, which meant a virtual shout with intonation rising sharply on the last syllable, also per protocol or tradition or both.

"Candidate Mansfield reporting as ordered, *sir*."

"I can't *h e a r* you, *Mansfield!*" was his rejoinder. His vocal tone and inflection were reminiscent of *All in the Family's* Archie Bunker addressing his long-suffering wife Edith. Bear in mind that Wild Bill was no more than seven feet from me.

A second time, now pounding the hatch frame much harder, I raised my voice and again advised, "Candidate Mansfield reporting as ordered, *SIR!*"

"I *s t i l l* can't hear you, *Mansfield!*" he persisted, slowly stressing every word.

"**CANDIDATE MANSFIELD REPORTING AS ORDERED, *SIR!!!***," I bellowed while simultaneously feeling I may have broken my hand.

"Mansfield, get your *ass* in here, and next time don't *knock* so damn loud!"

"Yes, sir," I said, still at attention.

"At *e a s e*," came the next command from Wild Bill, his chin and lips jutting forward as if barking cadence at close-order drill.

What a performance!

Now we would finally get down to the business at hand.

With a look of maybe mock disgust on his face, Sgt. Surette gestured toward a 4" by 9" package wrapped in brown paper, resting in the middle of his desk blotter.

“What *is* this, *Mansfield*? A *little fucking package* from *Momsey*?” Enunciating and elongating every sound, he resumed the show.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Fine; open the *fucking* thing and *find* the *fuck* out!” he ordered, with unintentional alliteration.

I read the return address as I began to unwrap the parcel, and I knew it was from Mame. “MAL,” her initials, and “24 Locust Street” were clearly and neatly printed in the upper left corner. Whereas I still wonder why Wild Bill didn’t pick up on the “L,” I surmised it would be best to let him continue thinking this thoughtful treat came from my mother rather than my girlfriend. Otherwise, forget it, his abuse would likely have become unrelenting, and I didn’t need that.

Having quickly removed the brown paper, I could see, as could Wild Bill, that there was aluminum foil covering the package’s contents.

“*O p e n* it, *Mansfield*,” he demanded.

The aroma of this recently baked banana bread was delectable.

“A *little fucking fruitcake* from *Momsey*, eh *Mansfield*,” he handed down his indictment. I was not about to disabuse him of the fact that it was *not* a fruitcake. Just try to imagine anyone engaging Bill Surette in a discussion of the differences between fruitcake and banana bread.

“I guess so, sir,” I responded, not knowing where he might be headed. *Beheaded* indeed.

“Don’t you like the *chow* here at OCS, *Mansfield*?”

“Oh, yes, sir, it’s just fine.”

“*Mansfield, are you hungry?*”

Implying that we were all about to march to the mess hall for evening chow, I innocently replied, “Yes, sir.”

“Good, then. How’d you like to eat all of this *little fucking fruitcake right now by yourself?*”

I was tempted to tell him that it would spoil my appetite but I thought better of it.

“No, thank you, sir. I’m not that hungry.”

“Now *Mansfield*, first I want you to take this here *little fucking fruitcake* into the squad bay, *share* it with your fellow candidates, and have yourselves *a little fuc*

*k-i n g p a r t y.*” His boisterous and emphatic enunciation of the *ts* in the word *little* followed ubiquitously by the f-word was more than mildly amusing. “Then, you will write to *M o m s e y* and tell her not to send you *any more little fucking fruitcakes.*”

“Dismissed,” growled Wild Bill, adjourning our meeting.

Sgt. Surette led the way from his office to the squad bay; I followed, toting the loaf. As we entered, he called the platoon to attention, and announced that I, in turn, had an announcement to make. Naturally, he declared loudly that “Mansfield has received a *little fucking gift* from Momsey that he would like to share with the rest of you.”

At first I wondered if I could communicate to all these guys – without laughing – that they were about to partake of a banana bread snack. After all, this *was* the Marine Corps. My concern quickly vanished as I had only to remember the likelihood of further special treatment from Wild Bill if I failed to do things just right. A bit nervous, I played it straight.

Wild Bill ordered me to cut the banana bread into small pieces. Standing at a small table, I informed my fellow candidates what was going to happen, that is, that I would be sharing and serving them a homemade banana bread. Next, with my bayonet I cut the loaf into dozens of small pieces. Still at attention, I watched these strong, young Marine officer candidates file by, some casting me furtive glances that said *Are you kidding me?*, and daintily help themselves to a morsel of Mame’s delicious but troublesome treat. The scene was comical but no one laughed.

The banana bread disappeared quickly, and I was very glad to see it gone.

Wild Bill had abstained.



Dave Taylor was a member of our platoon. A student at Brown University, he was a fine young man, who struck me as a gentleman. One evening, standing at the bar with some fellow Marines, Dave said something at which one of the other guys apparently took offense and left. Puzzled, as we all were, Dave lamented the loss of the fellow’s company and offered, laconically, “Well, as my grandmother used to say, if he can’t take a joke, fuck him!”

And that’s the truth, as Lily Tomlin used to say.

*Leader of men, teller of tall tales, legend in my own mind, U.S. Marine extraordinaire, stream fordable, air dropable, beer fueled, water cooled, author, lecturer, traveler, bum, philanthropist, occasional hero, semi-pro comedian, freedom fighter and defender of the faith. Wars fought, tigers tamed, revolutions started, bars emptied, alligators castrated, women chased, etc.*

- From the Back of a Marine Corps Calling Card

On the night of August 25, 1965, less than ten days from the end of OCS, our platoon was part of a night war games exercise that involved all OCS units, not just Sixth Platoon.

The weather was awful. Despite the time of year, it seemed unusually cold, which was probably due to the torrential rain that came down in sheets for hours that night.

Following a forced march to our defensive position, we dug in for the night. It was impossible to sleep, for we were sitting in foxholes with water up to our chests. To say this was unpleasant is an obvious understatement. It was so bad that we came to refer to the whole experience that night as, you guessed it, "That Night."

Frank Teague, my Holy Cross classmate and friend, had been appointed to serve as company commander for this combat training. He is a leadership-oriented guy and unflappable in virtually any situation. He also possesses a marvelous sense of humor, which, I must say, came in handy in this instance. That night I served as Frank's company sergeant; thus, he was my commanding officer for the duration of the exercise.

At this juncture I invite and encourage you to feel cold, soaked and utterly miserable, as we did at that time. With no doubt whereof I comment, I believe that virtually all of the candidates and the experienced Marines participating that night were both physically uncomfortable and psychologically fed up with an essentially bogus combat exercise that had become mired in, well, mire. I know that I had lost patience, certainly *not* with Frank, but with the seeming lack of any movement at all – and this while bogged down in mud and immersed in pools of cold rain in foxholes in a Virginia forest. Indeed, more than a few of the candidates were sullen but, of course, not mutinous.

After this lull in activity, Frank's voice pierced the audibly slashing rain.

"Sergeant Mansfield," he called out, "file your report!"

My expected role at this point was to give a status report, such as, "All present and accounted for, sir." However, my mood was foul and, against my better judgement, I shouted to Frank at the bottom of the hill, into the side of which we were so annoyingly dug, "Sir, the company sergeant regrettably but respectfully requests that we get the hell out of here!"

What I didn't know at the time was that the Marine colonel who happened to be the commanding officer of OCS was standing next to Frank from the very moment he issued me the order to report, straight through my most un-Marine-like reply.

There is no doubt that I could have been deemed insubordinate for failing, with obvious deliberation, to carry out a direct order. Instead, to the surprise and relief of all of us then in abject misery, the next word passed by Frank was to secure (leave) our positions and move out. We were going back to the base, which meant hot showers and a warm rack. It was music to the ears of many.

The next morning I was concerned that I might hear from the colonel, who couldn't have been pleased with my performance the night before. Luckily, whereas he could easily have asked Frank who the idiot was who responded the way I did, identified me as the culprit, and meted out suitable punishment, he did not. I was left to conjecture that he was cool, or maybe just wanted to go home like the rest of us that night.

There was also the chance that Wild Bill would wish to sanction me in some way, probably by designating me a "T.U.R.D.," or "Trainee Under Restrictive Discipline." In any case, I was spared the inconvenience of disciplinary action, and Frank and the rest of us now had the makings of a tale that has now been told on countless occasions over the past thirty-seven years.

For my part, I have made it my practice to call Frank, Roger Hunt and Bob Lund every August 25<sup>th</sup> to reminisce about "That Night." I know it will bring us all a good laugh, and I look forward to the calls for that reason.



*The Marines have developed a reputation as some of toughest fighting men in the U.S. armed forces. Doubters – and there are many, particularly in competing services – scoff that the*

*Marine aura is a triumph of image over reality. The Corps, they argue, is neither heavy enough for sustained ground operations nor light enough for commando raids. It is a source of constant consternation for the other services to see themselves outmaneuvered by the Corps in the battle for congressional support, leading to cracks about how the "Marines are best at storming Capitol Hill." There is no denying that the Marines have devoted a great deal of energy to burnishing their image. They've had to. Ever since the Corps' birth in 1775, it has been the target of attempts to eliminate it. The Marines have responded by cultivating the American people, whether through their famous band (once led by John Philip Sousa) or through movies like "The Sands of Iwo Jima." It will surprise no one familiar with the Corps that the first reporters allowed to accompany U.S. troops into action in Afghanistan were brought in by the Marines.*

- Max Boot

The Marine Corps' "most enduring contribution," to quote General Mundy once more, "is that it makes Marines, imbues them with exceptional qualities of confidence, determination, leadership, and a winning spirit that gives strength to our national character." True to this template, when all was said and done, Staff Sergeant William Surette, Jr. USMC was a Marine's Marine. On January 20, 1970 he was killed in action during his third tour of duty in Vietnam.

*Godspeed, Bill Surette.*

*My stint in the Marines was one of life's best experiences. It's a lean force, takes an interest in the individual, and instills its touchstones – honor, courage and commitment – into each of its charges. Class is its hallmark. Two months after I left active duty, I received a letter from the Commandant, General Vandegrift, wishing me well and thanking me for my services – a thoughtful touch. If you have an appetite for challenge and adventure, the Corps is the place to be. Measuring up breeds both good feeling and the esprit for which the Marines are renowned.*

- P. Henry Mueller

## MARINE

*I was that which others did not want to be.  
I went where others feared to go,  
And did what others failed to do.  
I asked nothing from those who gave nothing,  
And reluctantly accepted the thought  
Of eternal loneliness...should I fail.*

*I have seen the face of terror;  
Felt the stinging cold of fear;  
And enjoyed the sweet taste of a moment's love.  
I have cried, pained and hoped...  
But most of all, I have lived times  
Others would say were best forgotten.*

*At least some day I will be able to say  
That I was proud of what I was...*

*A MARINE.*

- George L. Skypeck

# 8

## Vietnam: America's Least Successful War

*In 1955 Marines with the Seventh Fleet assisted in moving three hundred thousand refugees from north to south Viet Nam, a straw in the wind little noticed at the time.*

*- The Marines by Marine Corps Heritage Foundation*

**T**he Vietnam War was the longest the United States has ever fought and the only one it has ever lost, although many disagree on this point. A total of 58,132 American men and women died in the fighting, from July 8, 1959 to May 15, 1975. Approximately 2.7 million Americans served in the war zone; 300,000 were wounded and approximately 75,000 permanent disabled. There are still 2,266 persons listed as missing in action.

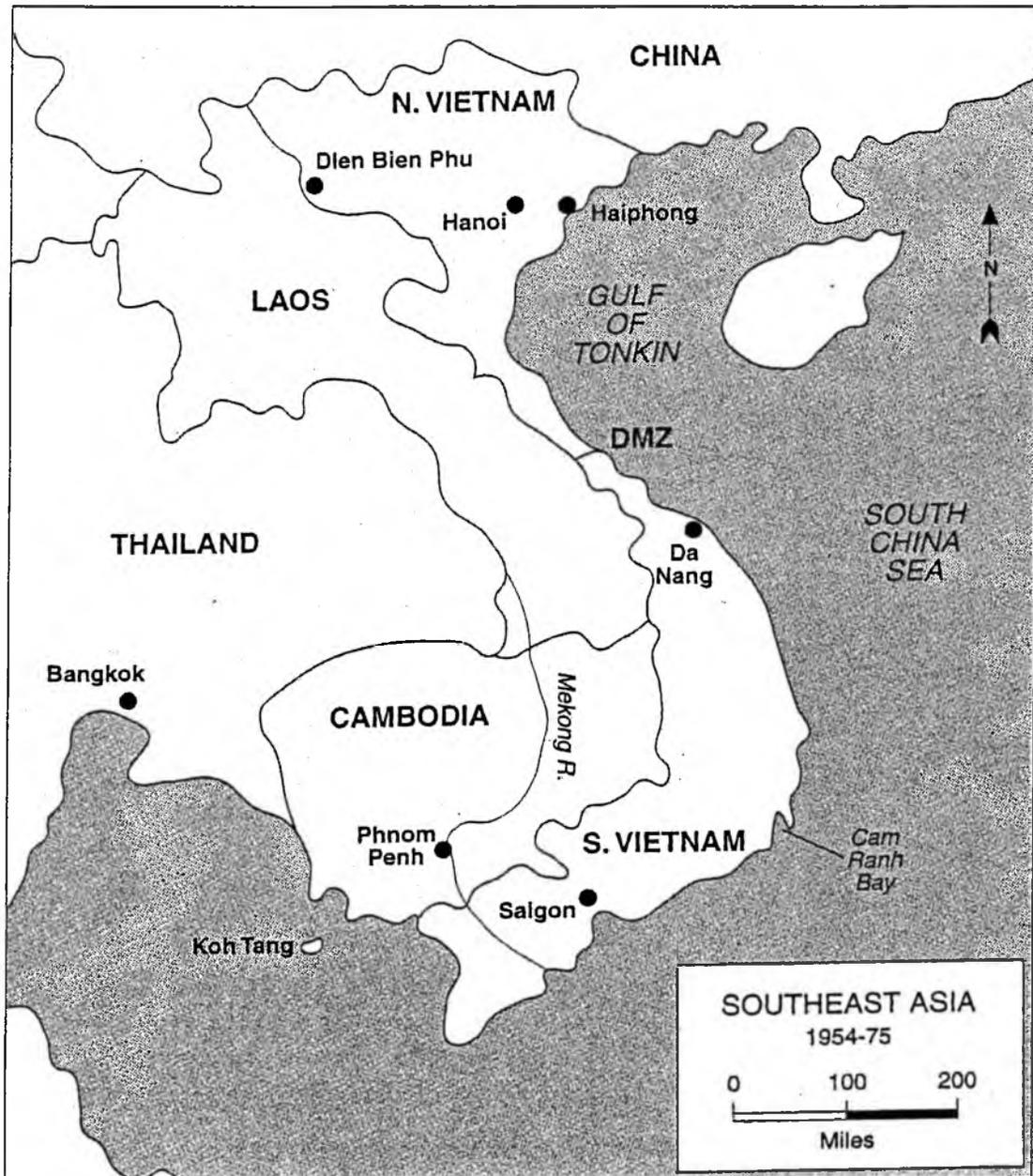
In *The Coldest War* former Marine and noted author James Brady reminds us that, "In the three years of Korea nearly as many of us died as in the decade of Vietnam." Also, "Korea might be thought of as the last campaign of World War II; because of the vague way it ended in 1953, as the opening battle for Vietnam."

Situated in southeast Asia (N23° 30', E106° 43'), a region once called French Indo-China, Vietnam stretches more than 900 miles from its northern border with China to the Mekong River Delta in the south. Its narrow "waist" is less than a hundred miles from its western border with Thailand to the Gulf of Tonkin, the northwesternmost waters of the South China Sea. To its northwest, Vietnam shares a border with Laos; in the southwest, it borders Cambodia (also known as Kampuchea).

Vietnam covers approximately 128,065 square miles. Topographically, it is a country of hills and densely forested mountains, with level land covering no more than twenty percent. Mountains account for forty percent, as do hills, with forests covering seventy-five percent. The north consists of highlands and the Red River Delta, whereas the south is divided into coastal

lowlands, the central mountains (Giai Truong Son) with high plateaus, and the aforementioned Mekong Delta.

Vietnam's climate is tropical and monsoonal, with a humidity that averages 84% annually. Its yearly rainfall ranges from 47 to 118 inches, and annual temperatures vary between 41°F and 99°F.



Source: *The Battle History of the U.S. Marines* by Col. Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret.). Map drawn by Mary Craddock Hoffman.



For the Marines the Vietnam War began arguably in 1965, when the Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) made a widely publicized landing at Danang on March 8<sup>th</sup> of that year. Initially, the Ninth MEB assumed a defensive posture around the Danang air base, which was the northernmost of the three jet-capable airfields in South Vietnam. The newly arrived Marines found it difficult to take seriously a war fought against “little guys in black pajamas.” Still, the ensuing build up was swift.

In those days, a Marine served a 13-month tour of duty in-country, that is, in Vietnam. After several months in-country, he would begin to count the number of days until his tour ended and he would go back to “The World.” (The other American services in Vietnam served a standard 12-month tour of duty there.) Once the half-way point was passed, a Marine considered himself “short,” as in short-timer. Going back to The World simply meant going home but the expression implied that, not only was Vietnam foreign and far away from the U.S., it was an environment so detested by Americans serving there that it was not even considered part of planet Earth!

*It cheered us to know we were not forgotten, not lost in this great allied army, that we were not just another infantry division of dogfaces, but that we were, and always would be, amphibious assault troops, that we were marines. I know that sounds corny, but it is how marines think.*

- James Brady in *The Coldest War*

When American veterans returned to The World from Vietnam, as I did in 1969, there were no cheering crowds, although there were individual homecoming celebrations. Instead, Vietnam veterans returned to a kind of embarrassed, uncomfortable silence, as if everybody was ashamed of them. Indeed, I remember once distinctly avoiding the topic of my combat service as a Marine in Vietnam.

According to David Clayton Carrad, a lawyer who served with the U.S. Army in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969, “Although I was proud to have served, I quickly learned the basic survival skill for Vietnam veterans: keep quiet about it, leave it off your resume, turn the other cheek.”

"You people ran a number on us. Your guilt, your hang-ups, your uneasiness, made it socially unacceptable to mention the fact that we were Vietnam veterans. Whenever we brought it up, you walked away from the conversation." With these words former Marine Lieutenant Robert Muller rebuked his audience at the opening of Vietnam Veterans' Week in New York City on May 29, 1979, as reported in *The New York Times*.

In its edition of that same day, *The Wall Street Journal* editorialized that "It is far from clear that Vietnam veterans suffer a particularly high incidence of neurosis. But it is abundantly clear to us that the body politic has yet to resolve its own Vietnam neurosis. The lessons of our national experience there are only beginning to be resolved."

In 1998 Major General Matthew P. Caulfield, USMC (Ret.) wrote me a letter to thank me for a copy of a Vietnam War presentation I had given at Chaminade. In it he also wrote:

Your presentation also reminded me of my own homecoming. There was only one welcome home party for me. My classmates from Chaminade invited me up to New York, took over a restaurant and we had a hell of a time. Our Chaminade friends never lost faith in us however they might have felt about the war. And when I think about it, neither did Chaminade. We were very well prepared to endure what we had to endure, to serve, and were inculcated with such a deep sense of responsibility for others, that some thirty years later I still feel for those Marines as though it were yesterday.

In writing "I still feel for those Marines," Matt refers to three Marines under his command who were killed during the siege of Khe Sanh. Sadly, American veterans were, according to *Newsweek*, "obliged to bear an inordinate share of the blame both for having fought at all and for having failed to win." In contrast, a Californian named Roy Rockstrom later wrote in a letter to *U.S. News & World Report* (June 18, 1984) some compelling words about this. "The shame of Vietnam," as he put it, "lies not on those who fought there, but on the politicians who so ably programed (*sic*) our defeat and citizens who sided with the enemy. May we never forget those who died; may we always remember those who came home."

By the time the U.S. military presence reached its peak of 543,000 in early 1969, most Americans had already turned against the war. A Gallup poll reportedly found that a majority of the nation for the first time was persuaded that it all had been a terrible mistake. The government was transferring from Lyndon Johnson, who had been politically destroyed trying to

win the war, to Richard Nixon, whose more modest goal was to get out of Vietnam without seeming to have lost it.

Here I should like to make clear my belief that the lesson of the Vietnam War for the United States is that never again should we enter a potentially long conflict without the support of the American people. Moreover, we should never enter any conflict unless we have the will to win.

Just the same, the U.S. had an obligation to help defend South Vietnam by virtue of its membership in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, or SEATO. In that agreement we promised to support and defend nations in the region in the event of aggression against them. In short, we made a commitment. (Ironically, South Vietnam was not a member of SEATO, at least not initially, but its strategic position made it critically important, especially in light of the "domino theory," which postulated that if one country in a region fell to communist control, so would the others.) Alas, our commitment lasted too long and cost us too dearly.

To personalize this notion of commitment, I believed in 1968 that I had a *duty* to fight in Vietnam, and I went there willingly. Nonetheless, I readily make the distinction that I had little *desire* to go there and fight. Today I juxtapose that lack of desire then to a full willingness to fight against terrorism today and in the years ahead. When I tried to rejoin the Marines in the days following September 11<sup>th</sup>, I was told by their recruiter in GC that I was, alas, too old.



With respect to President John F. Kennedy's role in involving the U.S. in the Vietnam War, Robert L. Bartley, editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, has written

My own view of President Kennedy is much more direct: His callowness and amorality got us into Vietnam. Or to be more precise, his blunders turned a limited commitment into an open-ended one. One of the few specific pieces of advice Gen. Eisenhower gave his young successor was to put American troops in Laos, that is, astride what later became the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Instead, Kennedy sent Averell Harriman and Roger Hillsman out to negotiate an agreement on Laos, which of course gave Ho (Chi Minh, the North Vietnamese leader) the access he wanted.

Infiltration and subversion increased in South Vietnam. With Buddhist bonzes [monks] committing self-immolation, the best and brightest argued the problem was the Catholic recalcitrance of our ally, Ngo Dinh Diem.

In an era when Presidents Johnson and Nixon are widely perceived as the "bad guys" responsible for America's phenomenal losses in Vietnam, Mr. Bartley's is a refreshing, if dismaying, perspective.

On November 2, 1963 the United States under President Kennedy engineered the overthrow and assassination of Diem, then South Vietnam's President. Twenty days later Kennedy was himself assassinated in Dallas, and Vice President Johnson was sworn in as president. Just before moving into the White House, Mr. Johnson reportedly showed Hubert Humphrey a photograph of Diem.

Continued Mr. Bartley,

"We had a hand in killing him," LBJ said. "Now it's happening here." Johnson of course made his own errors, but the die was already cast. In overthrowing an ally in the name of winning the war, the U.S. had made a commitment from which it could scarcely walk away. Many of Kennedy's admirers later became war protesters, of course, chanting that American society was immoral.

Robert Strange McNamara, who served as Secretary of Defense under both Kennedy and Johnson, has written in his 1995 book *In Retrospect*:

I think it highly probable that, had President Kennedy lived, he would have pulled us out of Vietnam. He would have concluded that the South Vietnamese were incapable of defending themselves, and that Saigon's grave political weaknesses made it unwise to try to offset the limitations of South Vietnamese forces by sending U.S. combat troops on a large scale.

His assessment notwithstanding, during the first eight months of the Johnson presidency our involvement in Vietnam deepened ever so crucially.

Ironically, President Johnson probably could have obtained a declaration of war in Vietnam when he didn't need it, and when he did need it he couldn't get it. Still, in 1964 he came close, by persuading Congress to authorize him "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." This became known as the "Gulf of Tonkin" Resolution, named after the body of water in which a controversial naval encounter between American and North Vietnamese vessels took place

earlier that year. The resolution was rescinded by Congress only a few months after the so called Kent State "massacre" in May 1970.

During this time frame, Chaminade alumnus Paul Gillcrist was a Navy fighter pilot who, as a fleet squadron commander, completed three aircraft carrier deployments to the Gulf of Tonkin. He flew 167 combat missions for which he was awarded seventeen combat decorations.

Now an aerospace consultant and a teacher, Rear Admiral Paul T. Gillcrist, USN (Ret.) was one of sixteen American aviation pioneers honored in the PBS documentary *A Gathering of Eagles* for their extraordinary personal contributions to "the history of modern flight" and for "expanding the envelope of aerospace operations."

In addition to being a fighter pilot, Paul served also as a test pilot and a weapons delivery instructor, and actively flew from sixteen carriers for over twenty-seven years. He commanded an F-8 *Crusader* fighter squadron, then a Navy aircraft carrier wing, and finally, as a flag officer, became wing commander for all U.S. Pacific Fleet fighter squadrons.

Throughout his aviation career, Paul flew virtually every airplane in the Navy's inventory. Included in his flight log book are over 6,000 hours flying in seventy-one different types of aircraft from 1952 to 1981. He retired in 1985 as Assistant Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare). He is the author of seven books, including two novels. Among these are *TOMCAT! The Grumman F-14 Story*; *CRUSADER! Last of the Gunfighters*; *Feet Wet: Reflections of a Carrier Pilot*; *Vulture's Row*; *Cobra* and *An Nasher, The Asp*.

Paul was inducted into the Chaminade Alumni Hall of Fame on March 21, 2002.



Nineteen sixty-five was a turning point for Johnson and American policy in Vietnam for two major reasons. First, the president ordered our forces to begin bombing North Vietnam. Second, he also ordered a major escalation of U.S. involvement with the addition of 100,000 combat troops in country.

In his conduct of the war, I believe Mr. Johnson made six critical mistakes.

➤ ***Despite his public rhetoric, he did not believe that the U.S. could win the war.*** This is well documented by presidential historian Michael R. Beschloss in *Reaching for Glory: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1964-65*, which was published in November 2001. According to these secret recordings, the president actually confided in his wife Lady Bird, Secretary McNamara and Senator Richard Russell, Johnson's former Senate mentor, that the war was unwinnable. His behavior was reprehensible and unforgivable.

The remaining five reasons were offered by Leo K. Thorsness in a letter to *The Wall Street Journal*, which was published on February 1, 1985.

➤ ***He kept McNamara on as Defense Secretary.*** In his own book *In Retrospect*, cited above, McNamara admits that "we could and should have withdrawn from South Vietnam either in late 1963 amid the turmoil following Diem's assassination or in late 1964 or early 1965 in the face of increasing political and military weakness in South Vietnam." Despite this belief, McNamara did not resign from Johnson's cabinet until February 1968, another reprehensible behavior. Had he resigned earlier, or been more courageous in making his case for early American troop withdrawal from Vietnam, a lot of American lives probably would have been spared.

➤ ***He failed to declare war.***

➤ ***He did not mobilize U.S. military reserves.***

➤ ***He granted students deferments from military service, which automatically split the young generation.***

➤ ***He lacked confidence in the military.***

As for this lack of confidence, it's too bad President Johnson didn't know Army First Lieutenant Steve Karopczyc or Marine First Lieutenant Tim Shorten, whose stories come later.

*True leadership is the ability to provide continuity and stability in times of rapid and violent shifts.*

– Pehr G. Gyllenhammar

# 9

## Tet and Khe Sanh

*Khe Sanh was famous, one of the very few place names in Vietnam that was recognized by the American public. Khe Sanh said "siege," it said "encircled Marines" and "heroic defenders." It could be understood by newspaper readers quickly, it breathed Glory and War and Honored Dead. It seemed to make sense. It was good stuff.* - From Dispatches by Michael Herr

**W**hen he was eighteen, my son Chas told me he was glad I had made it back from Vietnam. I told him that he well may have been the reason I did. You see, my orders to Vietnam directed me to be in-country by December 1967 but, thanks to a benevolent Marine Corps personnel policy, I did not have to report for duty in Vietnam until after Mame gave birth, which occurred the following April. As a result, I didn't leave the States for Vietnam until June 1968 and, fortunately (for me), missed two of the most disastrous events of the war: the Tet Offensive and the "siege" of Khe Sanh. Although I was not in-country for either, had the fates behaved differently, I almost certainly would have been. Still, Tet and Khe Sanh provide a backdrop to my service in Vietnam.

While Tet stunned America, President Johnson said of Khe Sanh: "This is a decisive time in Vietnam. The eyes of the nation and the eyes of the entire world – the eyes of all history itself – are on that brave little band of defenders who hold the pass at Khe Sanh."

Tet is the lunar new year, which is celebrated in Vietnam much as it is in China and other Chinese communities around the world. It began on January 27, 1968. The Viet Cong (VC) announced that during Tet they would observe a one-week cease-fire. Instead, they celebrated their cease-fire with rocket attacks up and down South Vietnam; ground attacks followed. On January 30, 1968, the VC, together with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), launched an all-out

assault on American military installations and those of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN, as it was called. It was almost certainly the bloodiest period of the entire war.

Hundreds of towns and villages throughout South Vietnam, in 36 of its 48 provinces, reported large-scale enemy attacks. The ancient imperial capital of Hue (pronounced *whay*) came under an especially heavy attack. It was the cultural center of South Vietnam, seat of a great university, and site of the Citadel, known for its enormous brick walls and moats, which were built in 1802. The battle for Hue would last for twenty-five bloody days.

As for the Marines, they were too few and too light to breach the Citadel, and fell back to await reinforcements. With the American military under attack throughout the country, there were too few ground troops available to recapture Hue. Despite fierce NVA resistance, Hue was later taken but not without 1,000 Marine casualties, including 142 dead.

In the same time frame, the isolated forward base at Khe Sanh in the far northwestern corner of South Vietnam saw U.S. Marines trapped for four months. According to *The Battle History of the U.S. Marines* by Col. Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret.), "Few Marines ever held an exposed outpost longer, under more relentless pounding, than India Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 26<sup>th</sup> Marines, on Hill 881-South." It was to be a "grueling seventy-seven-day battle for the western DMZ," the demilitarized zone that separated North and South Vietnam.

The "siege" began when two companies of the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment (some 6,600 strong) inadvertently encountered a well armed NVA battalion while on patrol between Hills 881-South and 881-North on January 20, 1968. The NVA occupied 881-North in force. When these Marine patrols encountered the enemy entrenched in the hills, comparisons were immediately made with Dien Bien Phu, the site of the climactic French defeat in 1954.

General William Westmoreland, then America's top soldier in Vietnam, gave two major reasons for the defense of Khe Sanh. The first was to provide a "killing ground" for NVA troops; the second, to prevent an NVA flank attack against Dong Ha and Quang Tri City to the east. In sum, Khe Sanh was the gateway to South Vietnam.

Initially, Gen. Westmoreland recommended that the Marines deploy a battalion to Khe Sanh but the Marines resisted. They argued that the base was too isolated to be supported adequately. According to Brigadier General Lowell English, then assistant commander of the Third Marine Division, "When you're at Khe Sanh, you're not really anywhere. You could lose

it, and you really haven't lost a damn thing." "Westy," as he became known, stood firm and the Marines characteristically followed his orders. In early October 1966, the First Battalion of the Third Marine Regiment, "1/3" or "One Three," arrived at Khe Sanh, and the Army's Special Forces camp was relocated to Lang Vei, some seven miles away.

Khe Sanh became the best-known Vietnam battleground of all as Americans at home were treated to daily doses of its horror, both in the newspapers and on evening television news programs. It was there that a young Marine captain named Matt Caulfield received a literal baptism of fire.

I received an aforementioned letter from Matt, dated April 12, 1998, Easter Sunday, in which he wrote:

I have read a lot of postmortems on Vietnam but nothing so comprehensive and personal. I happened to read it today. Easter Sunday. It was Easter Sunday 1968 when we finally broke out of Khesanh by attacking Hill 881N. I planned the attack every day of the seventy-two day siege and it would have been my best day except that we lost three Marines. We came very close to pulling it off without any KIA's. Your presentation reminded me of my most vivid memories of that day. Reports from an air observer of the enemy withdrawing from the backside of the hill, a faceless Kilo company Marine shinnying up the stump of a tree and affixing an American flag to it, reports that we had no serious casualties and then when it was almost over, the report that Mike Company had three KIA's. It still tears me up.

According to Michael Herr in his book *Dispatches*, "Khe Sanh's original value to the Americans might be gauged by the fact that in spite of the known infiltration all around it, we held it for years with nothing more than a Special Forces A Team; less than a dozen Americans and around 400 indigenous troops, Vietnamese and Montagnard." (The Montagnards, or mountain people, have been called America's most loyal allies in Vietnam. There are some eighteen Montagnard tribes in Vietnam, to whom the Vietnamese referred as *moi* or savages.)

Americans' biggest concern, as Herr has written, was that "Khe Sanh was vastly outnumbered and entirely surrounded; that, and the knowledge that all ground evacuation routes...were completely controlled by the NVA, and that the monsoons had at least six weeks more to run."

*Hard pressed on my right. My center is yielding. Impossible to maneuver. Situation excellent. I am attacking!*

- Ferdinand Foch

According to Col. Alexander's account, "the NVA uncorked a tremendous bombardment of Khe Sanh Combat Base itself (just slightly northeast of Khe Sanh village), raking the compound with mortars, artillery and rockets." It continued:

One of the first enemy rounds set off the main ammo dump, causing a chain reaction of fire and explosions that would create havoc for the next forty-eight hours and blow up 90 percent of the Marines' supplies. Pallets of artillery rounds detonated at once, creating powerful shock waves. Clouds of tear gas swept the compound, as did deadly bursts of flêchettes, the tiny steel darts released from exploding Claymores and 106mm "Beehive" antipersonnel shells.

As an aside, one of my Marines, Corporal Dan Schiavietello, a strong young man who introduced me to the Beatles "white" album, managed to take a photograph of the spectacular ammo dump explosion, which he later had made into a Christmas card, thanks to Kodak's service. The greeting he chose to have printed on the card was, perversely, if not predictably, "Peace on Earth."

At one point the Joint Chiefs of Staff were convened by the president and forced to sign a statement "for the public reassurance," insisting that Khe Sanh could and would be held at all costs. In fact, General Westmoreland stated that the Tet Offensive was a smokescreen intended to distract Americans from the real target --- Khe Sanh. Regardless, Hanoi had masterfully surprised both American and South Vietnamese forces with its huge offensive of January 30, 1968.

The relief of Khe Sanh commenced on April 1, 1968, the day before my first son, Charles III, now called Chas, was born. It was also the day after President Johnson went on national television to announce that he would neither seek nor accept the Democratic Party's nomination for the presidency, whose next occupant would be determined in the general election the following November when Richard M. Nixon beat Hubert H. Humphrey.

I might have served with Matt Caulfield and the other Marines at Khe Sanh had it not been for that fortuitous birth. I went to Vietnam at age twenty-three; Chas was then just two months old. That was a "bummer," which, by the way, is a term that came out of the Vietnam era.

Code-named Operation Pegasus, relieving Khe Sanh included over 10,000 Marines and three full battalions of ARVN troops. Soon there was, in Herr's words, "a forward operational base that looked better than most permanent installations in I Corps, complete with a thousand-

meter airstrip and deep, ventilated bunkers. They named it LZ Stud and once it was finished Khe Sanh ceased to be the center of its own sector; it became just another objective.”

According to *The Vietnam Experience: Nineteen Sixty Eight*, “the men at Khe Sanh endured a sustained attack that ceased to be an event with cause, beginning, and foreseeable end but became a condition of life to which the only alternative was death.” Moreover,

They never got a glimpse of the Big Picture. They were only small pictures, moments of fire, pain and sudden death. Only those who were there can really know what it was like.

Nearly 500 Marines died defending Khe Sanh and perhaps 10,000 North Vietnamese soldiers assaulting the place were killed or wounded... Once the fighting was over, the dead of both sides buried, and the wounded removed to where they might be healed, Khe Sanh had no attraction for either side. Gen. Westmoreland ordered the base dismantled.

I went to Khe Sanh later that year and found it a wasteland.



Although a reported 103,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the enemy during the siege, who actually won what at Khe Sanh remained obscure, for both sides had claimed it as a victory. Since then, however, former North Vietnamese Army colonel Bui Tin has offered a different view. Having served on the NVA general staff and received the unconditional surrender of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975, Mr. Tin confirmed an American Tet 1968 military victory. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, he wrote that “Our losses were staggering and a complete surprise. [Tin’s long-time mentor and the hero of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, General Vo Nguyen] Giap later told me that Tet had been a military defeat, though we had gained the planned political advantages when Johnson agreed to negotiate and did not run for reelection.” He continues:

The second and third waves in May and September were, in retrospect, mistakes. Our forces in the South were nearly wiped out by all the fighting in 1968. It took us until 1971 to reestablish our presence but we had to use North Vietnamese troops as local guerrillas. If the American forces had not begun to withdraw under Nixon in 1969, they could have punished us severely.

We suffered badly in 1969 and 1970 as it was.

With respect to strategy, Tin concluded that "If Johnson had granted Westmoreland's requests to enter Laos and block the Ho Chi Minh trail, Hanoi could not have won the war."



In addition to taking himself out of the presidential race, President Johnson replaced General Westmoreland with his deputy, General Creighton Abrams, and announced the start of peace talks with North Vietnam. On June 10, 1968, Mame's and my first wedding anniversary, "Westy" held a news conference in Saigon at ComUSMACV (Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam).

A reporter asked him a final question: "General, can the war be won militarily?"

"Not in a classic sense, because" – the general paused briefly – "of our national policy of not expanding the war."

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara also resigned. Thus, Tet and Khe Sanh had combined to unhinge some of the major American players in the conduct of the war; they also succeeded in turning public opinion in the U.S. against it.

There was irony in all this as well, for the only major American combat base *not* attacked during the Tet Offensive was Khe Sanh.

These events set the stage for my time in-country. They spawned at least two specific positive outcomes, of which I, along with countless others, would be a beneficiary. First, the worst fighting of the Vietnam War was over. Second, Dong Ha and Quang Tri were more secure than before Tet and Khe Sanh. In terms of relative extrema, and as one about to pay an extended visit to Quang Tri Province, I considered myself at least twice blessed.

*To be sure, Khe Sanh will be a subject of controversy for a long time, but this much about it is indisputable: It has won a large place in the history of the Vietnam war as an inspiring example of American and Allied valor. One day, in fact, the victory over the siege may be judged a decisive turning point that finally convinced the enemy he could not win.*

- Washington Star, June 9, 1968

# 10

## Leaving Home: The Party's Over

*Be strong and of good courage. Do not fear, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.* - Deuteronomy 31:6

**N**estled on the south shore of eastern Long Island, New York, Westhampton has always been in my blood. Indeed, my mother took me there for the first time when I was two months old, and I make my home there today. Its ocean beaches are among the most beautiful on earth, and it retains many of its rural qualities, despite substantial development in the post-World War II era. As young children, my brother and I, and also our four sisters in pairs, would spend a fortnight with Mimi and Poppa in their cottage at Cedar Beach on shimmering Moriches Bay, part of Great South Bay.

In June 1968 Mame and I took our infant son Chas to Cedar Beach for a few days of vacation before I shoved off for Vietnam. All those wonderful, golden days I had spent there during my then twenty-three years flooded my mind. Fishing and crabbing with my brother Mike, the salt air, the musty scent of the cottage, its coziness, Poppa Charrot's *Chuck* boat, the main house where we took our meals – these familiar sensual experiences and physical structures had always been revisited and renewed each year and gave me a generous measure of joy.

With now only Vietnam ahead of me, I wanted to block it and everything else out of my mind, except my beautiful bride, our baby boy and the old-new wonder of Westhampton. I remember only the love I felt and would miss in the as yet unknowable year ahead.

Although the weather was very cool, too cool for the beach, I am sure we found plenty to occupy ourselves; after all, Mame's fertile mind and imagination have never failed in the realm

of good ideas. Nonetheless, my memory retains little about those precious days other than my strong desire to remain right there at the little cottage on the bay.

So many significant and, for that matter, insignificant dates are etched in my memory that some people occasionally call me "Rain Man," after the character played by actor Dustin Hoffman in the title role in the film of the same name. Why, then, I do not recall with certainty the date on which I left home for Vietnam, I am at a loss to say. Suffice it to say that it was on or about June 27, 1968.

My orders indicated that I would travel to Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino, California, "FFT," that is, "for further transfer," to "WestPac Ground Forces." WestPac was a contraction for "Western Pacific" but invariably meant Vietnam, at least at that time.

My journey began at my parents' home in GC. My sister Peggy, then 16, was seated in the living room recliner holding my son Chas, not yet three months of age.

I had no wish to leave but I was as ready to go as I was going to be. Mame and my parents were readying themselves to take me to New York's JFK International Airport, about a twenty-minute drive. There I would meet my flight to the West Coast FFT.

The moment had arrived. I walked over to Peggy and the baby, each still comfortable in the big recliner. I kissed her goodbye. When I kissed Chas, I said, "Goodbye, little fella." Well, Peggy, Mom and Mame all began to wail. It was awful. Then I recall Dad saying, "Let's get the hell outta here" but his voice somehow lacked its usual "Now hear this" fanfare.

The ride to JFK was understandably unenjoyable. Dad was driving, and Mom sat next to him in the front seat. Mame and I sat behind them. There was little conversation. The ladies were choking back tears; Dad was characteristically silent as he had long since relied on the women to do the talking in many social situations. I was hurting but would be damned before I would let on.

Having arrived at the airport, I said goodbye to my folks, and Mame accompanied me to the plane. As there were no security checkpoints in those days, we strolled slowly and directly to the door of the aircraft. There we hugged and kissed, maybe thrice. She was tearful, and I was dying inside. I had to get on that plane, sooner or later, never mind having no remote wish to do so.

We left the comfort of each other's arms, and I turned away and boarded my flight. As much as I wanted to take in the sight of her beautiful face once more, I knew I dare not turn around. I made up my mind that I would walk, face and eyes rigidly forward, straight to my assigned seat on the port side near the front of the plane. Had I looked back, my own tears would surely have flowed. As it was, I sat down, closed my eyes and composed myself. After all, a man goes to war by himself.

As Bob Lund used to say when daunting responsibilities presented themselves, "The party's over."

Once more the pessimist, although I never breathed a word of it to Mame or anyone else, I did not believe I would come home from Vietnam alive. In truth, this pessimist actually thought he would never see his beautiful bride, his son or his homeland again. It was scary.

With greater resolve than ever before, despite my unprecedented and possibly unhealthy state of mind, I told myself it was time to get serious.

The party was over.

*Au revoir, mon amour.*



At Norton, together with scores of other young servicemen, I boarded a Continental Airlines flight bound for Hawaii. In those days, there were so many military people, virtually all male, being sent to WestPac that the government contracted with civilian domestic air carriers to transport the troops. Although I hadn't flown commercially more than a few times at that point in my life, it soon became clear that Continental's comforts were far superior to Uncle Sam's.

First stop was Henderson Field, now Henderson Air Force Base, in Hawaii to refuel for the remainder of the flight across the Pacific. I do not recall disembarking; we gassed up and took off again.

Next stop was Okinawa, where Marines had once landed – unopposed at first – and later fought one of World War II's bloodiest battles, which lasted more than seven weeks. Marine Private First Class Eugene Sledge, a veteran of the Battle of Okinawa, has written: "You never

knew when you were drawing your last breath. You lived in total uncertainty, on the brink of the abyss, day after day. The only thing that kept you going was you just felt you had to live up to the demands of your buddies who were depending on you.”

It was the middle of the night when we arrived on “Oki,” also known as “The Rock.” We were all tired, some possibly confused. Many of us had never made such a long journey in our lives. Today my mind still etches an image of Okinawa as a desolate, awful place. However, when the sun came up a few hours later, I could see that it was not as bad as I had imagined. Then again, the worst was still ahead for most of us, namely, Vietnam. We Marines were bussed to Camp Hansen, the Corps’ main installation on the island. There we trained with the M-16 rifle, some of us for the first time, and were processed FFT to our next duty stations.

One of the bonuses of being on Okinawa then was that my “best buddy” Jim Norwood was stationed there as a Navy communications specialist. We managed to share a meal, and he introduced me to some of his friends. The next day we went to the beach and had a few beers. I would return to Okinawa in October but Jim would by then have finished his stint in the Navy and gone back home to Long Island. Not finding him still there was disappointing since I had hoped to spend more time with him. Nonetheless, I took satisfaction in knowing that he was better off where he was.

On the morning of the next day, the welcome respite ended when I boarded yet another Continental Airlines flight that would take me to Danang, South Vietnam. I would be in-country at last.

*Sayonara.*

*When the cigarette was gone he felt his face go slack. He dug his nails into his neck, but the pain was not enough. The days were too long, the nights too short between, and a few moments of sleep seemed all that mattered in this world. He checked his watch and realized he was not going to make it.*

- Billy Roark in CW2 by Layne Heath

# 11

## Arriving In-Country

*This is first a political war, second a psychological war, and third a military war.*

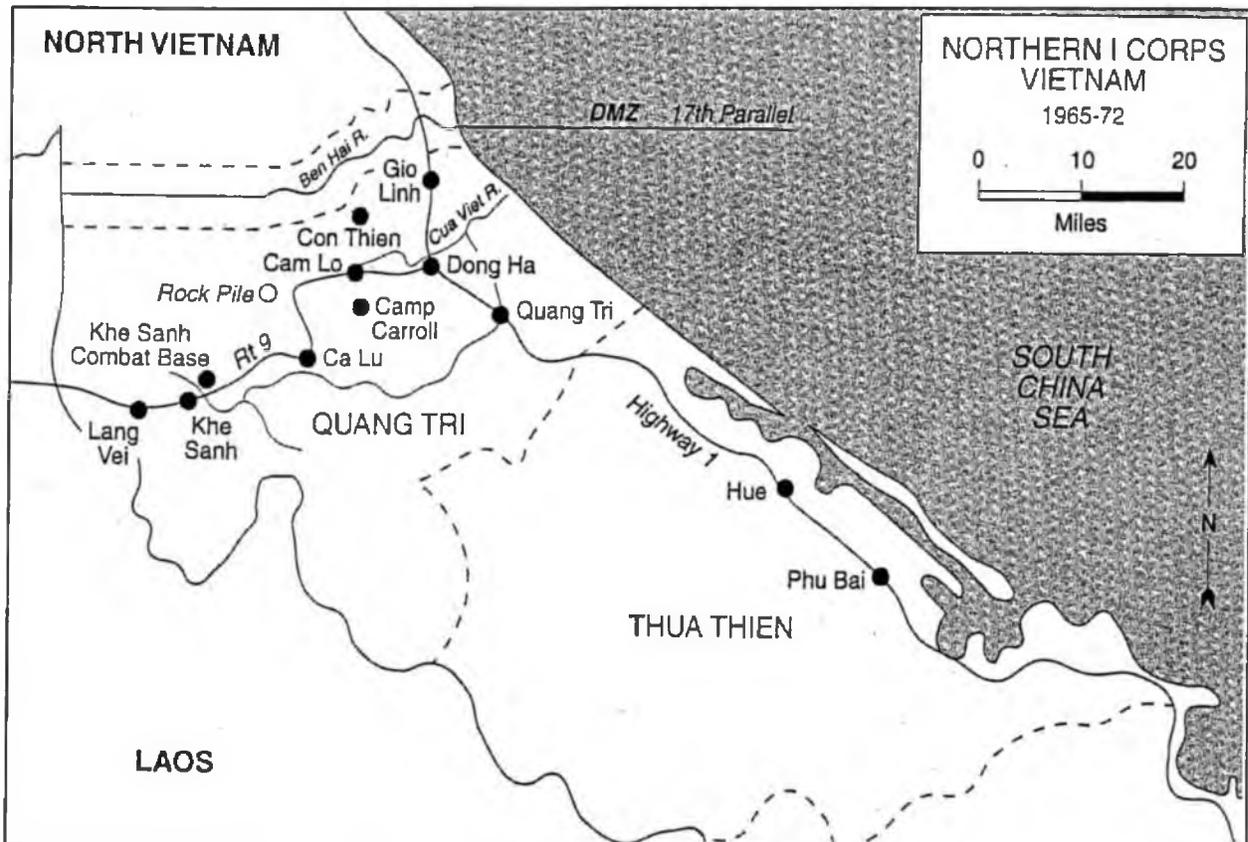
- Lt. Gen. Lewis F. Walt, USMC

**A**board the Continental flight from Okinawa to Danang, all, except members of the crew, were Marines. Home of the First Marine Air Wing in-country, Danang was a sprawling American base in the northern part of South Vietnam.

We arrived in darkness on the evening of July 8, 1968. In my mind's eye, I can still see most of us milling about, waiting to be assigned a rack and, darkly, for the first "incoming" (artillery round, mortar fire or rocket). For almost all of us it was our first night in Vietnam.

On the next day, a Marine Corps C-130 Hercules transport flew a group of us north to Quang Tri where I officially joined the Third Marine Division's Headquarters Battalion, which was abbreviated 3d MarDiv HqBn. From there I would travel about five miles north to Dong Ha, which Joe Moosbrugger, a fellow Chaminade alumnus and a Marine Grumman A-6 *Intruder* attack-jet bombardier-navigator, later dubbed Dung Heap. Dong Ha would be my duty station for most of the following year.

Quang Tri is the northernmost province in what was then South Vietnam. It was a Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) in what was designated I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ), and it included Quang Tri village, Khe Sanh, Dong Ha and other perhaps lesser known outposts. The "I" was actually the Roman numeral for the number one, but this ICTZ was simply called I Corps, which was pronounced *eye core* by the Marines and others stationed there. Some in other services suggested that those of us in the Corps didn't know the difference between the capital letter and the Roman numeral. This is, of course, untrue.



Source: *The Battle History of the U.S. Marines* by Col. Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret.). Map drawn by Mary Craddock Hoffman.

Dong Ha sits about five miles south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and was the last major American military installation before North Vietnam. Thus, it was equidistant between Quang Tri village and the “Z”. Officially, my “Combat History” would include “Counter-Insurgency Operations” from this day until May 21, 1969; also from this day I would be a participant in “Operation KENTUCKY” until February 28, 1969; and, finally, I would participate in “Defense of Dong Ha Combat Base” from March 1 to May 21, 1969.

Operation Kentucky was a long-term area operation in the vicinity of Con Thien, slightly northeast of Dong Ha. It kicked off on November 1, 1967 and formally ended on February 28, 1969. During this period, 478 Marines were killed and 2,698 wounded. Enemy casualties were 3,304 killed, and we took sixty-four prisoners. Earlier, Kentucky had been described as a Ninth Marines operation in the vicinity of “Leatherneck Square,” which was formed by Gio Linh, Con Thien, Dong Ha and Cam Lo. Actually, the “Square” was more like a parallelogram with Dong

Ha at the southeast corner, Gio Linh a few miles slightly northwest, Con Thien several miles west, and Cam Lo just a few miles slightly southeast of Con Thien. My responsibilities would take me frequently to Con Thien and Cam Lo but I can't recall having been to Gio Linh.

As it appears nowhere else in this essay, the term "Leatherneck," the Marines' oldest and most colorful nickname, deserves comment. The name derives from the characteristic black leather stock worn around the necks of all enlisted Marines, as well as many officers, during the Corps' first century. The device reportedly improved posture on parade, and protected the throat in battle.

Upon arrival at the Dong Ha Combat Base, I met with Colonel Woods, USMC, a "full bird" (a reference to his rank's silver eagle insignia), who offered me an Orange Crush, which I accepted and enjoyed. He told me that several buddies of mine had just arrived the preceding day, among them Merv Benson, Owen Chambers, both first lieutenants, and others whose names now regrettably escape me. At the time, they were leading rifle platoons or companies inasmuch as, the colonel volunteered, there weren't any captains left; they'd all been killed or wounded. Suffice it to say that this was neither appealing information nor a morale booster. To be sure, Marine rifle platoon commanders in Vietnam had a short life expectancy.

Col. Woods did a thorough job of interviewing me and took particular note that I had a young wife and a then three-month old son. He allowed as he could have me "out in the bush" that evening, or, alternatively, we could have a beer and some chow together in the officers' and NCOs' (non-commissioned officers') mess hall at the Dong Ha Combat Base. Despite the quasi-civilized ring to his invitation, if it was one, I felt a strong urge to say, "Colonel, send me out tonight," for I was trained as a "grunt" or infantryman, as are all Marines, each of us "a rifleman first." I also wanted to get what I regarded as inevitable over with.

The colonel also informed me that there was an opening in the Communications Company, of which Major Fred Reisinger, a Fordham University alumnus, was commanding officer (CO). The major's executive officer (XO) was Captain Keith Carlson, a really cool guy.

At the completion of his Vietnam tour of duty, by which time he had been promoted to lieutenant colonel, Reisinger was succeeded by Major Frank Mullin, a fellow Holy Cross alumnus. Reisinger gave me my only "Fitness Report" in Vietnam. When I failed to be promoted to captain along with my "peers" shortly after he left Dong Ha, I inquired as to why

and learned that Lt. Col. Reisinger had inadvertently neglected to file my fitness report on a timely basis with Headquarters Battalion. My promotion was delayed but came through soon afterward.

Keith Carlson was eventually replaced by a spit-and-polish, by-the-book captain whose first name was Marty. Perhaps I have unconsciously blocked out his surname but he was undoubtedly the biggest misfit I ever met in the Corps. When Marines are trying to get a tough, dirty and typically dangerous job done under often thoroughly adverse conditions, they don't want or need to be nagged by a guy who is constantly insisting that they shine their boots. Alas, Marty was that guy.

For better or worse, thanks to Col. Woods, I opted for beer and food. Thus, my second night in country was spent with not only him but also a couple of old friends: 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. John Wegl, with whom I attended OCS and The Basic School (TBS) in the summer and fall of 1966, and 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Jerry Miller, who was a classmate at the Marine Corps Communications School in Quantico in early 1968.

*Alea iacta est. (The die is cast.)* – Julius Caesar, as he crossed the Rubicon River

# 12

## Dong Ha (1968-1969)

*I'm skimming across the surface of my own history... – Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried**

**J**ohn Wegl was my roommate that second night in-country, in a bombed out cantonment building constructed by the French, who had once colonized Vietnam. The building had a corrugated steel roof perforated by so many shrapnel holes that huge old brown mess tents had to be placed on them and secured by sandbags in order to keep out the rain.

I slept on a military-issue cot that first night in Dong Ha, with no linens of course, although that didn't bother me. What did prove a nuisance, however, was not having mosquito netting. I got little sleep, no thanks to frequent outgoing artillery volleys and the infernal mosquitoes, which by morning had produced on my body some sixty-one bloody welts, by John Wegl's count.

"This place is the pits," I thought, but then I acknowledged gratefully in my own mind that I had lived another day, and in comparative comfort to boot. While Dong Ha was hardly a garden spot, I was not "out in the bush," at least not yet.

On the third day I reported to Communications Company's Radio Relay Platoon as assistant platoon commander under a salty first lieutenant (I was a recently minted first lieutenant) by the name of Bob Dusek, who was getting short. His platoon sergeant was Staff Sergeant Larry Slaugh, a hard-drinking, rough sort of man who at times could be uncooperative. To his credit, though, Sgt. Slaugh is the only man up to that time to beat me in an arm-wrestling contest. (I also lost a match to Chas many years later.)

I would later serve a short stint as Radio Platoon commander, also based in Dong Ha, and be reassigned to Radio Relay as platoon commander upon Bob Dusek's return to The World.

Dusek, for his part, was a chain-smoker who also drank heavily, probably just because of where he was stationed at the time. He had a slightly goofy aspect to his demeanor, as well as a twitch that caused him to close his eyes momentarily but longer than a couple of blinks, as if he were trying hard to avoid a stutter. A mustang (an enlisted Marine who later accepted an officer's commission), he was a solid Marine and a good guy to work with. But what I'll never forget is that he carried in his utility cap what he said was a nude photograph of his wife, which picture he also volunteered was sexually explicit. Happily, he did not show it to me. Perhaps it didn't exist.

This reminds me of another nude-photo story from those days. Indeed, here we're talking the mother lode of nude photographs. The sister of one of the men in our company then worked for a photo development company back in The World. In those days, as it was told to me, it was the policy of most developers that any indecent photographs be culled from the others after printing, and destroyed.

Well, apparently our fellow Marine's sister thought it would do her brother and his buddies a great deal of good if she were to forgo destroying the evidence, and send regular batches of hundreds of these photos to the sex-starved boys in Dong Ha. In the last analysis, however, of the pictures I saw, none were what one might call centerfold or, in World War II parlance, pinup quality. Indeed, these young women so willing to bare all, and be photographed that way, were, in a word, beasts.



Shortly after I arrived in Dong Ha, the enemy had succeeded in getting its attack forces within striking distance of Danang, its main target in I Corps. In fact, August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1968 is the date used to mark the beginning of North Vietnam's "Third Offensive" of that year. It was a familiar pattern, with mortar and rocket attacks against district and provincial headquarters and military installations. In addition, Viet Cong sappers (enemy commandos with satchel charges of explosives and the like) were employed, including an attempt against Dong Ha that was foiled. The ARVN had intercepted the NVA but the VC were already inside Danang's gates.

Quang Tri Province, especially along the DMZ including Dong Ha, was almost quiet during August. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, 2/1 (2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment) made a raid into the Z following intensive B-52 strikes, which were known as "Arc Lights" or "Rolling Thunder." There was also fighting the same day approximately three miles south of Con Thien, northwest of Dong Ha and virtually on the DMZ. Concurrently, two companies of the Ninth Marines got into a battle that went on for three days.

Dong Ha was well within range of North Vietnamese artillery. Every evening around six, like clockwork, the shelling would begin. (One might think the NVA would have learned something about the element of surprise.) Having grown accustomed to this shabby treatment, we would already be in bunkers, usually with cans of warm beer in hand, that is, if we could get any. Attentive to say the least, we could hear the "pop" of the enemy guns five miles distant, and then would count the ten seconds or so before the incoming artillery round impacted. If we heard the impact, at least we knew we hadn't taken a direct hit. Immediately we would toast the enemy's ineptness at missing us yet again.

In September, 3/1 (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment) was already in Danang on what one Marine has called "old, familiar, dangerous ground," where the battalion had worked in 1966 and 1967.

Thanks to Operation Houston just north of Danang, Highway One, the main north-south road, was kept open and traffic was moving mostly freely between Danang and Hue to its north.

South of Danang the Seventh Marine Regiment continued its operations. In an action on September 20<sup>th</sup>, an NVA battalion was caught in a box" by 2/7, 3/7 and other units. Thus trapped in a killing zone, the Communists lost 101 soldiers.

There were other scattered actions also in late September.



In this same time frame, I received a surprise visit in Dong Ha from Marine Lieutenant C. Craig Mannschreck, a helicopter pilot and friend. I first met Craig (the C. stands for Charles) at The Basic School in Quantico where he and I were roommates for twenty-one weeks, the length

of the program. A native of St. Joseph, Missouri, he was perhaps the most easy-going and clean-cut young man I had ever met. We became fast friends, despite the differences in our backgrounds. Although I don't see him much any more, he sent me a heartwarming and funny letter dated March 6, 1995 in connection with my upcoming fiftieth birthday. Here are excerpts:

I remember that I was in mourning on 6 November 1994 when I turned 50. I imagine you look great, although without a doubt, I am certain you don't look any prettier. It sounds like your whole family is doing well while putting up with you for all these years. Even though I haven't seen "ya'll" for quite some time, it seems like the proverbial "just yesterday" since I first set eyes on this hulk from the big city. I admittedly was apprehensive about rooming with a New Yorker who was rather quiet, at least initially. As I have told literally hundreds of people, this fellow from New York turned out to be one of the most sincere, caring, and truly good people that I have met in my entire life. A real friend!!

Craig is one of finest men I have had the privilege of knowing. I hope to see him again before long.



Meanwhile, the Third Marine Division was preempting an offensive across the Z by the rejuvenated 320<sup>th</sup> NVA Division. A "two-pronged spoiling attack" was launched from the Rockpile, about twelve miles west of Dong Ha. Col. Robert H. Barrow's Ninth and Col. Richard L. Michael, Jr.'s Third Marine Regiments secured, respectively, the Nui Tia Pong ridge, five miles west of the Rockpile, and then Mutter's Ridge, three miles to its north. (Col. Barrow later rose to become Commandant of the Marine Corps, in which capacity he served from July 1, 1979 to June 30, 1983.)

These successes set the stage for a "sweep" by Task Force Hotel under Brig. Gen. William C. Chip between Mutter's Ridge and the Ben Hai River, which flows through the DMZ. This five-battalion effort reportedly yielded over 500 weapons, nearly 5,000 land mines, 20,000 mortar rounds, thirteen tons of explosives and 250,000 rounds of small-arms ammunition. The 320<sup>th</sup> NVA Division's planned offensive had been completely gutted.

To the Marines' delight, the battleship USS *New Jersey* (BB-62), with its nine 16" "rifles" and twenty five-inch guns, arrived on station off the Z on September 29<sup>th</sup>. The big guns

had a 24-mile range. The ship's 2,700-pound armor-piercing and 1,900-pound high-capacity 16" projectiles were eight times the weight of the eight-inch shells fired by heavy cruisers. On the following day twenty-nine 16" and 116 five-inch shells were reportedly delivered on eight targets north of the Z.

October, in general, proved to be a quiet month along the DMZ, probably due to September's successes on the ground, and the battleship *New Jersey's* arrival offshore. The Fourth and Ninth Marines had almost no contact with the enemy. Indeed, the northeast monsoon hindered the conduct of operations throughout I Corps. On October 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, twelve inches of rain fell on Dong Ha, ten on Danang. Talk about relative extrema, I have still never seen rain like that elsewhere in my life.

Then, on Halloween 1968, we got the news that President Johnson had announced a halt to his then three-year-old bombing campaign against North Vietnam, effective November 1<sup>st</sup>. Consequently, the daily artillery barrages against Dong Ha ceased, and there were thereafter only limited incidents of incoming until mid-May 1969 when all hell broke loose again with a dreadful and spectacular night rocket attack on Dong Ha.

It was said that the intensity of ground combat in the second half of 1968 was about half of what it was in the first half. Nonetheless, taken together, the "Free World Military Forces" in I Corps that year had killed over 100,000 of the enemy and captured nearly 35,000 weapons.



There was no luxury in Dong Ha (hence its alias Dung Heap) and more than enough surprises.

Showers were crude and cold. Since the temperature was usually warm, the shower was almost refreshing, except for the invariably dirty water we used to wash ourselves. Shaving was arguably worse because cold water just didn't cut it, at least with my beard.

One morning I was awakened by what I thought was a bomb exploding. I was wrong. The crashing sound that caused me to roll off my rack and onto the concrete floor in search of

cover was merely that of lightning striking the corrugated steel roof of our hootch (barracks). To say it startled me is an understatement; it was the loudest noise I have ever heard.

Early on another morning in Dung Heap, with the weather much more agreeable, I suddenly awoke to the sight of a foot-long lizard lying on my chest, ostensibly staring me in the eye. The feeling of the reptile on my bare skin nearly sickened me but it was fleeting, for I have never moved so quickly in my life. Bolting swiftly upright, I pushed the lizard off myself and onto the floor. Next, seemingly instinctively, I grabbed one of my boots and hurled it at the animal, which was then about four feet from the door. The heel of the boot struck the critter hard where its tail meets the rest of its body, and severed the tail. Now, the tail was about half the length of the whole animal, in this case about six inches. What happened next was amazing and, to some perhaps, disgusting: The lizard ran under the door and out of the room, its tail visibly unconnected from its body. Then, in an incredible and ghastly sight, the severed tail quickly slithered under the door ostensibly following its owner!

Later, somebody told me that the 'flight' nerve impulse had already been transmitted by the lizard's brain to its tail; thus, it was simply following orders.

Since I am on the subjects of impulses and tails, I learned in my freshman-year biology class at Chaminade that an amoeba is "a microscopic, one-celled animal found in stagnant water or as a parasite in other animals." Suffice it to say that many amoebae lived in and around Dung Heap, and at least one took up residence inside me. I learned the hard way that some of these microorganisms cause dysentery, which my dictionary defines as "any of various intestinal diseases characterized by inflammation, abdominal pain, toxemia, and diarrhea with bloody, mucous feces." I was afflicted with amoebic dysentery for about six weeks. That written, I wish neither to recount the episode further here, nor to relive it.



In the autumn of 1968 there was scuttlebutt (rumor) that the number of American troops in-country would be cut, and many sent home. Of course this was soothing to most Marines, irrespective of how much of their Vietnam tours of duty they had served.

One significant aspect of troop reduction was embarkation, not only of troops themselves but also of vehicles and other equipment. Just as such instruments of a military campaign were brought into a theater of operations by air or sea, they would have to be taken out in planes or ships.

I was blessed again by being selected as my company's embarkation officer, which meant I would have to fly to Okinawa to attend Embarkation School, a three-week course. I felt I had won an all-expenses-paid vacation out of Vietnam. I couldn't believe it.

While on Oki, I saw a young woman named Claire Santoro from Huntington, New York, whom I had first met in August 1960 when she and I traveled together on a bus from Rockville Centre, Long Island, to Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana. She and I were our high schools' representatives to the national convention of the Catholic Students Mission Crusade. Now she was teaching at the air base at, if memory serves, Naha, Okinawa. Also on that interminable bus ride was John Burke from Manhasset, Long Island, who graduated from Holy Cross in 1965, served as a Marine helicopter pilot in Vietnam and was killed in action there.

My educational excursion to Okinawa reminds me of some of the good times we had at the officers club at the Kadena Air Force base, the official name of which was Kadena Air Base Open Officers' Mess, or KABOOM, for short. Back in Vietnam, the acronym for the Danang Open Officers' Mess was, yes, DOOM.

While on Oki, known otherwise as "The Rock," I had the opportunity to introduce Claire to Joe Moosbrugger, the same officer who gave "Dung Heap" its unforgettable nickname. I am happy to report that the couple later married and I served as an usher in their wedding party. On Oki, Claire had a girl friend, a teaching colleague, by the name of Barbara Rounds, or "Roundsie," as we called her.

At "embark school," I met a Marine lieutenant named John Benda, a grunt (infantry platoon leader) who served with 1/9 (a.k.a. Walking Dead) and was also a classmate at the school. "Of all the hard luck outfits in Vietnam," Michael Herr has written, 1/9 "was said to be the most doomed, doomed in its Search-and-Destroy days before Khe Sanh, known for a history of ambush and confusion and for a casualty rate which was the highest of any outfit in the entire war."

John and I became good friends in the short time we spent together. I tried to locate him when I returned to The World but to no avail. Happily, I did *not* find his name among those of the missing or killed in action chiseled into "The Wall," the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in Washington, D.C.

November 10<sup>th</sup> is the anniversary of the founding of the U.S. Marine Corps in Philadelphia's Tun Tavern on that date in 1775. Without fail, and no matter the circumstances in which they may find themselves, Marines around the globe observe "Marine Corps Birthday" religiously. Celebrations range from the elegant to the plebeian, with the eldest and youngest Marines toasting the Corps and each other.

In 1968, students at the Marines' Embarkation School were invited to join all other Okinawa-based Marines on November 10<sup>th</sup> for a gala hosted by a full-bird colonel. Benda and I invited Barbara and Claire, respectively, for what we expected would be a lovely occasion. And indeed it was, but for one minor glitch.

Part of the protocol at a Marine Corps Birthday ball such as this one was the reading of the Commandant's message by the commanding officer of the base. During the reading, all Marines in attendance are required to stand at attention, and spouses and civilian guests are expected also to be on their feet for the moment.

Now, a bottle of champagne had been delivered to our table just moments before we were called to attention. As we all listened intently to the words of our esteemed Commandant rendered by our capable commanding officer, the otherwise pin-drop silence pervading us hundreds of Marines and our guests was shattered by the seemingly deafening sound of the cork exploding from our champagne bottle, precisely at the crescendo of the Commandant's message.

Incredibly, the cork's trajectory took it some thirty feet and caused it to bounce once, roll and come to rest at last at the colonel's feet. Despite the furtive and ostensibly irate glance he cast in our general direction, the colonel, as lector, completed his reading to the enthusiastic applause of all present. For John Benda and me, as well as Claire, Roundsie and others who witnessed the unintended and untimely cork launch, stifling our laughter was at least as challenging as it was once upon a time for other Marines at one of Wild Bill Surette's rifle inspections.

I am happy to report that the colonel proved a good sport, as there was no inquisition following the embarrassing and awkward moment during his presentation. A lesser man might have had no tolerance for what was, after all, an accident.



During the fall and early winter of 1968-69, American forces throughout Vietnam braced for what some intelligence reports predicted would be a repeat of Tet '68. Now that things had been relatively quiet since President Johnson had ceased bombing the North, this information gave us in Dung Heap tremendous incentive to construct a bunker that would withstand a direct hit by an artillery shell, a rocket or a mortar round. Starting, I would say, in November '68, just after my return from embark school, our officer group decided to build what came to be known as "Super Bunker."

The basic construction material consisted of ordinary sandbags. The ordinary became extraordinary, given the thickness of the stout walls created by a vast multitude of almost certainly a few thousand sandbags. Likewise, pieces of Marston matting (pierced steel planking) were employed. The principal use of this material was to provide an inexpensive but dependable form of steel-surfaced runway that was rapidly deployable. First tested in 1941 in Marston, North Carolina, it was used in World War II to surface forward airfields on soft ground that enabled speedy construction of airfields for early defense fighters, interdiction bombers and close air support of ground Marines. In Dong Ha, some twenty-seven years later we used Marston matting as the 'bread' in protective 'sandwiches' that contained many layers of sandbags.

By the time Super Bunker was completed in early January of '69, its walls were approximately four feet thick. But the real marvel was the roof: A giant hero sandwich of Marston matting and sandbags, it was fully six feet thick.

My only Christmas Day in Vietnam was that of 1968. It was a sad time, for just five days earlier I received a telephone call from Joe Moosbrugger in Danang in which he gave me the tragic news that my Holy Cross classmate and friend Dick Morin, a McDonnell Douglas Marine

F-4 *Phantom* radar intercept operator (RIO), had been shot down on a low-level night bombing run. Officially, Dick was listed as missing in action (MIA) but his wingman reported first seeing “secondary explosions” from the target but then realized that the “fireball” he witnessed was from the impact of Dick’s aircraft in the target area. In retrospect, I was probably the last of our group of Holy Cross Marines to see Dick alive. As things turned out, he happened to fly to Okinawa in October during my time at Embarkation School. We met at the Officer’s Club *Oktoberfest* and enjoyed a few beers and a meal together. Dick is survived by his wife Jean, a Marymount classmate of Mame, and a daughter.

I was blessed to be able to spend a quiet Christmas Eve with my friends 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Bill Raabe, a Bay Area Californian, and Master Sgt. Joe King, whose specialty was a touching rendition of *The Irish Soldier Boy*. We ate, drank and sang Christmas carols into the wee hours of Christmas morn. We also consoled each other, for, despite the strong Marine and Christian bonds among us, each of us knew painfully well where he would rather be.

*Silent Night*. Happily for us, it was.

One Marine in our company was very unhappy, although few others knew. He had received a “Dear John” letter from his sweetheart back in The World. Such a communication can be devastating, especially in an environment in which one’s morale may not always be otherwise on the upswing.

After evening chow, according to his hootchmates, he smoked some marijuana. Not long after he hit the rack (went to bed) he put the muzzle of his M-16 in his mouth and blew his brains out.

That poor wasted Marine may have actually done my children some good, for I used his tragic example as a scare tactic with my kids in our family discussions about the use of illicit drugs, including pot. It was not difficult to understand: The Marine smoked a joint, went to bed and shot himself. Was there a direct correlation between the use of marijuana and his suicide?

As their father, I led my ‘colts’ to water; only they could decide to drink or not.

They drank.

In January 1969 Mame and I met in Honolulu, Hawaii, for the six days of my R&R (“rest and recuperation”). She flew from New York to San Francisco, where she visited her college classmate Mary Kay Schabel, and then on to Honolulu. I traveled aboard a military transport

south from Dong Ha to Danang where I caught yet another Continental Airlines flight to Honolulu. Our days there together were blissful but, alas, too few.

Shortly after I got back in-country, I wrote the following poem for her.

### REFLECTIONS ON LEAVING YOU AND COMING HOME

The glimpse of your long-loved face  
Watching in the Hawaiian night  
Lingers.

My memory shivers in the cold  
Of that inevitable separation.  
But even now  
I listen to the warmth of your silence.

In a moment then  
The eagle was winging its way  
To the dragon once more,  
Ending the ecstasy of your tender presence.

Lost in new-old towns,  
No one knows their names  
Or ours  
Or us  
For we only know each other.

Loneliness again becomes our captor:  
Common and uncompromising.  
Him we share  
(Tho' we be worlds apart)  
And one thing more:  
Love!

Nothing good happens fast –  
I'll be home in May.  
So dismiss the hundreds  
That have passed  
For now we see our day.

But still we wait.

Where is the order of the days  
In which we live?  
Sense and nonsense mingle,  
And for the lucky ones alone,  
Life is filled with mystical insights.

We have the business  
Of our days attending  
For scarce a hundred more.  
So please don't winter in pain;  
Button up your overcoat  
When the wind is free  
For you belong to me.

As for me, my love, my life was never  
So precious to me as now ---  
Because of you.

To live, to care,  
To give, to share; to love you:  
This is my prayer  
All the days of my life.

So until our day in May  
Let us bend back the bow  
In dreams as we may  
To love's dream we shared  
Yesterday.

In the spring of 1969 I had the good fortune of membership on a Marine Corps volleyball team that played others in I Corps. Like Embarkation School, it had the potential for getting Marines out of Vietnam, at least for a while. Winning the league competition would have placed us in a WestPac tournament to be played in Hawaii. Our team was victorious through the semi-finals but lost the big one. My teammates and I were presented individual trophies for our performance, and I still have mine.



Earlier in this chapter I referred to "limited incidents of incoming until mid-May 1969 when all hell broke loose again with a dreadful and spectacular night rocket attack on Dong Ha."

It was about three o'clock in the morning of Mother's Day when I was awakened by the sound of explosions all around. Whereas Dong Ha had been accustomed, at least during my time there, to artillery and mortar attacks, on this night, the rocket was the enemy's weapon of choice.

NVA rockets often proved to be errant missiles. They would come in with a ghastly whirring sound and then explode into what often were huge pieces of shrapnel that could easily decapitate or otherwise inflict horrific damage on humans and other targets. Unlike modern ordnance, these rockets had no guidance systems; nor could their firing or launch be easily plotted according to map coordinates, as could artillery or mortars.

At least one enemy rocket volley scored a direct hit on highly explosive and incendiary targets about 150 feet from my rack. Situated there were several huge rubber bladders, each of which contained thousands of gallons of "AvGas," the fuel for the mostly transport aircraft that used Dong Ha's airstrip daily. Once ignited by the rockets, these leviathans, now lethal, erupted into skyscrapers of flame so intensely hot and bright that one could look at them for only the briefest of moments. The image seared in my memory is that of, in a word, hell. The intense heat, the convulsions of fire and the general pandemonium generated by the attack were truly fearsome. These were relative extrema of the worst sort.

All of us knew it was nighttime, and yet the shimmering flames of the towering inferno in our midst gave us the false impression that midday was upon us. Among some who were so suddenly awakened by the explosions were feelings of confusion and even otherworldliness, either long since forgotten or never before experienced. "This is so weird, man," said one Marine.

I ran the short distance to Super Bunker and joined my fellow Marines who were already inside. Most were in their skivvies, and all were studies in pain and misery. I was buck naked but nobody noticed or cared; nor did I.

Hell had ended, at least for a while. The attack was soon over, the Dong Ha perimeter was reconnoitered and reinforced, and we got an early start on what was now, in reality, a new day.

*I love the smell of jet fuel in the morning. – Marine Corps Aviation Bumper Sticker*

# 13

## Captain Robert Eric Lund, USMC, a.k.a. The Round Man

*No matter what the mission, regardless of the weather or what had happened yesterday, it was impossible to begin a day in a Huey in low spirits.*  
– Layne Heath in CW2

One of the first things I was told when I checked into Radio Relay platoon was that a Marine lieutenant with “a big red mustache” had come by looking for me the preceding day. This puzzled me because I knew no Marines, except some I had just met since arriving in country, who sported mustaches, let alone a big red one.

I had to travel on one leg of this day trip from Landing Zone (LZ) Stud (later renamed Vandegrift Combat Base after the World War II Marine Corps Commandant, Lieutenant General Alexander Archer Vandegrift) up a nearby mountain, known as Signal Hill, to deliver scrip currency to my men stationed there. The most efficient way to do this was to wait until a helicopter, commonly called a “chopper,” came by, and simply hitch a ride to the outpost up the mountain. To return, one simply reversed the process.

As I climbed aboard the chopper that was to take me back down the mountain, a UH1E (Huey) “slick” (as opposed to a gunship), its rotor blades whooshing overhead, the copilot, seated left-front, instructed me where to sit. Then he turned to his right to survey his passengers, and, despite the obscuring effects of his visor and helmet, I was able to catch a glimpse of his lower face. Some aspects of him were familiar and unmistakable, and his mouth was partially obscured – by a big red mustache.

It was Bob Lund, my classmate and close friend from Holy Cross. We had not only graduated together, we had accompanied each other through virtually every phase of our Marine Corps training. I grabbed his arm so that he would focus on me; we both laughed heartily, took off, returned to LZ Stud and got reacquainted briefly and quickly. Each of us learned that he was

based near the other, with Bob's helicopter squadron, VMO-6, flying out of Quang Tri, just five miles down the road from Dong Ha. This proximity was to produce and witness many good and often raucous times. It was comforting to know he was nearby.

Within my first week I had to visit our various radio relay "shots," which were situated at outposts that stretched from the China Sea west roughly along the DMZ. My platoon's shots were located throughout Quang Tri Province at places with names like Cua Viet, Con Thien, Camp Carroll, LZ Stud, the Rockpile and Quang Tri Village.

Bob Lund came to be called "Round" or, more formally, "The Round Man" --- affectionately, I hasten to add, and it had nothing to do with his size or shape. In the summer of 1966 in the Hawkins Room at The Basic School in Quantico, draft Budweisers were being consumed after a tough, hot day of training. At our table were Bob, Roger Hunt, Steve O'Neill, Frank Teague and myself, Holy Cross classmates all. As we were drinking "rounds," and it was now Bob's turn to buy one, I had intended to say "It's your round, Lund." What came out instead was "It's your Lund, Round." And the rest, as they say, is history. (Since this accidental conferring of a nickname on Bob, I have observed that, had he been a "grunt" instead of a Marine aviator, we could call him "The Ground Round.")

Bob's combat performances were impressive enough to earn him a host of decorations, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, two individual action air medals (the aviation equivalent of the Bronze Star), 28 air medals (each representing twenty strikes or sorties), the Navy Achievement Medal with Combat "V", the Combat Action Ribbon, and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, as well as various unit citations.

One of the extraordinary stories about Bob is that, while on a "sniffer" mission, his Huey, another slick, crashed in a high-angle-of-bank, low-altitude turn, which was being negotiated in order to avoid small arms fire. Unfortunately, the chopper impacted at a speed sufficient to separate the engine and fuel cell from the aircraft. Improbable as it was for those on board to survive a crash severe enough to separate the helicopter's rotor head and everything aft of the crew compartment, the mishap proved providential. That is because the aircraft's load of JP-4, a refined kerosene used by turbine-powered helicopters, may have otherwise exploded and made toast of Bob and the other Marines on board.

That evening, following a celebration at which adult beverages were served, and I wish I had been present, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Lund managed to break his ankle. His fracture was so severe that he had to be medevac-ed (evacuated from the combat zone for medical treatment), first to a hospital ship and subsequently to an American military base on the island of Guam.

Parenthetically, this was surprising inasmuch as Bob and I, as college buddies, were "men of moderation" or would often describe ourselves as such --- usually after having consumed more than a few beers. This led me many years later to e-mail him a definition of moderation especially suited to him and me: *The last refuge for the unimaginative*. (One would think that such a clever line might be found in, say, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, but it is not to be found in my 1980 edition.)

It was during his stay on Guam that Bob's wife Patty visited him, and he got to spend instead several presumably pleasant months convalescing. He then returned to Vietnam with only eight months left to serve. Call it good fortune, call it being blessed; in the last analysis, as the great Jackie Gleason used to say, "How sweet it is!"

During our earlier training at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida, Bob and I lived in a four-bedroom ranch house for a period of time on Santa Rosa Island with our fellow Marines and Holy Cross classmates, Roger Hunt and Jim Stokes. Jim later moved out and John "Ace" Astle, now a Maryland state senator, moved in.

As the eldest of my parents' six children, I had developed at an early age some rudimentary culinary skills, nothing special, believe me. Accordingly, I agreed to do the cooking, provided I was accompanied each week by one of my housemates to the base commissary to select the food, the cost of which we all shared. I would serve as chef; the other three would be responsible for clean-up after our meals. In this connection, some twenty-eight years later, at my fiftieth birthday party, Bob eloquently expressed friendship and warm wishes but still managed to refer to this period "as the only testy time in our relationship."

"You see," said he, "Chuck and I had a fundamental philosophical difference as to whether you wash dishes before or after you eat from them!"

It brought the house down.



In 1999 I read a book entitled *The Right Kind of War* by John "Moe" McCormick who served with the Marines' Fourth Raider Battalion in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945. In Moe's wonderful work were some words he wrote for a fellow Marine. I included the same passage in a letter of tribute to Bob in January 2000.

I had then known him for more than thirty-seven years and had finally found language that I thought aptly described both him and my relationship with him: from its humble beginning at Holy Cross in 1962; through our Marine Corps training and service, including Vietnam tours of duty; in our marriages, both begun within a week of each other in June 1967; in the births of our first children on the same April 2<sup>nd</sup> the following year; and now, after myriad martinis, on the threshold of the Third Millennium.

In my letter, using Moe's words, I described Bob as:

**A CHARACTER WHO WOULD BE MY CLOSE FRIEND,  
DAILY ANTAGONIST, CYNICAL ADVISER, AND  
FREQUENT ALLY IN UNMILITARY ANTICS**

No epitaph, Moe's words, now a gift to my friend Bob, are of life well lived, of humor and warmth, of admiration and affection, of friendship and fun. Indeed, when I first read these mere eighteen words, I thought instantly of Bob. Notwithstanding a wish that I had written them myself, I offered them to him "as a modest millennial gift" for they seemed timeless and, well, perfect for him --- from my perspective of course.

I wrote in conclusion that "I hope you will enjoy reading them half as much as I did, and experience at least a small smile afterward. *Semper fidelis!*"

Soon after Bob received my letter, I received a reply from him. Here are excerpts:

"Your letter has given me pause for thought. Perhaps an attempt to gain forgiveness for the slight at your fiftieth, I still consider it a great compliment. I guess you could say we've spent the last 37 years proceeding from (characters at Holy Cross) to (our latest grandsons) Kevin and Colin with a number of unmilitary antics 'in amongst them.' It's been a great journey for me and your friendship has been very important. Thanks. *Semper fi.*"

*Pilots are plane people with a special air about them.* – Marine Corps Aviation Bumper Sticker

# 14

## Captain William Rogers Hunt, Jr., USMC, a.k.a. York

*Anxiety was a luxury, a joke you had no room for once you knew the variety of deaths and mutilations the war offered.*  
- From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

**A**s I called to mind suitable stories to share about this truly exceptional man, I was fortunate to have come across a sample of “Roger”’s goodness and humor in a 1992 letter he wrote to Mame and me in connection with our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. To wit:

I first met Chuck during our freshman year at Holy Cross. He was a graduate of a prestigious Catholic high school on Long Island and I from a public institution west of Boston. We became friends and he helped me with Catholicism, i.e. explaining the difference between the large and small beads on the Rosary, and also socially, i.e. how to open a can of Budweiser or was it a “Knick”? Chuck was one of those guys you could depend on – a true friend. So when he told me he met a girl with whom he was truly in love, I believed him. I wanted to meet this girl, Mary Ann from New York, if only to see personally if she was everything Chuck said she was. Well,...I was impressed – pretty and intelligent! I knew right from the start these two would end up together.

Thanks to the U.S. Marine Corps, our post-graduate careers were parallel. Moving from such exotic bases as Quantico, VA, Pensacola, FL, and “I Corps,” Vietnam, Chuck and I would share many great times. We had that “esprit de corps” not limited to just Marines. We laughed and sometimes cried together but in spite of often adverse conditions, there were no “bad” times. I remember seeing Chuck in Dong Ha in early 1969 and asking him how he was coping. He told me the letters from Mary Ann kept him going. I will never forget that.

My wife, Joanne, who has been with me most of the last twenty-five years, has shared most of these memories. Like Chuck, I am indeed a fortunate man. We think of the Mansfields as family. We have seen our children grow old and have a lot to be proud of. I hope we can grow old together as we enter another generation.

“Roge,” as Joanne calls him, is the type of person who would do anything to help another. (Most people simply call him Roger, despite his proper middle name, Rogers.) He has

never taken advantage of anyone. His motives are always the purest. I have admired him for a long time, and I have no truer friend.

Roge and I did indeed become friends early in college but I believe that our time together in the Marine Corps forged our relationship forever. Yes, we trained and even lived together in the places he mentioned in his letter. Yet, it was in Vietnam where we had a conversation that not only bonded us as friends and Marines; it gave each of us a look into the other's soul.

Roge or "York," as he is still frequently called by his classmates and fellow Marines, was a CH-46 *Sea Knight* helicopter pilot. Unlike the UH1E Bob Lund flew, the "46" had two huge rotors and was designed as a medium transport. As a chopper pilot, Roge had already seen a lot of combat action during his tour of duty in Vietnam by the time he visited me in Dung Heap in the spring of '69.

The mission of the 46 was threefold: transport (for troops, resupply, etc.), medevac and recon (reconnaissance) Marine insert and/or extract. Of these the most dangerous by far was the recon mission, especially the emergency extract of a recon Marine or his whole team, which often involved a "high hover" by the pilot and copilot, and a "ladder extract." This was highly risky business, to say the least.

*The Battle History of the U.S. Marines* by Col. Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret.) provides compelling commentary on 'the helicopter war' in Vietnam:

The low-flying, slow-speed birds were fair game to every Viet Cong or North Vietnamese foot soldier with a weapon. Marine helicopter crews who survived an entire tour unscathed led charmed lives. Enemy gunfire downed 1,177 helicopters during the first five years of the war; many others returned to base shot to splinters. Yet every Marine "grunt" in the bush knew full well that his fellow Marines flying those birds would risk hell on earth to evacuate him should he become seriously wounded.

One evening the commander of York's squadron announced that it was his (the commander's) duty to choose one of his pilots to serve as a forward air controller (FAC), a 100-day assignment with Marine grunts. The FAC's job is air-ground coordination, and he is required to call in close air support by attack and fighter aircraft to assist and protect Marines on the ground in both offensive and defensive operations. A Marine pilot, like every Marine officer, is first trained as an infantry platoon leader. Thus, this combination of skills was superbly tailored to the FAC's crucial role in supporting the ground troops' mission.

The squadron commander's selection mechanism was the time-honored approach of picking a name out of a hat. Roge said to himself, "Fine with me. I'm the luckiest guy in the world; I'll never get picked."

The name pulled first was his.

Roge's mother Penny had always told him, "Bad luck comes in threes." His selection as a FAC was the first. The second was his orders, which read "1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines," the infamous 1/9 or "Walking Dead," so described because it had the highest rate of killed and wounded of any unit in the entire Vietnam War. Thirdly, to make matters worse, when Roge reported for duty, his new CO (commanding officer) advised him that the battalion would soon depart for an operation on the Laotian border called Dewey Canyon.

The difference between being named a FAC for duty in Vietnam, and being selected for Embarkation School on Okinawa, as I was, in roughly the same time frame is inestimable. Nonetheless, I have a strong hunch that Roge might have preferred Okinawa, although it would not surprise me in the least that his devotion to duty would anchor him willingly to his FAC assignment. It's the nature of the man.

As 1969 began, the enemy was increasing its forces in the Da Krong valley in Quang Tri Province's southwest corner. Known as Base Area 611, it was fed by Route 922 from Laos and, in turn, Route 548 through the A Chau Valley, from which men and supplies could be moved eastward toward Hue or southeastward toward Danang. The NVA and VC probably felt relatively immune to ground attack because not only was 611 remote, the monsoon weather continued to mask their activities.

On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, General Raymond G. Davis, CO of the Third Marine Division, ordered three battalions of the Ninth Marines into the Da Krong to kickoff Operation Dewey Canyon.

In *The Marines In Vietnam 1954-1973* Brig. Gen. E.H. Simmons, USMC (Ret.), describes Dewey Canyon:

Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9<sup>th</sup> Marines were to be completely dependent upon helicopters for logistic support, a particularly disquieting prospect in view of the always uncertain flying weather. The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, with a tonnage requirement only a fraction of the Marines, had usable trails and roads running back into Laos. The convolutions of the Laotian border protected the enemy's back and a portion of his flanks from ground attack and he had – something of a rarity for in-country operations – a number of artillery

pieces of up to 122mm. caliber. His base area was also well seeded with light antiaircraft weapons.

...Enemy resistance began to stiffen on 2 February, with the heaviest fighting taking place between 18 and 22 February, involving the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines, in the center of line. Soon some of the largest caches of the war were being uncovered. By the time the operation ended on 19 March, the base area was cleaned out... Enemy dead had been counted at 1,617, and 1,461 weapons and hundreds of tons of ammunition, equipment, and supplies had been taken.

In addition, Operation Dewey Canyon, which lasted fifty-seven days, claimed many Marine casualties: 121 killed and 803 wounded.

Shortly after Dewey Canyon had ended, York requested permission from his CO to visit "a grunt buddy of mine in Dong Ha," namely me. Providing some insight into his respect for his subordinate, the CO proffered his own jeep and driver to take York to Dung Heap so he could visit me. York arranged for the driver, a lance corporal, "several beers" to compensate him for the return trip.

Roger Hunt has always been a superbly physically conditioned individual. A "lean and mean Marine," he was and still is, at 57, perfectly fit and well proportioned. Not quite wiry, neither was he bulky like me. About six feet tall, he was and is exceptionally strong despite his lean musculature. I would estimate his normal body weight to be about 170 pounds. A track man in high school, he was also fleet afoot.

When he arrived in Dong Ha that evening in the early spring of 1969, Roge was emaciated; indeed, he had lost fifty pounds during Dewey Canyon – that's 50 pounds in only 57 days, or fourteen ounces per day. We talked and drank a few Budweisers, the calories from which York sorely needed.

It did not take me long to recognize that what Roge had just lived through had killed a part of him. He related a harrowing, heart-wrenching tale of carrying a dead Marine up steep hills to a waiting helicopter.

As he continued to describe the seemingly incessant carrying of Marines killed in action, also to waiting choppers frequently under heavy enemy fire, he had trouble speaking. His lips quivered slightly, and the lower crescents of his eyelids filled. It was not difficult to see how deeply his heart hurt. Brutally, the worst of the war's horrors had insinuated themselves into one of the Marines' best.

Roge spoke of physical exhaustion, and conveyed his worry that he might not be able to continue lugging the dead but precious bodies of his comrades. (Whenever possible, Marines retrieve the bodies of their fellow Marines fallen in battle.) He said he knew he must not stop; he simply had to keep going. His expressed fear that the horror would never cease was palpable. I didn't know what to say to console him, or even if I could. Man, it was bad.

*I don't know how anyone who hasn't been shot at up close in a real firefight can possibly understand how good you feel afterward. Men have been killed and hurt, the fight has been won or lost, but there is only the one truly significant fact: that you are still alive, you have not been killed.*

- James Brady in *The Coldest War*

The underlying message of Roge's Dewey Canyon experience was, incredibly, not the obvious. To me it was the fact that throughout his moving account, which I believe he then felt he must share, he never spoke of *himself*, or the deadly risks *he* faced. Instead, he focused exclusively on other Marines, whom he simply *had* to help, whether they were dead or, he hoped, only wounded. He made up his mind that for the rest of his life, no matter what, he would never feel sorry for himself.

Despite his mother's maxim about bad luck, Roger says today, "I can't help but think that I made it out – I survived, intact, whereas several of my fellow officers did not. One of my radio operators had his arm blown off by an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) – I'll never forget it. These guys were the true heroes."

York received forty-one Air Medals for his 820 (!) missions, the Bronze Star, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and the Combat Action Ribbon (for his service with 1/9). In addition, he was awarded a meritorious citation from Boeing/Vertol, manufacturers of the CH-46, for a medevac mission in 1968, for his "superior flying skills."

The total number of "hits" to his aircraft was thirty-eight; he was also shot down near Hill 55 but, in his words, "I was lucky compared to several others in my squadron."

Roger's Bronze Star citation refers to his "heroic achievement in aerial flight...in connection with combat operations against the enemy." Moreover, it reads:

Arriving over the objective, the pilot was informed by his gunship support that the ground unit was heavily engaged with the enemy less than seventy-five meters from the landing

zone. Approaching the area and coming under a heavy volume of automatic weapons fire, First Lieutenant Hunt successfully landed the aircraft... During the second approach to the beleaguered unit's landing zone, the aircraft received six direct hits. Undaunted by the hostile fire, (he) steadfastly remained in the hazardous area while the Marines and ordnance were being disembarked, and then departed from the landing (zone) with one man who had been seriously wounded.

His bold initiative and superb aeronautical abilities inspired all who observed him and contributed significantly to the accomplishment of his unit's mission. First Lieutenant Hunt's courage, professional airmanship and steadfast devotion to duty in the face of great personal danger were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.

As I reflect on these words and on York's visit with me in Dong Ha some thirty-three years ago, I know that I came to know from the words he spoke that he is a genuine hero, albeit a quiet one.

*I've yet to meet a Nam grunt who wouldn't leap to buy a Marine chopper vet a heartfelt drink.*

- Anonymous

# 15

## Captain Donald O'Neill, USMC, et al.

*I asked a lithe lady to lie her down: Holy and meek, she cries. – William Blake*

One of the most affable and knowledgeable officers in Dong Ha in my time there was a 38-year-old mustang captain by the name of Donald O'Neill, who happened to live in the same cantonment I did. First Lt. Bill Raabe, my friend from Oakland, California, introduced me to Don and worked for him in the Dong Ha Communications Center, or "Comm Center," as it was called, which Don ran.

I learned a tremendous amount from Don, thanks to his then already twenty years in the Corps. Like Bob Lund and me, he enjoyed an occasional martini, a rarity for junior officers, or anyone for that matter, in our neck of the woods. We trusted each other, enjoyed working together and became friends.

Occasionally the officers in our little corner of Dung Heap would have a barbecue --- with real beefsteaks, a delicacy for us. Beer, usually warm Schlitz, was more regularly available. Don, however, had connections through which he was able to procure the occasional bottle of Beefeater gin. To be sure, in the context of the way we lived in those days, this was extraordinary and highly civilized.

A raconteur par excellence, Don was at his most entertaining after he had consumed a couple of martinis, known variously then as loud-mouth soup, silver bullets or, simply, see-throughs. What follows is perhaps his most memorable tale.

In his younger days in the Corps, he had reportedly made the acquaintance of a delicate flower of an American girl back in The World, whom he affectionately called "Trooper Kelly." Whereas I recollect that her surname was in fact Kelly, the Trooper part was Don's playful

nickname for this young woman he described as lovely; it was a moniker contrived to assign her – get this – a suitable “rank” for taking and following orders from, you guessed it, Don.

“Trooper, attention!” “Trooper, at ease!” And so it went.

I reckon that Trooper was probably somewhat gullible although, in fairness, I still have no trouble imagining that Don could be extremely charming and kind. Suffice it to say that Trooper was adept at executing orders; put perhaps more considerately, she likely was in love with her ‘commanding officer.’ Well, one warm summer evening Don and his unsuspecting damsel were outdoors at her parents’ home “necking and petting,” which eventually progressed to more serious lovemaking.

As Don told it, he and Trooper at this point were lying in the flower bed (!) alongside the patio *in flagrante delicto*. The only available light, dim at that, came from the windows of the house. As such, it was difficult to see much of anything, even at close range. As the young couple’s amorous activity intensified, neither Don nor Trooper was aware that the patio door had been quietly opened.

Suddenly Don was sensing on his head, neck and back the splashing warm wetness – and the unmistakable odor – of urine. Trooper was not spared either. Somehow her father had stealthily emerged onto the patio and stood directly above the now frantic but frozen fornicators. Could he not have been aware of the presence of the young lovers who lay just below him in his garden?

As Don and Trooper closed their eyes in abject horror while simultaneously filled with fear of discovery, dear old dad, seemingly unfazed, zipped up and presently disappeared into the house.

Don has stated that he always believed Trooper’s father actually knew all the time that the two were there in sexual embrace. The old man’s chosen treatment was merely an expression of his disapproval. According to Don, the moral of the story, which he insisted was true, is that it’s better to be pissed off than pissed on!



Like Bill Raabe, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Don Fritz worked for Don O'Neill, at least for a while. Fritz was a big man with a high-and-tight silver crew cut. Another mustang, he teamed up with the Dung Heap Marines well into the second half of my tour of duty, and lived in the same cantonment as the rest of us. Judging by my acquired knowledge of accents, not fully refined in Dong Ha days, I would wager that Fritz hailed from southwestern Pennsylvania.

A gentle giant, Don Fritz gained the respect and admiration of all his fellow Marines in short order. The slightly ungainly aspect of his demeanor was swiftly displaced by his exceptional knowledge and professionalism. I know not how long he had been a Marine but he *was* salty, and I believe he had also served in Korea. Always optimistic and positive, he gave his colleagues and friends a generous share of his great inner strength and tremendous loyalty. Don was also great fun to be around because of his wonderful and sometimes bawdy sense of humor, plus his infectious laugh. His jokes were simply hilarious. He is a man I am proud to have served with and would love to see again.

Another super guy in Dong Ha was 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Henry Notthaft, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. Hank, as he was called, was one of the smartest people I have ever met. He and I were also roommates after John Wegl's return to the world.

Hank was the only person I met in Vietnam who subscribed to *The Wall Street Journal*. This was in the days long before Dow Jones & Company, publisher of the *Journal*, had likely even thought of publishing *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. He possessed worldliness and sophistication, some would say arrogance, that I thought made him unique vis-à-vis the other Marine officers I had come to know. Always impressive, Hank also taught me what a résumé was. Through the years I have often wondered what he did after Vietnam; perhaps he remained in the Corps.

*Heaven won't take us, and Hell's afraid we'll take over.* – Marine Corps Bumper Sticker

# 16

## Corporal James Wilbanks, USMC

*Hope and assurance of a successful outcome are two different things. – P. Henry Mueller*

**J**im Wilbanks had made corporal at last.

Lance corporal (LCpl) is one rank below corporal, the usual rank of a Marine rifle squad leader, and one above private first class (PFC).

LCpl Wilbanks was, at least in the minds of some, a good ol' boy from Huntsville, Alabama. Despite a somewhat comic aspect to his bearing and manner of speech, he had, to his credit, a quick mind, and could be counted on when the chips were down. After all, he *was* a Marine. Enlisted Marines were generally respected by their officers in many cases simply *because* they had made it through Marine boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, or San Diego, California.

A near-chain-smoker, Wilbanks had the habit of often biting on the filter of his cigarette, ostensibly for emphasis when addressing others, including those senior to him in rank. He also bit the butt when he was telling a joke or, at least in his own mind, about to say something humorous. Approximately my age (I was 23 when I arrived in Vietnam in the summer of '68), LCpl Wilbanks made it clear to me at one point that he was full-corporal material. Now, without the benefit of much formal education, Wilbanks was never accused by anyone of being a rocket scientist. Although this was the case with many enlisted Marines of that era, it is not intended to be a criticism but merely a statement of fact. Still, in fairness, he was largely hard-working, loyal and quick-witted.

Then, in a surprise move, he actually began lobbying me for a promotion. In my experience as a young officer, that was a first. At the outset, I recall thinking, perhaps unfairly,

that Wilbanks was, at base, a brazen son of a bitch attempting to curry favor with me because, I believe, he happened to mistake my reputation for fairness and, may I be forgiven for saying so, my largely good nature with the troops for something akin to weakness. With such a perception I was more than annoyed, to say the least. Worse, if such a perception were more widely held, I would have been in trouble.

Indeed, I was deeply displeased with such a presumptive approach by Wilbanks with respect to his platoon commander (i.e., myself). After all, was he not essentially a man I perceived as an uncouth and underdeveloped redneck? Still, he was a Marine. After cooling off and consulting with the two most senior staff NCOs in my platoon, I decided to have a serious word, as the British are wont to say, with the ambitious and possibly already overachieving lance corporal so unabashedly "bucking" for corporal.

In the end, I laid out for him a three-month program, at the communication of which he was puzzled, frustrated, angry or all of the above. My deal with Wilbanks was that, if I judged him to be successful in meeting or completing the various elements of the basic self-improvement course I proposed to him, I agreed to recommend him for promotion.

In explaining the nature of the objective to Wilbanks, I focused on the language of a Marine Corps fitness report, which, I must acknowledge, may have been designed for officers rather than enlisted Marines. Regardless of the specific application, the highest acclamation of a Marine's performance was summarized in the words *Especially desire to have*. If a Marine had this line or box checked on his fitness report, he was virtually assured promotion and/or transfer to one of the more highly-ranked duty stations on his "wish list." Thus, I explained what I believed it would take for Wilbanks to be so designated.

Well, talk about incentive working big-time! I never saw a Marine, let alone anyone in my subsequent experience in the American corporate world, take the ball and run with it the way Wilbanks did. At the end of Wilbanks's metamorphosis, I had the pleasure of presenting him with his second stripe, and he seemed genuinely thrilled. Not only did his performance continue to improve substantially, the new rank was prestigious to him and served as a positive stimulus for more than a few of the other men in our platoon. In retrospect, I believe it was almost certainly more a corporate-type negotiation than a military one that led to Wilbanks's new rank but I believe it worked to the benefit of all then and there.



To shift gears, as it were, from the sublime to the ridiculous, one of the most hilarious anecdotes from my time in Vietnam involved the same Corporal Wilbanks, although he may still have been a lance corporal at the time.

Now, it must be understood that girly magazines typically made the rounds in most Marine hootches, and our platoon's were no exceptions.

Before progressing with this particular anecdote, some technical background is necessary. The Marine Corps of the nineteen-sixties had a field telephone designated the EE-8, which is spoken as "double-E eight." A double-strand, black-coated wire referred to simply as "slash wire" physically connected field telephones and their typically small networks. For additional perspective, another significant reference point is that the city of Danang is located approximately 95 miles south of Dong Ha.

One day a Marine in our platoon produced a copy of a girly magazine, which he had opened to display the ever-popular centerfold. Next, he unfolded the full-length photo of the young lovely in her naked glory for all to see. For his part, Wilbanks, now holding the magazine himself, appreciating the young woman's pulchritude and gesturing toward me, excitedly exclaimed in his inimitable southern drawl, "Lieutenant Mansfield, I'd lay slash wire from here to Danang just to hear her fart over a EE-8!"

*The Corps doesn't build character. It reveals it. – Bumper Sticker*

# 17

## A Regret

*And when he goes to heaven  
To Saint Peter he will tell:  
Another Marine reporting, sir;  
I've served my time in hell!*

- Epitaph on grave of Private First Class Cameron,  
USMC, Guadalcanal (1942)

**A**fter almost a third of a century, I can say with regrettable conviction that I did my Dong Ha Marines (and myself) a disservice when I failed to write down all their names while we were serving together. I should have kept a journal. It saddens me today that, while I can still see the faces of many of them, the intervening years have impaired my memory of some of their names. I honor all those with whom I served in that time and place, but, alas, my recognizing only a few by name here will have to suffice.

The mission of my platoon was to keep radio relay communications circuits up and running in northern I Corps. One half of my time was spent in Dong Ha, the other visiting my men at various outposts, some remote hilltops that we had to defend as well. Perhaps the most important part of my job was to ensure that adequate supplies of food, water, ammunition and equipment – as well as reasonably regular deliveries of adequate supplies of beer, preferably Budweiser (but usually Schlitz) – were available. These perhaps insignificant elements of management of Marines then and there were nonetheless key to two important aspects of leadership: Getting commitment and maintaining morale.

The one hundred Marines in my platoon, many of whom were largely demoralized when I arrived, became a cohesive unit, and pulled together as a team, especially when times were toughest. I have never believed that I could take credit for this, but it did happen. Despite all the risks we faced daily, my Marines and I were able to function in an atmosphere of trust and

mutual respect, as well as professionalism – but, then, my young Marines were already professionals, more than I, I sometimes believed. Many of these men actually extended their tours of duty under my command – against which I usually advised – for obvious reasons. Still, this was most gratifying.

*You must reflect that it was by courage, sense of duty and a keen feeling of honor in action that men were able to win all this.*  
– Pericles in his famous *Funeral Oration*

Gunnery Sergeant Don Simpson replaced Sgt. Slaugh and gained the respect and confidence of all in Radio Relay. He was another gentle giant of a man who had also served in Korea. His loyalty and support were the underpinnings of our platoon.

Staff Sergeant, later Gunnery Sergeant, Jimmy Blackstock was a highly professional, super-conscientious, squared away Marine who loved the Corps. After returning from his second tour of duty in Vietnam, he married Joanne Squazzo in the fall of 1969 in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. A genuine Texas Christian gentleman, Jimmy was kind enough to invite Mame and me, as well as 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Vic Fitzgerald, who had the perfect handle-bar mustache, to his wedding. Joanne's Dad, an elderly Italian-American gent who had served in World War I, showed me his Army medals that afternoon at the reception in his home; his pride in both his daughter and his military service was palpable. I have also learned since then that he also served under General John Pershing, chasing Pancho Villa in Mexico, as did my Uncle Martin Meaney. Jimmy and Joanne lived in West Islip, New York, not far from Westhampton, for many years but just recently relocated to Stockbridge, Georgia, to be near their daughter.

Sergeant George Krentz was another fine Marine who possessed excellent technical proficiency. He was highly reliable and had probably forgotten more than I would have ever known about the various technologies for which *I* was responsible.

Sergeant Sidney Dines was an exceptionally bright but nearly inscrutable young man, who had another perfect mustache. Independent and strong, he probably felt that I didn't pay enough attention to him. He was a self-starter, and I was proud to promote him to sergeant, although I suspect that he felt the promotion should have come sooner.

Corporal Ron Sackie, for whom I believe I also approved a third stripe, was a laconic man who did his job exceedingly well but seemed to keep a low profile. However, he was regarded by his fellow Marines as outstanding, knowledgeable and dependable. I remember exchanging addresses with him just before I returned to The World. Maybe it was 1970 when I wrote to him but I don't recall receiving a reply. I wish him the best life has to offer.

Others I remember well include Sergeant Rick Boisselle, from Hartford, Connecticut; Sergeant "T" (for Thompson), a technical genius; Corporal Bradshaw, a skinny young African American who possessed a great sense of humor and was a top performer; Corporal DeFrisco, who had something of a literary bent and chose the inscription on the farewell plaque our platoon presented to me ("For those who fight for it, life has a flavor the protected never know."); Corporal Dan Schiavietello, the Beatles fan of ammo-dump Christmas card fame; and Lance Corporals Harley Washburn, Henderson, Madsen and McCurley, whose first names unfortunately escape me.

LCpl Henderson hated being anywhere but at posts "out in the bush." He was also the antithesis of a garrison Marine; no spit and polish for this guy. But what a worker and what a trooper! He was a Marine's Marine. Although he typically resembled an unmade bed, there was no one more reliable or willing to help, and he always got the job done. I'd take many Hendersons on my team any time.

To all of these "few good men" in whom I still and will always take great pride, Godspeed and *Semper fi!*

*Marines are about the most peculiar breed of human beings I have ever witnessed. They treat their service as if it were some kind of cult, plastering their emblem on almost everything they own, making themselves up to look like insane fanatics with haircuts ungentlemenly short, worshipping their Commandant almost as if he were a god, and making weird animal noises like a band of savages. They will fight like rabid dogs at the drop of a hat just for the sake of a little action and are the cockiest SOB's I have ever known. Most have the foulest mouths and drink well beyond a man's normal limits. But, their high spirits and sense of brotherhood set them apart and generally speaking the United States Marines I have come in contact with are the most professional soldiers and the finest men I have had the pleasure to meet.*

- Anonymous Canadian Citizen 1969

# 18

## A Tiger Hunt

*There's something happening here,  
What it is ain't exactly clear.  
There's a man with a gun over there,  
Tellin' me I've got to beware.*

- The Buffalo Springfield

**T**here were sporadic reports, usually in the American forces newspaper *Stars & Stripes*, of American military personnel in Vietnam being attacked and/or killed by tigers. In this connection, on one of the monthly occasions when I served as the "Officer of the Day" (OOD), which meant being on duty continuously for twenty-four hours (without sleep), one of the Marines in my platoon raced into the underground bunker where I was stationed for the night. As for the time, it was around two o'clock in the morning.

This Marine, a young Native American corporal by the name of Sharkie, wore the look of stark terror on his face. He was a serious and accomplished Marine.

When I recall the moment, I now believe that he may have been in shock. Nonetheless, he managed to relate in a voice constricted by fear how he had rolled over on his cot, awakened momentarily and found himself staring a tiger in the face. Sharkie froze and, moments later, the big cat reportedly sauntered out of the hootch, pushing open, and then letting slam, the screen door of the SEA (Southeast Asia) hut in which Sharkie and other members of our platoon lived. Clad only in his skivvies (undershorts), he then took off for my command post to relate his unprecedented and unwelcome encounter.

I walked with Sharkie the short distance back to where he had been sleeping. On the plywood floor of his hootch were large paw prints, easy to discern inasmuch as their owner had obviously slogged through the ubiquitous mud outside. My assistant platoon commander, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Vic Fitzgerald, and I organized an ad hoc patrol, heavily armed, to follow the tiger's clearly discernible trail – and to capture or kill the animal. If you will pardon the expression, we were loaded for bear. I actually had visions of a tiger-skin rug as a trophy! After all, rank has its privileges, *n'est-ce pas?*

We spent about three hours organizing and conducting our tiger patrol. Keep in mind that such a patrol had all the earmarks of a hunt. To be sure, it was not the typical Vietnam combat patrol, to which few of even the best Marines had limited desire to belong, unless it was absolutely essential. Indeed, for most Marines, patrols were the name of the game in much of Vietnam, and they were often invitations to danger. Yet, participation in this 'tiger hunt' was attractive to many who had sufficient interest in a potentially exciting venture in which there was no chance of the 'enemy' shooting back. Just the same, the tiger had the wherewithal to 'ambush' a Marine patrol and do serious bodily harm.

It was a dark, cold night during the rainy season, although it was no longer raining when we set out. There was perceptible nervousness among some of the men but this was largely offset by their heightened sense of expectation. As long as we had the tiger's paw prints to follow, the trail was still hot, and excitement was in the night air.

Someone broke the mostly silent tedium, declaring he had heard the big cat's guttural growl. Others chalked this up to imagination or wishful thinking. We trudged on. After about a mile of heavy going through the muddy darkness, our tiger's trail ended abruptly at the edge of a small monsoon-swollen pond. All were disappointed; the hunt was over.

For weeks thereafter, skeptics chided poor Sharkie about the tiger episode, for they readily dismissed it as nothing more than a nightmare or hallucination. After all, no one else claimed to have seen the beast. For my part, I believed Sharkie got a bad rap and supported him whenever I had the opportunity, which was not infrequent. Besides, I had already judged the paw prints to be genuine.

In the last analysis, I believe it was a good thing, for all on that patrol, that we never found the tiger. Besides, Mame and a tiger skin probably don't work together.

*Only, here and there, an old sailor,  
Drunk and asleep in his boots,  
Catches tigers  
In red weather.*

- Wallace Stevens  
in *Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock* (1923)

# 19

## Oh Rats!

*Once I ran into a soldier standing by himself in the middle of a small jungle clearing where I'd wandered off to take a leak. We said hello, but he seemed very uptight about my being there. He told me that the guys were all sick of sitting around waiting and that he'd come out to see if he could draw a little (enemy) fire. What a look we gave each other. I backed out of there fast, I didn't want to bother him while he was working.* - From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

**O**n another tour as OOD, during a nighttime perimeter check, I was inspecting a section of our line that did not have live guards posted. Instead, this sector was "protected" by fences and huge amounts of barbed and razor wire. It was also heavily booby-trapped with "Claymore" anti-personnel mines and conventional land mines, all designed and placed to spoil the day or night of any NVA soldier or Viet Cong (often referred to as "Victor Charlie" or simply "Charlie") or, for that matter, anyone else who wandered into the area.

Nights were the time for air and artillery strikes for they were when the NVA and VC were out and about. At night we could sometimes see the awesome firepower of AC-47 gunship aircraft, each of which had a wing-mounted gunsight and an electrically operated Gatling gun that could shoot 7.62mm NATO rounds at a rate of 6,000 per minute; the three of these door-mounted "miniguns" with which each AC-47 was equipped by 1966 could fire 300 rounds per second. Put still another way, these guns could put a round in every square inch of a football field in less than a minute. These gunships were later designated "Spooky" or "Puff the Magic Dragon" or simply "Puff." Amazing – and scary.

In his evocative Vietnam testament, *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien gives extraordinary texture and flavor to night work in Vietnam by capturing brilliantly the fearful eeriness of the enemy presence after dark:

We called the enemy ghosts. "Bad night," we'd say, "the ghosts are out." To get spooked, in the lingo, meant not only to get scared but to get killed. "Don't get spooked," we'd say. "Stay cool, stay alive." Or we'd say: "Careful, man, don't give up the ghost." The countryside itself seemed spooky – shadows and tunnels and incense burning in the dark. The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth century science. Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering – odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogiemens in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical – appearing, disappearing. He could blend in with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. He was scary. In the daylight, maybe, you didn't believe in this stuff. You laughed it off. You made jokes. But at night you turned into a believer: no skeptics in fox holes.

Some nights had no light, neither moon nor stars. Whether one's eyes were open or closed made no difference, for the darkness was the same.

This night had no light, save some from a moon and stars barely visible through a thin, dimming cloudcover. As I strode across an open space of, say, fifty or sixty yards along this unmanned section of perimeter, I kept my pistol at the ready. I did so because I freely admit to finding it disconcerting to have to walk along this stretch of abandoned outpost in the middle of the night. Frequently, I would have the urge to use my flashlight but decided, prudently I believe, against it. After all, I would only be highlighting my own visibility, and I knew I didn't want to be a target shining in the dark. I also remember wondering if I was alone, or if there might be some unwanted presence just outside the wire. Was Charlie there, somewhere? Were that the case, I suppose I might not be writing these words now.

As I walked the perimeter this particular night, I felt something bumping against my legs, mostly on my shins but sometimes as high as my thighs. Although my night vision had kicked in, I still couldn't make out what was going on around me. I was startled but kept walking, suddenly realizing the "something" was more than one. At least slightly alarmed and my heart arrhythmic, I stopped and took the risk of spraying my flashlight's beam quickly around me. To my disgust, I found myself immersed in a veritable sea of rats. They were huge – about the size of domestic cats – and numbered in the hundreds at a minimum.

*I asked myself what I was doing out here, halfway around the world, hanging my ass out like this, while my college buddies were selling insurance or practicing law, in the warm comfort of their secure offices. At that moment I could think of no good answer to the question.*

- From *Feet Wet: Reflections of a Carrier Pilot* by Rear Admiral Paul T. Gillcrist, USN (Ret.)

To be sure, the apparently sudden gathering of these rats was not even remotely close to the worst that could have happened to me in this godforsaken place. Yet, I recall thinking for just an instant how pleasant it would be to find myself someplace else, like home. At the same time, I must confess that I also felt like a wimp. After all, they were just rats, and I should have been thankful that no one was shooting at me just then. I also thought, *I should have some guts; I'm a Marine, for God's sake!*

It was then that I decided to do an about face, return quickly to my jeep, and leave my rodent friends, not to mention any "ghosts" in the vicinity, to do whatever they were doing before I so rudely interrupted their nocturnal pursuits. Besides, my mission had been accomplished: the perimeter was secure.

*Bonne nuit, mes amis!*

*I think we are in rats' alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.*

- Thomas Stearns Eliot in *The Game of Chess*

# 20

## Body Bags

*When someone got killed, his body was not really a body, but rather one small bit of waste in the midst of a much wider wastage. I learned that words make a difference. It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead.*

- Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*

I recall a few quiet evenings in the early spring of 1969 when I had occasion to sit outside my hootch and read a book. These opportunities came during the welcome lull that followed President Johnson's order to halt the bombing of North Vietnam, which took effect the preceding November 1<sup>st</sup>. Of course, there was still fierce fighting out in the bush but Dong Ha itself had been largely spared for months.

Indeed, it was clear that the war still raged, as each evening I would see scores of dark green rubber body bags stacked like cord wood on the edge of the Dong Ha Combat Base airstrip, just a couple of hundred feet from where I usually sat. It was hard to concentrate on my book, to say the least, for in each of those receptacles were the remains of a U.S. Marine killed in action (KIA), in all likelihood that very day. Body bags' near-blackness, especially at dusk, augmented their stillness and seemed to cast over the surrounding landscape a lugubrious, almost palpable, pall.

Instead of the workhorse Marine Lockheed C-130 *Hercules* cargo planes, C-123 *Providers* would more frequently land at Dong Ha because of their easier maneuverability and shorter takeoff run and rollout after landing. Still, these sizeable aircraft wouldn't stay long; after all, they were targets, just like everything and everyone else in the area. As the pilots and crew waited, perhaps anxiously, young Marines would work quickly to load the day's dead on board for the beginning of the long journey to their final resting places back, wherever, in The World.

The grim reality of witnessing body bags actually fulfilling their intended purpose caused some Marines to cease exhorting younger and typically combat-inexperienced brethren to be sure to pick up a body bag along with the other required equipment that was standard issue to new arrivals in-country. Make no mistake, I personally detested this form of hazing – I don't know what else to call it – from the moment an obviously sullen 19-year-old Marine, brand-new in-country, approached me and, in all seriousness, inquired, "Sir, where can I get my body bag?"

Feeling disgusted but empathetic, I told him it wasn't necessary, that it was merely a sick joke. A soft smile of relief then slowly spread over his handsome, young face.

*Requiescant in pace!*

*A dead buddy is some tough shit, but bringing your own ass out alive can sure help you to get over it.*

- From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

# 21

## Costs

*Older men declare war. But it is youth that must fight and die. And it is youth who must inherit the tribulation, the sorrow, and the triumphs that are the aftermath of war.* — Herbert Hoover

**D**espite extraordinary performances like that of Jimmie Howard, the Vietnam War was often militarily baffling and morally ambiguous. Ground captured at great cost in blood and money one day was abandoned the next. Our overwhelming superiority in firepower was often hard to realize.

To be sure, as I have said many times over the years, we felt as if we were fighting with one hand tied behind our back. I remember Marine Lieutenant Tom Satterlee, a Marine Corps Basic School classmate and friend once telling our company commander, "Let's just bomb the hell out of North Vietnam, make the place a parking lot, and go home." Sadly, Tom was later killed along with classmates Randy Brundage and Walt Lubbe, whose wife Pat was then pregnant with their first child, in a tragic training flight accident at the Glynco Naval Air Station near Brunswick, Georgia.

Tom's remark reminded me of a similar one made by U.S. Air Force General Curtis E. LeMay: "My solution to the problem would be to tell [the North Vietnamese Communists]... they've got to draw in their horns and stop their aggression or we're going to bomb them into the Stone Age."

As insensitive in retrospect as some, especially pacifists, might regard such cracks, they were nonetheless accurate barometers of the frustration Tom, the general and many more of us were then feeling. What's worse is that we didn't always know who the enemy was. For example, the Vietnamese barber who came into our Dong Ha compound regularly to cut

Marines' hair turned out to be an NVA-VC sympathizer. He was found out when he made the big-time mistake of taking a straight razor to the throat of a Marine colonel who was alert and strong enough to stop the little man's potentially lethal attack. Even women and children were sometimes the enemy, and friendly Vietnamese villagers seemed not to care who won.

It is probably true that we couldn't really win in Vietnam because of the tactics and politics of a war nobody wanted anymore. Consequently, as President Nixon quickly learned, we lowered our sights from victory to survival. There was no other way to rationalize the things we did and saw done, such as the killing, the maiming and the wailing of children dying.

When Saigon, the capital city of the South, finally fell in 1975, two years after the last U.S. forces left, it was the belief of many that the war had been a waste of American life, youth and money. All the North wanted was to reclaim Saigon, which it eventually renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the North Vietnamese leader, whom we Americans irreverently called "Uncle Ho." (Our enemies concocted the taunt, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Cong is going to win!") In the minds of many, the American sacrifice was just not worth it.

But just what was the nature of the American sacrifice in Vietnam? A few accounts follow.

*From 1965 through 1971, nearly half a million Marines served in Vietnam. And after 1971 was long past, some Marines were still at war in that country.*

- E.H. Simmons, Brigadier General, USMC (Ret.)

# CAPTIONS FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Here I am in 1945 at approximately six months of age. Nice hair!
2. This picture of Mom and me in the early days in Brooklyn is a favorite of mine.
3. I thought I was Hopalong Cassidy on April 10, 1949, my fourth birthday. Note the Bugs Bunny-Porky Pig sweater.
4. At seven I received my First Communion on May 24, 1952. Here I am afterward, flanked by my brother Mike, 5, and sister Pat, not quite 3, at Our Lady Help of Christians School on East 29<sup>th</sup> Street in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.
5. At fourteen I played third base and left field for the Garden City (New York) Babe Ruth League Dodgers, shown here. Front row (left to right): Tom Hipp, name unknown, Tom Schenck and Greg Herbert; second row: Dave Brewer, myself, Bob Wihnyk, Jerry Coyle and Dean Martin; third row: Jim Henderson (a Chaminade High School classmate), Edwin "Punky" Booth, Joe Caselli, Ture Dormsjo and Jim Norwood; back row: coaches Jim Norwood, Sr., Nelson Brewer, Sr., Henry Wihnyk, Arthur Herbert, Sr. (manager), name unknown, and Charlie Mansfield, my Dad.
6. That's me, #63, in pursuit of a Hicksville High School running back on Saturday of Labor Day weekend 1961. I played offensive guard and defensive linebacker. The game was televised, and the announcer was the late great Marty Glickman. We won 28-7, the Chaminade Flyers varsity's first of eight victories (against no losses) that year.
7. Here's Chaminade's first undefeated and untied team in the autumn of 1961; it was our second consecutive championship. Some of my closest friends also appear in this photograph. In the top row, third from the right is Al Groh, #85; second from the right is Earl Kirmser, #39, co-captain. In the second row on the far left is Bill Sellerberg, #64, co-captain; fifth from the left is Cliff Molloy, #59; sixth is Rod Dwyer, #48; Tom Kiley, #58, is third from the right. Kneeling in front are Carl LoGalbo, #49, fifth from the left; and Frank Biasi, #31, second from the right. I'm in the second row on the far right.
8. This is Mame as she appeared in the 1962 *Mast*, the Garden City High School yearbook. To me this picture says everything about why I asked her to marry me.
9. This shot depicts Bernice Bonner Locasto, Mame's mother, Mame and me after Mame's graduation from Marymount College (Tarrytown, N.Y.) on June 1, 1966, which was also the day Mame and I became engaged.
10. This is my college yearbook photo as it appeared in the College of the Holy Cross's 1966 *Purple Patcher*. I was twenty when it was taken. I graduated on June 8, 1966.

11. Here Mame and I are pictured walking down the aisle after we were married on June 10, 1967 in St. Joseph's Church in Garden City.
12. Shown here is our wedding party. Left to right: Tom Greene, Denis Murphy, Bernice Locasto (Healy), myself, Mame, my brother Mike (my Best Man), Catherine Locasto (Stovall), Jim Norwood and Larry Hennessy.
13. Here I am relaxing in Dong Ha, Vietnam, shortly after arriving in country in July 1968. I'm holding an M-79 grenade launcher in my right hand.
14. Here I am in Dong Ha with (left to right) Gunnery Sergeant Don Simpson, Staff Sergeant Jimmy Blackstock and First Lieutenant Bob Dusek (far right). This shot was taken in the autumn of 1968 soon after we had built SEA (Southeast Asia) huts, one of which is seen in the background, to replace the troop tents in which our Marines had been living.
15. Here's my friend Captain Don O'Neill dancing with a martini in our Dong Ha "backyard" in May 1969.
16. Marines at ease. A few beers were enjoyed at this party thrown by my platoon. Left to right are Gunny Don Simpson, Corporal McCurley, Sergeant George Krentz, Corporal Jim Wilbanks, Lance Corporal Harley Washburn, myself, and Corporal Madsen, who placed his hat on my head just before the snapshot.
17. This picture was taken in May 1969 minutes before I shaved the moustache. Having seen the photo, Mame wrote and asked me to remove the moustache before coming home. She said she was afraid I would scare the baby, and she was probably right.
18. Here I am in 1985 in my office at 100 Gold Street in New York City. I served then as chief executive officer of Prudential's international bank.
19. It was an honor here to present Coach Joe Thomas, who had then retired from Chaminade after forty years, with an album of letters and other memorabilia. The photo was taken at Chaminade on September 11, 1988 during the Joe Thomas Testimonial, which I chaired and at which I served as master of ceremonies. My friend Brother Richard Hartz, S.M., Chaminade's Director of Development and Alumni Relations, is shown in the background.
20. This is one of Mame's and my most cherished pictures of our family. It was taken on October 5, 1989 in Westhampton, and shows (left to right) John, 19, Mame, Chas, 21, Kate, 14, and myself.
21. Here I am with Mike Paulino in the comfort of the Great Barber's chair. Mike was my tonsorial professional and friend from 1952 to his retirement on September 5, 1992.

22. Here's the whole clan (as it was then constituted) at my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration on Hutchinson Island, Florida, their winter home, on April 27, 1994. Present were (left to right): front row: Tim (10 months), Dawn (his Mom and Chas's wife), my daughter Kate, my mother Mary, my father Charlie, Emily Barnett (my sister Peggy's daughter) and Mame; second row: Chas, Elisabeth, Peggy, John and myself; back row: Tom Phelan, my sister Pat (Tom's wife), my sister Kate, Jim Brumsted (her former husband), Maggie (Mike's wife) and my brother Mike.

23. On April 8, 2000, the "Boys of Summer" gathered at Earl Kirmser's home with Coach Joe Thomas to honor Al Groh on his ascendancy to the head coach's position with the New York Jets. Standing left to right are Earl, Carl LoGalbo, Tom Kiley and Al. I'm kneeling next to Coach Thomas, who is seated.

24. I love this shot of Mame, which was taken at our son John's wedding to Elizabeth Van Hook on September 23, 2000 in Boothbay Harbor, Maine.

25. This is another recent favorite picture of Mame and me. It was taken in January 2001 at Chaminade's annual Founders Dinner in Woodbury, New York.

26. I worked for U.S. Senator John McCain of Arizona during his 1999-2000 presidential campaign. Here I am shown with him and Congressman Peter King on April 15, 2000 at a luncheon at the Long Island congressman's home. I was actually elected an Alternate Delegate to the Republican National Convention, held that year in Philadelphia.

27. "The Gathering" takes place each summer at Mame's and my home in Westhampton. It includes Holy Cross classmates, former Marines and Vietnam veterans Roger Hunt, Frank Teague, myself and Bob Lund, shown here (left to right) in July 2001. Of course, our wives --- Joanne Hunt, Dee Teague, Patty Lund and Mame --- also participate fully in the festivities. Now an annual tradition, The Gathering has produced some of the most hilarious moments --- and photographs --- of our lives. *Semper fi!*

28. Another gathering has traditionally taken place at our Westhampton home each March to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. At our most recent fête on March 9, 2002 Mame took this great shot of Pat, Mike and me.

29. On April 1, 2002 I visited "The Wall" (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.) for the fourth time. Each visit for me has been a sacred duty and a deeply moving experience.

30. Here is the next generation of Mansfields: Mame's and my grandchildren. Chas and Dawn's beautiful offspring, Marissa, 4, Tim, 9, and Kevin, 3, surround their newest brother Justin, just shy of his first birthday on August 3, 2002.

# 22

## Good News?

*Nobody likes the man who brings bad news. – Sophocles*

In 1967, about a year before I left the U.S. for Vietnam, I was assigned the duty of informing a widowed mother that her son had been wounded in battle in Vietnam. It was a Corps tradition that a Marine officer would go to the home of any Marine who had been wounded or killed in action to tell his family the bad news personally and try to offer consolation.

It was literally ‘a rainy night in Georgia’ when I went to the young Marine’s home. As his mother opened the door and focused on my Marine uniform, her face turned ashen. She then began to cry.

“It’s John, isn’t it?” she said in barely a whisper.

I replied, “Yes, ma’am. He’s been wounded but he’s aboard a hospital ship and doing fine.”

Next she surprised me by saying, “Thank God!” She then explained that she was actually relieved that John was *only* wounded because her elder son, also a Marine, had been killed in Vietnam earlier that same year.

Everything is relative, isn’t it?

*But they also felt a kind of giddiness, a secret joy, because they were alive, and because even the rain was preferable to being sucked under a shit field, and because it was all a matter of luck and happenstance.*

- From *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien

# 23

## First Lieutenant Stephen E. Karopczyc, USA

*Imagine being too tired to snap a flak jacket closed, too tired to clean your rifle, too tired to guard a light, too tired to deal with the half-inch margins of safety that moving through the war often demanded, just too tired to give a fuck and then dying behind that exhaustion.*

- From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

**A**bout the time I visited the widow's home in Georgia, U.S. Army First Lieutenant Stephen Karopczyc was leading his platoon against an enemy force in South Vietnam's Kontum Province, and noticed that his lead element was engaged in fighting a small enemy unit along his route. Aware of the importance of pushing through to the main enemy force in order to provide relief for another American platoon, he ran through intense enemy fire into the open, and hurled colored smoke grenades to mark the enemy for attack by U.S. helicopter gunships. Taking that risk alone was brave, to say the least.

According to the Army's official report, here's what happened next. Steve moved among his men to embolden their advance, and guided their attack by marking enemy locations with bursts of fire from his own weapon. His forceful leadership sped the advance, forced an enemy retreat, and allowed his unit to close with the main hostile force.

During this effort, an enemy sniper shot Steve above the heart but he refused aid for his injury, plugging the bleeding bullet wound with his finger instead until it could be properly treated.

Imagine that for just a moment. We Marines were trained to do what Steve did if we received what the military services call a "sucking chest wound," which has been defined as "a wound that penetrates a lung, through which air is forced as the victim breathes." I am confident that being trained to plug a bullet wound with one's finger, and actually having to do it, are situations worlds apart.

Next, as enemy strength increased, Steve ordered his men to organize a defensive position in and around some abandoned bunkers, where he went on to defend against the increasingly strong enemy attacks.

Several hours later, the situation worsened when a North Vietnamese soldier hurled a grenade to within a few feet of Steve and two of his wounded men. Although his position protected him, Steve leaped up to cover the deadly grenade with a steel helmet, which exploded, driving steel fragments into his legs. Steve's response, however, prevented further injury to his two wounded soldiers. Severely weakened, Steve continued, incredibly, to direct his men until he died of his wounds two hours later.

For this, President Nixon awarded 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Steve Karopczyc posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty." On the medal itself appears the word 'VALOR', which is, according to Mr. Webster, "strength of mind or spirit that enables a man to encounter danger with firmness." I believe you will agree, now that you have read his story, that Steve was a hero. Indeed, I, for one, am reminded of the words ascribed to Jesus Christ in the gospel of John (15:13) that "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends."

Who was 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Steve Karopczyc? He graduated in 1961 from Chaminade, and in 1994 became the first alumnus inducted into its Alumni Hall of Fame. A replica of his Congressional Medal of Honor was given to Chaminade by President Ronald Reagan and is displayed permanently at the school.

Steve's parents, Ed and Nina, are dear friends and remain great supporters of their son's alma mater.

*A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done.*

*- From *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien*

## First Lieutenant Timothy J. Shorten, USMCR

*Between what contact did to you and how tired you got, between the farout things you saw or heard and what you personally lost out of all that got blown away, the war made a place for you that was all yours.*  
- From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

**T**im Shorten and his brother Greg grew up in my GC neighborhood and were young men the rest of us much admired. Both fine athletes, they were clean-cut, all-American sorts. They preceded me at Chaminade; Greg next went on to Villanova University, Tim to Holy Cross. Later, Tim became a teacher and a coach at a Catholic high school on Long Island. In 1967 I met him one Sunday morning as I was on my way to church, and we walked the last block together. As I hadn't seen him in some time, I asked how and what he was doing. Gesturing to the Marine Corps officer's uniform I wore that morning, he told me, "I'll be wearing one of those soon."

Surprised, I further inquired, only half-jokingly, "Why would you want to do a thing like that?" After all, his teaching position exempted him from military service. Moreover, he and I both knew that, as a Marine officer in those days, he would eventually be headed to only one place, namely, Vietnam. In an instant, I could not then help but recall the decisions other friends and acquaintances had made to quit other, better paying jobs to go into teaching just to avoid the military, or to leave the country altogether. (Interestingly, Tim's two youngest brothers openly demonstrated against the Vietnam War, and one was even arrested for doing so in Washington, D.C.)

Then Tim answered my question: "It's my duty," he said, "and I want to go there with you and the other guys." As his words hit me, I felt inwardly ashamed. Although I had already worn Marine green for a year and believed firmly I too had a duty to go to Vietnam, I also

believe I would not have relinquished my position as a teacher-coach to volunteer for Marine Corps Officer Candidates School and combat duty in Vietnam.

I met Jack Shorten, Tim's father, in Mike Paulino's barbershop shortly before I left for Vietnam. He told me that Tim had been wounded, medevac-ed and later returned to combat duty only to be killed in action on March 31, 1968 during the infamous Tet offensive. To this day his brother Greg says Tim's commitment to his country and Corps was total and unwavering, even as the U.S. political tide was turning.

Thirteen days before he died, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Shorten participated in an attack against NVA units in Quang Tri Province. As the fighting intensified during the attack's early stages, Tim effectively coordinated mortar fire against enemy emplacements and disregarded his own safety as he moved forward to the points of heaviest contact to evaluate the situation and assist in the evacuation of his wounded men. When an adjacent unit began taking enemy sniper fire, he led a Marine squad to the exposed flank of the friendly unit and, both directing effective mortar fire and throwing hand grenades, silenced the sniper fire in the area.

Later the same day, when another Marine squad became separated from the remainder of his company, Tim assumed command of the unit and led his men against several enemy-held bunkers. During the advance, he observed a North Vietnamese sniper positioned in a bunker to the front of his unit and, after organizing a two-squad attack force, commenced an assault against the fortified emplacement. During his unit's advance, two Marines were killed and several others wounded. Immediately employing a flamethrower against the bunker, he then assaulted the emplacement singlehandedly, throwing hand grenades and firing his pistol into the embrasure of the fortification, killing the NVA sniper and enabling his unit to continue its advance.

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action" due to "his courage, bold initiative and selfless devotion to duty," Tim Shorten was awarded the Silver Star, our nation's third-highest military honor. His courage and leadership in combat also won him two Purple Hearts for wounds he sustained and the Bronze Star for "heroic achievement" in a battle on October 14, 1967. In this action, ignoring the dangers to himself from the enemy fire, he skillfully directed his unit's suppressive fire until the enemy force was repulsed. Due to his aggressive fighting spirit and calm presence of mind in the face of extreme personal danger, he was an inspiration to

his men and was instrumental in inflicting heavy casualties against the enemy. He was also cited for his “courage, superb leadership and unwavering devotion to duty.”



Nineteen-sixty-seven was also the year in which Guido Farinaro graduated from Chaminade. An immigrant from Italy, he enlisted in the Marine Corps to repay the debt he believed he owed his adopted country. He went to Vietnam, served in combat with the Marines, and was killed in action in August 1968. The preceding month, my friend and Chaminade classmate Bob Kisch, who served as a Marine officer in Vietnam, was reportedly captured by the Viet Cong, who tortured, hanged and “necklaced” him with their bayonets.

Parenthetically, Chaminade honors at its annual Gold Star Mass its fifty-three “Gold Star Alumni,” who gave their lives in the service of their country. Of this, in a letter from which I have earlier quoted, Matt Caulfield has written, “And incidentally, I have never forgotten that the faithful celebration of the Gold Star Mass during those years made a statement about us more powerful than all of the dissent... How fortunate I was to have Chaminade with me in those days, and today.”

*It is thanks to our fallen heroes that we could have reached this day.* – Menachem Begin

# 25

## A Chauffeured Ride In-Country

*Damn the torpedoes – full speed ahead!* – David Glasgow Farragut

One of the more amusing, although potentially deadly, incidents during my Vietnam tour of duty occurred shortly before I went back to The World. During most of my time in-country I traveled alone, though well armed (with a 45-caliber pistol, an M-16 automatic rifle and an M-79 grenade launcher), driving a military jeep wherever I had to go. (There were exceptions, though, when I enjoyed the luxury of being shuttled via UH1E or Huey helicopter piloted by Bob Lund.) Toward the end of my tour of duty, my division commanding officer issued an order requiring every Marine officer to assign himself a driver. Frankly, given the way we lived in those days, especially in Dung Heap and points north and west, I thought it was a bit high-falutin for me to have a driver. Besides, I enjoyed driving the jeep. Be that as it may, I complied with the general's new order.

One day I had to travel just five miles south of Dong Ha to Quang Tri, where my battalion's administrative offices were located. Reluctantly I pressed into service as my driver a 19-year old lance corporal from California named Schrader who then had only a few days left in-country. When our Marines got "short," or close to returning to The World, we would make every effort to keep them out of harm's way and get them home safe and sound.

As Michael Herr has written in his book *Dispatches*,

Such odd things happen when tours are almost over. It's the Short-Timer Syndrome. In the heads of the men who are really in the war for a year, all tours end early. No one expects much from a man when he is down to one or two weeks. He becomes a luck freak, an evil-omen collector, a diviner of every bad sign. If he has the imagination, or the experience of war, he will precognize his own death a thousand times a day, but he will always have enough left to do the one big thing to Get Out.

On a particularly clement morning in May 1969, LCpl. Schrader and I set out for Quang Tri, about a twenty-minute ride from Dong Ha. As we approached the gates of the village, the surrounding countryside was the usual mosaic of rice paddies and farms with the local people busy at work. As we left Quang Tri to return to Dong Ha, we faced a completely different scene. All the people had disappeared, and this usually meant just one thing: VC were operating in the area, and an attack of some sort was likely, if not imminent. Now, Schrader and I both had weapons; what's more, we had wheels and presumably could maneuver quickly, although jeeps then couldn't really do more than forty miles per hour. I made the decision to proceed to Dong Ha.

About a quarter mile outside Quang Tri – *CARRUMPPP!!!* – a mortar round exploded on the bumpy dirt road not far behind us. Then came a second and a third, perhaps fifteen in all. Believing it too dangerous to stop, turn around and return to Quang Tri, I encouraged Schrader to step on it in an effort to outrun the highly skilled enemy mortarman who was probably in the treeline a couple of hundred yards east of the road we were traveling. Amazingly, the incoming mortar rounds were being *walked* along the road behind us, and one caused minor damage to our vehicle.

Mortars are small, portable artillery pieces. A mortar shell is simply dropped into a mortar tube in the base of which is a steel pin that causes the firing and propelling of the shell out of the tube. Well, I guessed that the enemy was firing 61mm mortars; after all, the larger 82mm version would have been a lot worse and caused greater damage. (Interestingly, Americans had 60mm and 81mm mortar shells. Thus, our enemy could use our slightly smaller shells in their slightly larger tubes, if necessary, but their shells, thousands of which were captured in Vietnam by American and allied forces, were simply too large for our smaller tubes.)

Soon, thankfully, we got beyond the range of this enemy soldier who was trying to kill us, and arrived safely back in Dong Ha. In what was perhaps a lapse of judgment, I joked with my young Marine, thanking him for such an exciting ride.

For his part, a pale and shaken Schrader looked at me and asked, "Sir, the next time you need a ride somewhere, would you please ask someone else to drive you?" Fair enough.



Nearly thirty-one years after this episode, I had the pleasure of dining with an Irishman named Carl O'Sullivan. Having read a piece I had written about the Vietnam War, in which I related the Schrader story, Carl wrote to me as follows: "You certainly captured the mood of the time and I hope that the article will be the first instalment of a more detailed memoir." Then, referring to an upcoming trip Mame and I were to take to his country, he concluded: "Please contact me when you are coming to Ireland and I will try to assist you with your itinerary. Having read your article, however, I certainly would not offer to drive you anywhere."

*There's nothing so embarrassing as when things go wrong in a war.*

- From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

# 26

## Some Good in All This

*International relations is not a branch of moral philosophy; it's a street fight.*

- Colonel Ken Allard, USA (Ret.)

**W**e often hear about Vietnam veterans who are messed up as a result of their Vietnam service. In fact, there is something called “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD), which consists of nightmares, flashbacks, rages, binges, panics, melancholic silences, numbed feelings, depression, and even guilt at having survived, and at what survival sometimes necessitated. Yet, there were others who were strengthened by the war, made tough and self-reliant. Many of us saw death up close every day, yet we are today married, happy and largely secure in our lives. Indeed, PTSD likely has claimed far fewer victims than previously thought.

In my research I came across a web site named “Vietnam 25,” whose “Main Frame Page” bears the headline, “The War Is Over! 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.” What really caught my eye, however were two captions on its second and third pages, principally because of their tone. To wit:

- We also remember the more than 58,000 Americans – almost entirely the sons and daughters of poor and working-class families – who lost their lives, ordered into battle by arrogant men 10,000 miles away.
- We commit ourselves to continue to oppose U.S. interventionism and foreign policy driven by corporate profits and greed.

So the liberal, aging antiwar crowd is still at it. How I wish they would give us a break. Since that is almost certainly wishful thinking, I will take these extremists to task on some of their *extrema*.

A fellow Marine who led an infantry platoon in Vietnam during the same two years I was there has done some remarkable research that demonstrates that Vietnam veterans are not the victims the liberals and the media would have us believe; nor was Vietnam a "class war."

His name is Mackubin Thomas Owens and he serves as professor of strategy and force planning at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. He tells us squarely, in an article published in *The Wall Street Journal* on July 13, 2000, that "The myth of the Vietnam veteran as victim had its genesis in the antiwar left of the 1960s and '70s. Initially vilifying the American soldier as a war criminal, the left eventually bestowed victimhood upon him."

Here are some of his findings about the Vietnam War:

- 30% of those who died were from the *lowest* income group, but
- 26% were from the *highest*.
- 86% of those who died during the war were *white*, and
- 12.5% were *black* (in an age group in which blacks comprised 13.1% of the population).
- Two thirds of those who served in Vietnam were volunteers, and
- Volunteers accounted for 77% of all combat deaths.

As far as PTSD is concerned, it is real but not nearly as widespread as the press would insist. Mr. Owens addresses this too:

The claim that PTSD continues to affect nearly half of the 3.3 million men who served in Vietnam is implausible, especially given that fewer than 15% of those were assigned to combat units. A more reasonable figure comes from the Centers for Disease Control, whose study reported that 15% of Vietnam veterans experienced symptoms of combat related-PTSD at some time during or after military service, but that only 2.2% exhibited symptoms at the time of the study.

The liberal purveyors of victim status for Vietnam veterans should consult a comprehensive survey commissioned by the Veterans' Administration in 1980. Were they to do so, they would learn that:

- Fully 91% of those who had seen combat in Vietnam were "glad they had served their country."
- A healthy 80% disagreed with the statement that "the U.S. took advantage of me."

➤ Nearly two thirds said they would go to Vietnam again – even knowing the war's outcome.

In words both balanced and patriotic, "Mack" Owens concludes that "Those who served in Vietnam did so...with honor, decency and restraint. Vietnam veterans have fared at least as well as any other generation of warriors."

Perhaps the most eloquent words about the future of Vietnam veterans were written in 1983 by the late Vermont Royster, who had served as editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, was a Pulitzer Prize winner and became one of the greatest journalists of the twentieth century. In a Pulitzer-winning column entitled "Those Who Were There," he quoted Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "And gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here." Mr. Royster then concluded his piece with the following two sentences:

The day will come, I no longer have any doubt, when those few who were there those years ago will gather with their wives and walking canes, as old soldiers have always done, to talk of how it was.

When that day comes all the others will be excluded from that band of brothers.

At the time Royster wrote his warm and welcome words, which was fifteen years after I had gone to Vietnam, even I had observed the emerging pride of Vietnam veterans. Young people who worked in my organization, as well as others who happened to learn of my Marine Corps service in Vietnam, became inquisitive and friendly, some peculiarly deferential and even admiring. Typically, they wanted to know what Vietnam was all about, why I went there instead of, say, Canada, how I felt then and how I feel today. Like Vermont Royster's column, their desire to know was good, honest, timely, and helped bring us full circle. It made us all once again a "band of brothers."

One well balanced summary of the fall of South Vietnam is to be found in an April 30, 1985 editorial, also in *The Wall Street Journal*:

In all, a remarkable run of mistakes, bad judgment and ill fortune. Yet the essential morality of the American purpose is clear enough if you look at Southeast Asia today, and see the kind of society we were trying to prevent. Indeed, this purpose was not totally a failed one. In all likelihood the war bought time for nations from Thailand to Indonesia, and the development of the Pacific Basin is a bright spot in the world today.

Sixteen years after these words were written, Congressman Henry Hyde (Republican of Illinois), a man I admire greatly, wrote in an op-ed piece in the *Journal* that “even though Vietnam was conquered, the objective for which we fought – the establishment of a free and independent Vietnam – is still attainable.” When I first read these words, I thought Mr. Hyde had flipped. After all, Vietnam is now a Communist state.

The Congressman went on to say that “the U.S. was never militarily defeated in Vietnam. When the U.S. entered the war in the early 1960s, the Saigon government’s control over the countryside was slim and fading fast, with the Communists dominating... When we withdrew in 1973, 80% or more of the territory and population was under government control, and the Communist infrastructure and cadres in the South had been virtually wiped out.

“The conquest, when it came two years later, was at the hands of North Vietnamese regulars. This was required because the Viet Cong, which had borne the brunt of the confrontation with the U.S. military over the past decade, had been reduced to tattered remnants.”

Mr. Hyde concluded that our military success prior to the North Vietnamese invasion of the South cannot be labeled a defeat, any more than France’s surrender to the Germans in World War II could be called a final defeat for the Allies.

Along the same lines, about ten years after I came home from Vietnam, on April 2, 1979, Chas’s eleventh birthday, *The Wall Street Journal*, under the rubric “Vietnam Memory: Acts of Good Faith,” published a letter from me, part of which follows.

I too believe there remains a “reservoir of feeling” that we, American veterans of the war and the U.S. itself, acted in good faith for a cause that would hopefully serve some ultimate beneficial purpose for the Vietnamese people, many of whom...continue “risking their lives en masse to get out on the high seas in small boats.” In one fundamental sense the U.S. had an obligation as a member of SEATO to defend then South Vietnam. While this has been acrimoniously debated and treated extensively in the many articles and books written during and since the war, it still relates to other fundamentals like U.S. credibility, decisiveness, and strength – all of which are seriously questioned, if not doubted, every day both here and abroad. In another sense many of us believe that our presence brought some hope and happiness, however temporary, to those poor, devastated people.

*The Marine Corps has consistently advocated the principle that the war in South Vietnam can be conclusively won only through convincing the South Vietnamese people in the villages and hamlets that their hope lies with freedom, not with communism. Today while the search for a negotiated settlement to the war continues, this becomes even more important.*

- General Leonard F. Chapman, 24<sup>th</sup>  
Marine Corps Commandant [1969]

# 27

## Coming Home

*We gotta get out of this place, if it's the last thing we ever do. – The Animals*

In early 1969 I received a telex (there were no faxes or e-mails in those days) from Headquarters Marine Corps, which I wish I had saved for its value as a humorous document. Its subject was my “Rotation Tour Date,” or RTD. This was the date on which one would leave his duty station in Vietnam and begin the long-awaited trip back to The World, which in official military communications was abbreviated CONUS, for “Continental United States.” The telex also addressed my RELAD, or “Release from Active Duty.”

After reading this official communication, I could not keep myself from laughing. Here is a reconstruction of its message:

FROM HQMC TO 1LT C F MANSFIELD JR: RELAD SET AT 1 JUN 69 (STOP) ORIGINAL RTD SET AT 27 JUL 69 (STOP) FOLLOWING OPTIONS NOW AVAILABLE: (1) COMPLETE CURRENT WESTPAC TOUR OF DUTY AS OF ORIGINAL 27 JUL 69 RTD (STOP) (2) EXTEND CURRENT TOUR OF DUTY SIX MONTHS OR LONGER (STOP) (3) RETURN CONUS 21 MAY 69 FOR RELAD (STOP)

This is clearly another one of those relative extrema. Talk about a no-brainer.

When I received word that I would be going home early, I called Bob Lund to tell him of my good fortune. He was now back in Quang Tri with his squadron, VMO-6. I proposed that we get together for a beer and some chow, and he was amenable. First, though, Bob surprised me with an invitation to fly a UH1E (Huey); I don't recall if it was a gunship or a “slick.” Of course, he wouldn't even dream of allowing me to take off or land but he did permit me to sit in the copilot's seat and fly the bird once we were aloft. It was late on a sunny afternoon with near-calm winds and a bit of haze in the air. We

took off and toured a portion of Quang Tri Province, including, of course, Dong Ha, from which I would soon take my leave. As we headed north, Bob startled me while I was flying the helicopter.

“Holy shit, Charlie, we’re in the Z!” he shouted.

The nasty thought of being where we shouldn’t, and the attendant risks, flashed through my mind. I could hear the echo of my father saying, “Chuck, for a smart boy, you’re an awful dope!”

“Let’s get the hell out of here fast,” I shouted back.

In fact, there was no reason to be alarmed. Bob had merely reverted to his old college antic of exaggerating a situation, in this case sounding an alarm, when all he wanted to do was dupe someone. Now, my dictionary tells me that “Dupe suggests unwariness in the person deluded and the acceptance of what is false as true.” Score one more ‘gotcha’ for The Round Man.



Before leaving Dong Ha I cleaned out my hootch. This was not difficult since Marines lived in such places with few personal effects. Still, there were some things I decided to discard. In fact, I burned the letters Mame wrote and sent to me during my tour in-country. I still cannot forget that she wrote to me every day, as I did to her. Destroying them was a colossal mistake; as I write now, how I wish I had kept her written words, for they would have added so much.

I also received letters from family members; I especially recall receiving one from Mimi Charrot every week. My sister Elisabeth, then 12, wrote to me and I reciprocated. She has given me copies of the letters she received from me, and they are beyond boring. My Mom, of course, wrote, as did my sister Patricia. Receiving mail was wonderful.

There’s another mail-related anecdote that deserves telling. When Mame and Chas were living in GC with her parents, my letters from Vietnam would, of course, arrive via the local post office. The letter carrier whose route included 24 Locust Street was known as “Rocky,” a true-blue Italian-American man, of whom everyone was very

fond. On the occasional days when there was no letter from me for Mame, he would always return to the post office at the end of his rounds just to check if a letter from me might have arrived during the day. If so, Rocky would take it upon himself to deliver the letter to Mame on his own time prior going home at the end of the day. When I returned to GC from Vietnam, I looked up Rocky and thanked him deeply for his service above and beyond the call of duty.



Believe it or not, as much as I could not wait to get back in The World, I was troubled when it came to saying goodbye to my fellow Marines in Dong Ha. My platoon gave me a great sendoff --- a steak barbecue with plenty of *cold* Budweiser. Near the end of the party, Gunny Don Simpson presented me a plaque that I display on the wall of my den and cherish to this day. On it is inscribed:

FOR OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP  
TO  
1<sup>ST</sup> LT C MANSFIELD JR  
FROM THE MEN OF RADIO RELAY PLT  
68-69

FOR THOSE WHO FIGHT FOR IT  
LIFE HAS A FLAVOR  
THE PROTECTED NEVER KNOW

The next morning, May 21, 1969, I flew aboard a Lockheed Marine C130 *Hercules* from "Dong Ha International Airport" nonstop to Danang. The flight was uneventful, although personally thrilling, for it was the first leg of my journey back to The World.

In Danang I had to unpack and spruce up my "Summer Service Charlie" uniform, which was required for my return flight to the States. It consisted of lightweight tan trousers, a shortsleeved tan shirt with open collar, the traditional Marine web belt, black

shoes and a tan "piss cutter." I hadn't worn 'Charlies' since the preceding November on Okinawa. When I slipped into the trou and zipped them up, they nearly fell down, for I had lost forty pounds, most of it deliberately, going from 210 to 170 in just three months. Because of my new svelte size and appearance, I had to have the pants altered, but this was a good thing.

Also while in Vietnam I gave up my two-pack-a-week smoking habit. I quit primarily because even then I believed that cigarette smoking caused lung cancer. Moreover, the price of a pack of cigarettes in the U.S. had risen to 40¢ whereas I was buying smokes in-country for 10-15¢ a pack. I smoked Camels or Lucky Strikes, unfiltered, of course. If someone gave me a filtered cigarette, I would remove the filter, put the other end in my mouth and light up. Kicking that habit is one of the best things I have ever done for myself.



While I was in Danang awaiting a flight to Okinawa, I met with several Marine aviator buddies – "airedales," as they were sometimes called – who were stationed there with the First Marine Air Wing (1<sup>st</sup> MAW).

I was shocked when they told me that another friend with whom I had trained and served, Billy Ryan, had been killed in action in the crash of a Marine F-4 *Phantom*; it was a virtual carbon copy of Dick Morin's tragic death five months earlier. Billy and Dick were both RIOs (radar intercept operators), and I believe they were even in the same squadron.

The two most tragic elements of Billy's death were its timing and circumstances. His wife Judy had already left their infant son with her parents in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., and traveled to New York's JFK airport for the first leg of a trip to Hawaii where she would meet Billy for R&R. Judy and Mame were good friends, having been pregnant with their first children at the same time, and having had the same ob-gyn doctor, a Navy man called Dr. Yon. While Judy was at JFK about to board her flight, she was paged. It was a phone call from her father who conveyed to his daughter the

shocking news that her husband had been killed. The news was heart-breaking, and not just for Judy.

We toasted the memory of both Dick and Billy, but it was not enough.

The only personal consolation I have in this story is that I had dropped out of the F-4 *Phantom* RIO program because the aircraft, as exciting as I found it, did not have flight controls in the back seat, which was the RIO's; there was only a small radar screen there. I left because I didn't want to be at the mercy of a pilot who, for whatever reason, might somehow forget that I was there too, if, for example, it came to ejecting from the aircraft, a time when a split-second might mean the difference between life and death. I have since learned that my concern was unfounded because, in such a situation in the F-4, the back seat goes first, regardless of whether the RIO or the pilot in front initiates the firing of the ejection mechanism.



Gunnery Sergeant Washington was, like me, assigned to Headquarters Battalion, Third Marine Division, in Quang Tri in northern I Corps, although we were both physically stationed elsewhere. Moreover, I believe his tour of duty in Vietnam coincided roughly with mine. I also remember seeing him only from time to time during my service in Vietnam, say, every few months.

An African-American, Gunny Washington (sorry to say I don't recall his first name) was a man who commanded, not demanded, respect, for he was a Marine's Marine, one who had served in combat before, namely, in the Korean War. Senior Marine non-commissioned officers like him made men like me, as James Brady put it so aptly in *The Coldest War*, "uneasy to be saluted by men of such distinction." Strong but gentle, inspirational and softly spoken, he was, above all, admirable in my eyes. He exuded confidence, maturity, credibility and authority, but he possessed genuine warmth too. To me he was the quintessential Marine, one I could only admire, although I liked him very much as well. Indeed, he was the sort who made others proud to be on the same team as he, an extraordinary man.

As luck would have it, when my day came to leave Vietnam and return to The World, I boarded a flight in Danang chock-a-block filled with fellow Marines. As I walked down the aisle of the Continental Airlines 707 that was to take me on the first part of a journey to Okinawa, California and (finally!) home, I spotted Gunny Washington sitting in a window seat on the starboard side of the aircraft about mid-fuselage. As the aisle seat next to him was empty, I asked if he would mind my sitting there.

Gracious and charming (not all Marine gunnery sergeants could be so described), he recognized me and said, "Lieutenant Mansfield, I would love to have your company on *this* trip."

He and I spoke happily and incessantly until the big bird's take-off roll, when everyone on the plane went silent as it began.

Next, as the large jet's nose wheel rotated upward and we began to lift off, Gunny Washington, his face virtually pressed against the window out of which he gazed wistfully, took his last measure of Vietnam.

With near-religious reverence he said quietly, "Adios, *motherfucker*."

How bizarrely perfect, I thought, as I added, "Amen."

The Gunny then grinned his marvelous grin. He and I quickly and eagerly shook hands; I think we even hugged each other. We then joined in the thunderous applause and hoopla, as he and I felt the tremendous happiness, virtually forgotten during our time in-country, that every Marine on board experienced in that exhilarating moment.

I would not see Vietnam again until November 11, 1982, the Veterans Day on which the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., was unveiled and dedicated. That day I was on an airplane headed to Singapore from Hong Kong when the pilot directed passengers' attention to "the coast of Vietnam off the right side of the aircraft." It was a sight I will never forget.



After a stop in Okinawa for a couple of days, we flew on to Hawaii where we refueled. Our next destination was mainland U.S.A., specifically the Marine Corps Air

Station at El Toro (Santa Ana), California. We arrived on the afternoon of Sunday, May 25, 1969, and were told that official processing, RELAD in my case, would take at least a week. I remember thinking about, and resenting, being in the U.S. but not actually being able to go home when I wanted to.

*So near and yet so far. Hurry up and wait. Typical Marine Corps Mickey Mouse,* I thought.

On that Sunday evening many of us headed for the officers' club for drinks and a meal. Despite the reality that we weren't yet where our hearts and treasures were, it was an honor and a pleasure to be in the company of those great Marines, both young and not so young. It was sweet, but we weren't quite home yet, and all of us were anxiously anticipating being with our families after, in most cases, long separations.

On Monday morning, I headed straight for the administration building to begin my processing. There were scores, if not hundreds, who had the same status as I; how could I expect to get home any earlier than the one week of which we were advised?

To my astonishment, Tom Moore, Holy Cross '65 and a Marine captain, was in charge of the administration office. First Lieutenant Gerry Byrne, a classmate from The Basic School and a fellow New Yorker also awaiting RELAD, was with me and exulted, "I can't believe you know this guy!"

Anyway, I spoke with Tom and told him that Gerry and I had been formally advised that it would take at least a week for us to be processed and get back to New York. Unabashedly, I asked Tom, "Is there any way you could get us out of here sooner?"

Citing the horrendous workload of his office, so as not to engender false hope in us, he still managed a smile and promised, "I'll see what I can do." *How sweet it was!*

After that most satisfactory chance meeting with Tom, I had the time to do another friend a favor. Back in Dong Ha I had promised Don Fritz I would look up his wife Betty, a nurse at El Toro. He had given me her office telephone number, so she was easy to find. Betty and I had a brief but pleasant visit, which I found rewarding, for it gave me the opportunity to do something good and tangible for a buddy who was still in-country. While I spoke with her, I recall thinking, "I hope Don's okay." After all, one never knew.

On the next morning, Tuesday May 27<sup>th</sup>, I kept an appointment with a Marine Corps lieutenant colonel who, in effect, administered what in corporate America might be called an exit interview, although this one had an unmistakable element of recruitment. Clearly, the lieutenant colonel's primary responsibility was to get me to "re-up," that is, to extend my period of active duty. I must concede that his proposal was not wholly unattractive for there was still a great deal in and about the Marine Corps that I loved.

The initial part of our conversation focused on the success of the Corps' operations in Vietnam, and the importance of having seasoned officers available to lead in the various military operational specialties (MOSSs). Yet, I thought, he can't seriously begin to imagine that I might want to return to Vietnam any time soon. I was right, and this is where the lieutenant colonel employed some fairly savvy marketing. To make the potential seduction even more attractive, I would be given a regular (as opposed to a reserve) commission and promoted to captain virtually immediately. (This was a non-event because I knew I would be promoted very soon anyway, as I was on August 1, 1969.) The other part of the proposal centered on an assignment in the continental United States, one in which I would be living with my wife and son for a minimum of six months. It sounded good, up to a point.

In my own mind I had no technical or differentiating civilian job skills, except reasonable abilities to read, write and speak. Worse, I had no idea what I wanted to do in a post-Marine Corps career, and yet this reality did not bother me excessively. What did concern me, however, perhaps more than anything else at the time, was that I wanted to remain with my wife and son indefinitely, to say the least. I also knew that I had no desire to return to Vietnam while the war was still on.

Six months. *That's pretty good*, I thought. I was a Marine. Being one was my job, the only one I had known since college, and there was so much about being a Marine that seemed to suit me. Yet, down deep, my mind and my heart both said the same thing: Go home and take your chances in the non-Marine Corps world.

One question about which the lieutenant colonel was somewhat vague was when, if I re-upped, I might be returned to duty in Vietnam. I understood, of course, that he was not in a position to make commitments of any sort. Nonetheless, I felt I had no realistic

choice, for myself or my family, other than to assume that I would go back in-country after the promised six-months stateside had passed.

In short, I decided that I'd be a damn fool to re-up. I opted for RELAD, which could not be denied me.

On Wednesday, May 28, 1969 shortly before 9:00 a.m., Gerry Byrne and I boarded a transcontinental flight from Los Angeles International Airport to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport. Joyful at the prospect of our homecoming, we talked our way across the country; the joy we shared was an unprecedented feeling for both of us. I believe it was the first time in about a year, likely longer, that we had both truly relaxed. We even toasted each other – and the Corps, of course – with glasses of champagne.

Our flight landed in New York on time at 5:30 p.m., and Gerry and I said goodbye. I believe we also hugged each other and verbalized *Semper fi*.

Mame was at the gate, wearing a green summer jumper. *Mine eyes have seen the glory! I am back in The World!*

Like the reverse-thrusters on the jet engines on the big silver bird that had just brought me safely home, all of the miserable feelings and daunting prospects I took with me on the day I left home for Vietnam the prior year were reversed, and more. Instead, I was experiencing a renewed and vital freedom of mind and spirit, the like of which was novel in my life.

The dream of having Mame in my arms again had at last come true. She and I were together once more, and our life as a married couple, interrupted by a war now a half-world away, had resumed for real in this magic moment. On this bright, beautiful and warm May afternoon, she too was all of those things, as she had always been. She was 'younger than springtime,' as the soaring song from *South Pacific* goes, and, once more, stunning.

My dictionary tells me that joy is "a very glad feeling; happiness; great pleasure; delight." These first moments of renewal with Mame on American soil could also be so defined. But they were so very much more that I do not believe the words exist to describe adequately how I felt. The emotion of happiness was thrilling, and it took my

breath away. I cannot imagine what else to say that would adequately convey my feelings.

With my arm around her, Mame led me to American Airlines' Admiral's Club at JFK. As we approached the clear glass doors of the Club, I could see through them my parents and siblings standing inside, awaiting Mame's and my return from the arrival gate.

Then the Club's main door was opened, and my firstborn, Chas, whom I hadn't seen in nearly a year, was turned loose. Seeing his mother, he ran at first, then gradually slowed to a reluctant saunter as he approached his mother and me. Next, with great self-assurance, he peered up at me with those big brown eyes of his that one of his school teachers would later characterize as "chocolate."

The message I got from his look was straightforward: *Who's this ugly bastard with my mother?* Chas is nothing if not straightforward. After all, he could not have remembered me, and I had *my* arm around *his* Mom. In fairness, his look was not necessarily one of dislike, but it did reveal uncertainty. I believe there was also suspicion in his young eyes. He told me without saying a word that, *If you're not home with me, Dad, you're irrelevant.* Maybe that's why he is home with and so close to his own four kids today.

After meeting and greeting the whole clan, I was escorted by my family to the parking lot where we boarded cars for the ride to 62 Fairmount Boulevard, GC, my parents' home. It would be the reverse of the trip I had made the year before.

I believe it was impossible for me to have been happier.

As we drove along Fairmount Boulevard, some of the neighbors, aware of my homecoming, were out on the sidewalk, waving as we passed by. Their shouted greetings were warm and welcome; I was amazed that so many had come out for me.

As we pulled into the driveway at #62, I couldn't help but notice a huge sign, made of canvas from an old awning my Dad had saved. Hung from the railing on the house's second storey, the sign was draped over the entire front of the garage. In foot-high block letters, it read: WELCOME HOME, CHUCK! The feeling I had was nearly overwhelming, one I don't think I had experienced before.

At the homecoming party that followed this unprecedented and wonderful welcome, I think every relative, friend and neighbor I had ever known stopped by to welcome me home and visit for a while. It was moving and, at times, unreal. In fact, I had to ponder deliberately the fact that I was finally back in The World.

To my surprise, Mame told me later that she was not happy with the fact that my parents had decided to have such a big party in my honor on my first night home. She believed that immediate family only would have been more appropriate on that special evening. For years she harbored a negative feeling about it, but it's ancient history now. Besides, she and my Mom have long since buried the hatchet and are the closest of friends.

A high point of the evening came near the end of the party. My Dad and I were alone, chatting, when he did something unexpected that I don't remember him doing before – ever. He hugged me, and said audibly, "I love you, and I'm glad you're home." That was all, but it was more than enough.

Mame and I slept in the bedroom that Mike and I had first shared when the family moved from Brooklyn in '52, and later as college students. She and I prefer a larger bed but the room's twin beds were just fine, particularly after such a long separation.

On the morning of May 29<sup>th</sup>, I was awakened by the unwelcome sound of a "cherry bomb" that some neighborhood kid had set off just outside the bedroom window. Instinctively, upon hearing the explosion, I rolled quickly off the bed and onto the floor, attempting to take cover from the perceived attack. It took me a moment to realize that I was in friendly territory and nobody was actually shooting at me. Mame was at first startled at my unusual and unanticipated behavior but still managed a good laugh, as I did a moment later.

On June 30, 1969 I started a new job as a management trainee at Bankers Trust Company in New York City. A few days later, on Independence Day weekend, my parents, my sisters, Mame, Chas and I spent a long weekend at the home of Aunt Jeanne, my mother's sister and my godmother, and Uncle Bob Peters in Westhampton Beach. Before dinner, Dad and I each enjoyed a martini while watching the television evening news, much of which was about the Vietnam War.

Hearing our discussion about the war and my new position in a major international financial institution, my sister Peggy, then 17, who had just graduated from GC High and considered herself an antiwar protester, denounced me in my Dad's presence as "a war-mongering capitalist pig." I was astonished, for sure, but decidedly not angry. For some reason, I didn't take it personally. After all, she was just a kid, and I guess I couldn't believe she could really intend to direct such invective toward her own brother. As far as I was concerned, this was merely another example of how the war had affected Americans, even the very young, at home. My father, however, wanted to kill her.

*A warmonger is a person who is invincible in peace and invisible in war. A warmonger is always ready to lay down your life for his country.*

- From *Voices from The Wall*, an anthology compiled by  
Jan C. Scruggs of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund

Aside from the resumption of good times with the family, being back in The World afforded me the opportunity to make good on a vow I had made one bad day in-country. I had promised God – yes, God – in an especially uncomfortable moment while under attack that, if He brought me home alive, I would attend Mass and receive the Eucharist every day for a full year.

The deal worked – for both of us.

*Deo gratias!*

*None of these decorations was for uncommon valor. They were for common valor. The routine, daily stuff – just humping, just enduring – but that was worth something wasn't it? Yes, it was. Worth plenty.*

- Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*

## The War's End in Sight

*Vietnam was a dark room full of deadly objects, the VC were everywhere all at once like spider cancer, and instead of losing the war in little pieces over years we lost it fast in under a week.*  
– From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

In 1973 President Nixon's Secretary of State and former National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, together with North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho, initiated "The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam." Within two and a half years of its signing on January 27, 1973, South Vietnam would collapse in the face of a North Vietnamese juggernaut, and the Vietnam War would be lost.

As Dr. D.M. Vuckovich of Chicago has written in a 1985 letter to *The Wall Street Journal*, "the U.S. forfeited any victory in Vietnam by leaving that wretched country, as a football team might quit at half time. ... The failure to win the war was based on our absence of sound military objectives, the result of sustained interference by the political short-term planners, not allowing (the) military to respond in the optimal way which ultimately could have resulted in a different outcome."

The U.S. Congress reduced its aid to the South and that was the beginning of the end. Mr. Kissinger, who negotiated the deal with Le Duc Tho, in the first volume of his work *The White House Years*, attributed the South Vietnamese failure to the "collapse of (U.S.) Executive authority as a result of Watergate," the scandal that led to President Nixon's resignation of the presidency on August 9, 1974.

Lawrence O'Brien, an attorney who served as a U.S. infantry officer in Vietnam, in "The Final Conquest of Vietnam: A Look Back" (published in the January 25, 1983 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*), offered some compelling commentary on the final

days of South Vietnam. On January 8, 1975, he wrote, North Vietnam's Central Committee decided to launch a major offensive "to divide the South at its center by means of a west-to-east drive to the sea, much as Grant devised Sherman's march in 1864." The NVA began "(a)ttacking across the waist of South Vietnam on March 4, 1975," and the Southern forces under a leader who failed to believe his intelligence reports withdrew "under pressure." "The ensuing failure...and the subsequent collapse of half the country led to (then President Nguyen Van) Thieu's resignation and, ultimately, to surrender..." For its part, North Vietnam "had brilliantly played out the "talk, fight-talk, fight" strategy."

President Thieu, who died in September 2001, was forced to resign in May 1975 shortly after the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam. In resigning, he emotionally asked his countrymen to forgive his mistakes.



Many Americans, including more than a few Vietnam veterans, believe that what we lost in Vietnam was much more than a war. Some say it was the soul of our nation. For many, even today, the wounds of Vietnam have never really healed.

According to President Ronald Reagan, what we lost were "pride, self-esteem, the belief that we really are a great country," which he later managed to restore.

Today, on Vietnam's battlefields, most of the scars of war have been obscured by time and repairs but some remain. Not long ago I read that still visible are the gaping holes that Marines blasted through the thick walls of the Citadel in the city of Hue when they recaptured the ancient Vietnamese capital in the bloody fighting following the Tet offensive.

On the road north of Hue, according to an old report, the rusting hulks of destroyed American-supplied tanks dot fields along the roadside. White-star markings on the vehicles are reportedly kept freshly painted as a reminder of the American role in the war.

The best-known battlefield of all – Matt Caulfield’s Khe Sanh – is little more than a weed-covered air strip surrounded by farm plots. The Montagnard tribesmen in the valley around Khe Sanh reportedly complain that cultivating the battlefields sometimes triggers old land mines and shells still embedded in the soil. Many, including returning veterans on both sides, have attested that after the war there was absolutely nothing left, except the land and bomb craters.



Francis J. West, an assistant secretary of defense in the first Reagan administration, served as a Marine grunt in Vietnam and is author of *The Village*. At Christmas 2001 he visited a village 400 miles north of Saigon where he had patrolled decades earlier with a “Combined Action Platoon” – local militiamen combined with a squad of Marines. In an article entitled “Back to Vietnam” written soon after his visit and published on January 29<sup>th</sup> of this year in *The Wall Street Journal*, West wrote warmly of how the villagers welcomed him back. He concluded with words that resonated with me: “America has surely praised the generation of World War II. But of their Vietnam progeny, pictures and print have projected a face filled with fear, unworthy of praise. It is left to others in unlikely places to remember the faces that were stalwart.”

*“This whole war,” she said, “why was everybody so mad at everybody else?”  
I shook my head. “They weren’t mad, exactly. Some people wanted one thing,  
other people wanted another thing.”*

*“What did you want?”*

*“Nothing,” I said. “To stay alive.”*

*“That’s all?”*

*“Yes.”*

*Kathleen sighed. “Well, I don’t get it. I mean, how come you were even here in  
the first place?”*

*“I don’t know,” I said. “Because I had to be.”*

*- Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried**

# 29

## Not Fond o' Jane

*Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.*  
– Martin Luther King, Jr.

**O**ne prominent American who sided with the enemy in Vietnam was the actress Jane Fonda, daughter of legendary American actor Henry Fonda, and former wife of Ted Turner of AOL Time Warner, Turner Broadcasting System and Atlanta Braves fame. Ms. Fonda actually traveled to North Vietnam to condemn the policy of the United States.

On August 22, 1972 Ms. Fonda gave an address on Radio Hanoi from Hanoi, North Vietnam, in English to American servicemen involved in the war. Here are some excerpts:

This is Jane Fonda. During my two week visit in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, I've had the opportunity to visit a great many places and speak to a large number of people from all walks of life—workers, peasants, students, artists and dancers, historians, journalists, film actresses, soldiers, militia girls, members of the women's union, writers.

One thing I have learned beyond a shadow of a doubt...is that (then President Richard) Nixon will never be able to break the spirit of these people; he'll never be able to turn Vietnam...into a neo-colony of the United States...

(D)espite the bombs, despite the crimes being created—being committed against them by Richard Nixon, ...the people have taken power into their own hands, and they are controlling their own lives.

...I think Richard Nixon would do well to read Vietnamese history, particularly their poetry, and particularly the poetry written by (North Vietnamese leader) Ho Chi Minh.

As if this weren't enough, to Americans' horror, Jane Fonda actually encouraged Viet Cong soldiers to fight "American Imperialists" – and sang antiwar songs behind

enemy lines. She also had her photograph taken on a Communist anti-aircraft gun used to shoot down American planes.

On her performance and my feelings about it, I would echo enthusiastically the words of former Secretary of the Navy, former Marine and Vietnam veteran James Webb, as told by Robert Timberg in his bestseller *The Nightingale's Song*. When a San Francisco radio talk show host asked Webb what he thought of Ms. Fonda, he replied, "Jane Fonda can kiss my ass. I wouldn't go across the street to watch her slit her wrists."

"Hanoi Jane," as she is known to many Vietnam veterans, has been honored as one of *Ladies' Home Journal's* "100 Years of Great Women," presumably the twentieth century. Unfortunately, few are aware of how she betrayed not only our country but also specific men who served and sacrificed during the Vietnam War.



The following stories may help some people understand why I believe Ms. Fonda should have been tried (and executed) for treason.

Here is the report of Jerry Driscoll, an F-4 *Phantom* fighter pilot. In 1968 this former commandant of the U.S. Air Force Survival School was a prisoner of war (POW) in Ho Lo prison, the so called "Hanoi Hilton." Having been dragged from his stinking cesspool of a cell, cleaned, fed and dressed in clean prisoner's pajamas, Driscoll was ordered to describe for a visiting American "peace activist," namely, Ms. Fonda, the "lenient and humane treatment" he had received. After he spat at her instead, he was clubbed and dragged away. During the subsequent beating, he fell forward upon the camp commandant's feet, which enraged that officer, who frenziedly applied a wooden baton. Ten years after this incident, Colonel Driscoll still suffered from double vision, which ended his flying career.

A civilian economic advisor I'll call Jim was captured by the North Vietnamese in South Vietnam in 1968 and held for five years. He spent twenty-seven months in solitary confinement, one year in a cage in Cambodia, and another in a "black box" in Hanoi. In addition, Jim reported that his North Vietnamese captors deliberately poisoned and

murdered a female missionary, a nurse in a leprosarium in Ban Me Thuot, whom he buried in the jungle near the Cambodian border.

Jim describes himself and his fellow POWs as Jane Fonda's "war criminals." When she was in Hanoi, he was asked by the camp's communist political officer if he would be willing to meet with her. He agreed because he wished to tell her about the real treatment all the POWs were receiving, which was far worse than the "humane and lenient" handling purported by the North Vietnamese and parroted by Ms. Fonda.

Following the meeting, Jim was forced to spend three days on a rocky floor on his knees, arms outstretched. A heavy amount of steel was placed on his hands, and he was beaten with a bamboo cane until his arms dipped. Shortly after he was released, Jim had the opportunity to meet with Ms. Fonda and asked her if she would be willing to debate him on television. She did not answer him.

No one should be an honoree in "100 Years of Great Women," especially when she is a traitor whose hands are covered with the blood of so many patriots.

Article III, Section 3 of the Constitution of the United States declares, "Treason against the United States shall consist only in levying war against them, or in adhering to their enemies, giving them aid and comfort."

Plainly and blatantly, Jane Fonda committed treason.

What goes around comes around – although Hanoi Jane did not suffer any physical torture of which I am aware.

Here is a heartwarming story from Colonel Bob Kielhofer, USMCR (Ret.), who once served as chief-of-staff to the "Confederate General" who commanded 6,000 troops in *Gettysburg*, a historical film made by TNT (Turner Network Television), founded and now partially owned by Ted Turner, Jane's former husband.

According to Bob, there were two incidents involving Jane, the first of which occurred on the day Ted was making a cameo appearance in the film. (He plays a white-haired officer who dies scaling a fence in a military charge.)

Prior to the actual filming, Col. Kielhofer led a battalion, about 700 men, up a road in the hot sun to await the setup of cameras. Hanoi Jane and Ted arrived by helicopter for the take. She walked toward the middle of the battalion to view the troops

– and to receive the adulation she expected would be forthcoming from her then husband's employees.

Of the stand-in troops, many were North Carolinians, actual soldiers from Fort Bragg. The colonel in the battalion commander's role informed Bob that his troops were nonplussed by Ms. Fonda's presence, and requested permission to effect a troop movement "to ease their feelings."

"What then happened," according to Kielhofer, "I will never forget." The battalion commander called his men to attention. Hanoi Jane, noticing the activity and still anticipating a show for her benefit, walked to the fore of the rightmost company in the battalion.

The colonel resumed his orders to the battalion and commanded the company in front of which Ms. Fonda stood watching and listening. "B Company! To the rear, march. Halt. At ease." At that moment one hundred men pivoted and gave her their backs!

Taking the action for what it was, Jane beat a hasty retreat down the line to her helicopter. With precision and, no doubt, glee, the battalion commander followed her progress and effected the same salute of disrespect, skillfully reversing each company just as she arrived front and center. Ten minutes later Hanoi Jane's chopper took off and she was seen by the men no more that day.

The second episode involving dear Jane also involved one of Colonel Kielhofer's sergeants, a former medic in Vietnam, who "performed meritorious medical duties during the filming." In Vietnam the sergeant had actually stabilized half a dozen critically injured troops in a variety of mishaps, probably saving one man's life.

During a ceremony at the end of the filming, the county and the National Park Service gave the sergeant an award. Ted Turner shook his hand, presented him with a large check in gratitude, and in front of the throng introduced his wife Jane to the proud "confederate." As she extended her hand to the sergeant, he pulled his hand back sharply and put it behind him. Then, in a strong voice, he spoke into the microphone and said, "I mean no disrespect to you, Mr. Turner, but I will not shake the hand of a traitor."

What goes around comes around.

*God bless America!*



To Jane Fonda's credit, during a 20/20 television interview with Barbara Walters sixteen years later, she apologized for going to North Vietnam and allowing herself to be used as a propaganda vehicle. Here is what she said:

I would like to say something, not just to Vietnam veterans in New England, but to men who were in Vietnam, who I hurt, or whose pain I caused to deepen because of things that I said or did. I was trying to help end the killing and the war, but there were times when I was thoughtless and careless about it and I'm...very sorry that I hurt them. And I want to apologize to them and their families.

Some have said that Ms. Fonda actually made no such apology.

In the minds of most of those to whom she addressed her apology, it was too little too late. As Colonel Dana King has written, "I commanded brave men in battle...they deserve the recognition and the forgiveness of having to kill or be killed. Jane Fonda deserves nothing. Not even sympathy." I couldn't agree more.

A footnote: In discussions about Ms. Fonda and her activities during the Vietnam War, some people have told me that they are happy that no one holds *them* "accountable for things they may have done in (their) twenties." What a cop out!

For the record, at the time of her treasonous acts Ms. Fonda was four months shy of her thirty-fifth birthday. Thus, I wonder what then *is* the age of human accountability. Also, I wonder if the "unaccountables" would perhaps modify their view if they had actually known personally one or more of the men who suffered at Hanoi Jane's traitorous hands. After all, but for the grace of God, I could have been one of them.

Oh, yes, I have thrown Hanoi Jane's exercise video, once used by my wife and daughter, into the trash.

*Do draft dodgers have reunions? If so, what do they talk about?*

- Marine Corps Bumper Sticker

# 30

## The Wall

*Considering where you were and what was happening to so many people, it was a privilege just to be able to feel afraid.*

- From *Dispatches* by Michael Herr

**T**here is a thought I would like to share about something Vietnam veterans simply call "The Wall." Its proper name is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and it is located in Washington, D.C. It is dedicated to the honor and memory of those who died in the Vietnam War, and, according to a National Park Service web page on The Wall, "to the sacrifice of American military personnel during one of this nation's least popular wars. The purpose of this memorial is to separate the issue of the sacrifices of the veterans from the U.S. policy in the war, thereby creating a venue for reconciliation." Some 58,226 names of the deceased and missing are inscribed on The Wall, along with the following:

**IN HONOR OF THE MEN AND WOMEN  
OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE  
UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN THE  
VIETNAM WAR...OUR NATION HONORS  
THE COURAGE, SACRIFICE AND  
DEVOTION TO DUTY AND COUNTRY  
OF ITS VIETNAM VETERANS.**

Vietnam. The name itself still stirs strong emotions in a multitude of adult Americans.

For many others, the mention of places like Khe Sanh, A Chau, Saigon, Danang or Quang Tri evokes battles fought and family members or friends lost. Brief victories yielded to long-term agonies for many.

For us who served in Vietnam, its sights, sounds, smells --- as well as heat, leeches, fever and jungle rot --- are unforgettable. Still, just as the U.S. was "The World" to those in-country during the war, Vietnam was another world to those at home. It is, even today, despite all that has been written and said about the Vietnam War, still difficult to explain things that happened in that land halfway around the globe from America. In fact, many veterans did not discuss their Vietnam experience before the construction of "The Wall."

As I have attempted to convey, those who returned from Vietnam found their country divided by the war. Few of those who survived their tours of duty received any expressions of gratitude or respect, at least not at first. Worse, few of our servicemen and servicewomen who died in Vietnam were publicly mourned until the advent of "The Wall."

Today, for millions, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become a healing place. Leaving gifts at its base for the dead, the missing, and all who served has become part of the national ritual of grief and recovery.

One of the most poignant testimonials to The Wall comes from Major Q. X. Pham, USMCR. A native of Vietnam, he went to OCS in Quantico in the summer of 1986. He visited the memorial during his last liberty weekend before graduation.

"It was difficult," wrote Major Pham in a moving op-ed article in *The Wall Street Journal* published on Veterans Day in 1998, "to stand before the names of those who gave their lives to fight for my freedom. They were not even from my country." This *Vietnamese-American* patriot continued:

Why didn't they go to Canada? Why didn't they question their orders? Where would I be now if they hadn't fought the Communists? What would their lives be like now had they lived?

At the wall, I realized that I would not be standing there without the sacrifices of those whose names were inscribed. I accepted my commission a year later, after finishing college. I wound up serving seven years on active duty as a Marine helicopter pilot and flew combat and support missions during Operation Desert Storm and in Somalia. The day the Gulf War ended, I felt I had earned my American citizenship and paid back my debt to our great nation.

*Earned my American citizenship and paid back my debt to our great nation.*

*Our great nation.*

What compelling words. It's a pity that more native-born Americans don't have such depth of feeling for the land of the free and the home of the brave.



Sadly, The Wall was desecrated on Memorial Day 1993, Bill Clinton's first as president. Veterans from all over the country headed to Washington, D.C., to protest Clinton's presence at The Wall. I supported them, although I could not be there.

Incredibly, the Clinton White House had ordered The Wall enclosed in an "ugly snow fence" that kept veterans about five hundred yards away. Hence, the protest rally, which was hastily organized, was kept back behind the fence.

According to one Vietnam veteran, television reporters tried hard to bury --- in the word "healing" --- the issue of draft-dodger Clinton, who, like Jane Fonda, actually traveled to a foreign country to denounce the United States.

Said the vet to the reporter, "Why don't you go down and film the inscription on the Wall and show it on television tonight? That's why we're here, and why Clinton shouldn't be. This Wall was built to honor everyone who served in Vietnam, which most emphatically does not include Mr. Clinton."

Another reporter asked, "Don't you think it took a certain amount of courage for the president to come here today?"

The veteran gave the perfect reply: "If standing around in a suit and tie and getting booed for a couple of minutes, and then going home to the White House is 'courage,' then what's the word for going to Vietnam and getting shot at for 365 days?"

The hundreds of veterans there that day were understandably irate at Bill Clinton's highly publicized 1969 letter in which he wrote, "I loathe the military." In addition, Clinton lied to an Arkansas ROTC program in the same year, and lied again to the American people during the 1992 presidential campaign about exactly what he had said and done while the rest of us were in-country fighting.

As David Clayton Carrad has written of that protest,

So today was payback (for Clinton), for a lot of things. Our most popular signs were "Vietnam Veterans Loathe Clinton" and "Coward" and "Draft Dodger" and "You

Dishonor the Dead by Appearing Here.” About 12:45 (p.m.) we fell into a loose formation. We stood on our hillside, kept away from our Wall by the ugly snow fence, until 1:00 when the band played “Hail to the Chief” and we had our first chance to boo.

We came to attention, did a reasonably smart about-face..., and turned our backs on him. “Where was Bill?” we chanted, and “Off our Wall,” and “Come up here!” – an invitation he did not accept.

We booed our lungs out as Clinton himself rose to speak, our anger at him mixed with the sheer lighthearted joy of rebellion, and of hearing our strong voices blend together. We came to attention again and turned our backs on him in unison, even more smartly than in our first about-face. We sang “God Bless America” at the tops of our lungs and drowned out his words. We booed him until our throats were hoarse, half angry and half proud of our solidarity and the sheer volume of the noise we made.



Tom Brokaw’s book *The Greatest Generation* has been referenced earlier in this work. In it he chronicled the commitment and the sacrifice of the generation of Americans who fought and won World War II.

On December 7, 1999, coincidentally the fifty-eighth anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Mr. Brokaw was interviewed by Don Imus, a former Marine, on the *Imus in the Morning* radio program, which emanates weekdays from New York City and is broadcast nationwide. At one point, during a discussion of the differences between the World War II and Vietnam generations, Brokaw referred, on the one hand, to those who served in the Vietnam War and, on the other, to “those who followed their conscience and protested it.” In that moment I wondered if he himself recognized or understood the bias against Vietnam veterans that his words betrayed.

After all, is it not possible, or even likely, I wrote in a letter to him, that those of us who served our country in Vietnam did so in good conscience, good faith, enthusiasm, devotion to duty and even the confidence that we were serving in the very tradition of our forebears that he so skillfully articulated in his book? Alas, his words seemed instead to imply that those who protested the Vietnam War answered a higher call than we veterans did. This is simply a false premise, and inconsistent with Mr. Brokaw’s obviously clear understanding of the motivation of those World War II Americans he profiled so poignantly in writing.

In reply to my letter, I received only a form card from Brokaw's NBC office, on which was printed an expression of thanks for having read his book. How thorough and reassuring.

In the same vein, President Jimmy Carter many years earlier issued a comprehensive and unprecedented pardon of Americans who refused to serve in the military.

The aforementioned James Webb described the pardon for what it was. "Mr. Carter's gesture," he has written in a letter to the editor of *The Wall Street Journal* published on February 23, 2001, "had the symbolic effect of elevating everyone who had opposed the Vietnam War to the level of moral purist, and by implication insulting those who often had struggled just as deeply with the moral dimensions of the war and had decided, often at great sacrifice, to honor the laws of their country and serve."

I have visited The Wall four times, most recently in April of this year, and I will do so again.

One friend, who has taken his family to it, has told me that he found it to be "a somber place where people did not converse." He said that, even at President Kennedy's grave in Arlington National Cemetery, across the Potomac River from The Wall, folks at least engaged in conversation.

Upon reflection, I believe that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial evokes human feelings that one may not experience elsewhere, even at the grave of a loved one. Faced with the more than 58,000 names cut in stone, which represent all those killed or missing in action, the visitor is inevitably struck by the magnitude of the loss. Then, based on my own experience there, a sense of the spiritual overtakes even the most worldly person, followed by reverence and solemnity, perhaps even, as in my case, tears.

I consulted the directory of those whose names are forever etched into The Wall. It resembles a telephone book, with all the names listed alphabetically with place of birth, service, rank, date missing or killed and other information. It was also as thick as the telephone directory of a major city.

Finding in the directory the names of those Marines I knew who had made the ultimate sacrifice, I then located the panel and the line on The Wall where each of their names appeared. There were the names of Norm Billipp, a Marine pilot, Guido Farinaro,

Steve Karopczyc, Bob Kisch, Dick Morin, Billy Ryan, Tim Shorten and, yes, Bill Surette, among others. I touched each name, moving my fingers across it, feeling each letter, remembering each man, visualizing his face, wishing I could be with him, as sadness and grief engulfed me.

There too is the name of Lance Corporal Michael Alberici, USMC, a friend and classmate of my brother Mike, who was killed in action on August 24, 1968. I also found the names of seven other men I did not know, all Mansfields, and I salute them by recording their names here:

Technical Sergeant Bruce Elwin Mansfield, USAF (East Providence, RI)  
Captain Clayton John Mansfield, USA (Fort Bliss, TX)  
Private First Class Donald Lewis Mansfield, USMC (Rockland, ME)  
Lance Corporal John Michael Mansfield, USMC (Preston, CT)  
Private First Class John Montagu Mansfield, USA (New York City)  
Corporal Patrick Leroy Mansfield, USA (Tucson, AZ)  
Specialist Fourth Class William Granvil Mansfield, USA (Massapequa Park, NY)

*Requiescant in pace.*



I have visited, with Mame and the kids, the World War II Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer, France. It is situated on a cliff overlooking Omaha Beach and the English Channel. (The cemetery is American territory, having been ceded to the United States in a gesture of international gratitude for Americans' role in liberating France from Nazi occupation.) In this hallowed place are buried 9,386 American military dead, most of whom were killed during the D-Day landings and the ensuing operations of World War II. Their graves are starkly marked by marble crosses or Stars of David. The feeling that washes over a person on first seeing these monuments, row on row, is of the same silent solemnity and reverence he or she feels at The Wall.

In a more recent comparison, the feelings one experiences at The Wall are akin to those felt at the ruins of the former World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. The Wall, however, is a magnificent monument; "Ground Zero," as many now call it, is at this

writing, in many ways, nothingness, albeit hallowed ground, like Normandy or The Wall. In another comparison, the number of names on The Wall dwarfs the number of lives lost at Ground Zero by a factor of almost twenty but, then, of course, Vietnam was a war, not a day at the office.

For those of you who have not visited The Wall, go there when you can. For those of you who have, I am confident that you were moved by its silent black granite beauty and that you will go there again some time, as I have gone. Appropriately, it is a place of reverence and peace, and honors those thousands who died too young.

*If you are able, save for them a place inside of you and save one backward glance when you are leaving for the places they can no longer go.*

*Be not ashamed to say you loved them, though you may or may not have always.  
Take what they have taught you with their dying and keep it with your own.*

*And in that time when men decide and feel safe to call the war insane,  
take one moment to embrace those gentle heroes you left behind.*

- Major Michael Davis O'Donnell,  
USA, a helicopter pilot  
Killed in Action  
March 24, 1970  
Dak To, Vietnam

