



Newsletter of "The Professionals"
Vietnam Veterans of 2nd Battalion 1st Marines

www.FirstMarines.org



Volume 6 Issue 1

February 2009

Officers & Trustees



Message from the President

Brothers, Family and Friends of 2/1

This President's message is a Big Thank You to everyone involved in making this year's reunion another memorable meeting of our 2/1 family and a heads up on this year's gathering in Washington DC – 7-11 November, 2009.

A big HOO RAH to LtCol Paul Nugent, 2/1 Bn Commander and his senior staff and all the active Marines of 2/1 who, although deployed to the Mojave Desert for a month's long multi-national training exercise, held firm on a commitment to welcome our presence at 2/1's Battalion HQ, and to participate in our Battle Flag Ceremony. They proved again, why the term 'The Professionals' applies to 2/1.

A BIG thank you Tom Lang, (CO Fox '68) and his bride Linda for hosting us at their beautiful home for a tasty BBQ and an afternoon of camaraderie. Thanks again to Tom for having BG Angela Salinas, Commanding General, Marine Recruiting Western Region, and Commanding General of MCRD San Diego whose motivational comments were a special addition that capped off a great day.

And a BIG thank you General Salinas, whose inspiring and straightforward comments about today's Marine recruits gave all of us a boost of enthusiasm and even had some asking where they can go to 're-up'.

We were extremely fortunate to have as our honored guest and speaker, Major General James J. McMonagle, (USMC Retired). As a former Commanding General of the First Marine Division his on point speech added significant value to the Battle Flag ceremony dedicating our new Battalion Flag and Battle Streamers. Thank you, General for honoring us with your inspiring words.

*During the post Reunion Trustees' meeting the Board unanimously voted to bestow Honorary Membership in the Vietnam Veterans of the Second Battalion First Marines to Major General McMonagle and his Lady Carol. Welcome Aboard!

And last, but definitely not least, a special thanks to every one of the attendees for jumping right in to help whenever things needed to be done, whether it was field day at the end of the evenings or being available to provide transportation to those who needed it.

(Continued on Page 2)

President

Paul Mangan
NamGrunt@aol.com

Vice President

Phil Leslie
pdleslie@mindspring.com

Secretary

Ben Dickson
GruntLt69@aol.com

Treasurer

Mario Sagastume
choncho0331@sbcglobal.net

Trustees

Doc John Weed
EchoDoc21@GMail.com

Phil Odom
podom21@comcast.net

Mike Valdez
mvaldez@windstream.net

Ron Sampson
rsam47@optonline.net

Vin Burdziuk
Vin@1stMarines.org

Webmaster

Vinnie Burdziuk
Vin@1stMarines.org

Message from the President Continued

And all the examples of being there not only to enjoy the brotherhood, but being a part of what helps make successful reunions happen, thank you all. One additional thank you goes to the growing 2/1 spouses and family members participating in our time together and helping us all enjoy the friendship and brotherhood that defines us as 2/1. Thank you all.

To the officers and trustees, your dedication to what is in the best interest of our 2/1 Brothers, Families and Friends has brought us a long way in the past few years and will prove to have helped guide the Vietnam Vets of 2/1 in ways that will be felt for years to come.

Reunion 2009

Mark your calendars now and get ready for a big reunion in Washington DC this November 7 – 11. We will again be staying at the Holiday Inn Rosslyn/Key Bridge in Arlington, VA. Call 888-465-4329, our reservation code is MRN and the room rate is \$89.00 single or double occupancy. See more details on back page.

Your reunion organizing team – lead by Mike Valdez is working hard to get some special events planned, including a trip to the National Museum of the Marine Corps, in Quantico, VA. More announcements will be posted to the website and in a future Newsletter or News-card.

Reunion 2010

After looking at several great locations, including Nashville, TN – Branson, MO – Evansville, IN and others, the two city locations we are down to are; Memphis, TN and San Antonio, TX. More details on our progress and final decision will be in our future mailings and postings to the website.

Semper Fidelis, Paul Mangan, President 2nd Bn 1st Marines, Foxtrot '65-'66



Corporate or Individual Sponsorship

In order to help pay for some of the expenses incurred by our organization we will be looking for sponsors.

Corporate Sponsors \$250.00

(Business Card Size Advertisement in our Newsletter plus an Acknowledgement on our Website for one year.

Individual Sponsor \$100.00

(Business Card Size Message or Advertisement in our Newsletter)

Memorial for Member \$25.00

2/1 Corporate Sponsor

John A. Barrasso

Southington, CT

JABarrasso@aol.com

Fiscal Year - Financial Statement 9-30-08 Mario Sagastume - Treasurer

INCOME STATEMENT

10/01/07-09/30/08

Sales-PX	\$	6,097.25	
Donations-Unrestricted		12,740.15	
Contributions-Non Members		2,500.00	
Total Revenues	\$	21,337.40	
Total Expenses & Cost of PX Sales	\$	19,111.91	
Net Income	\$	2,225.49	

BALANCE SHEET AS OF SEPTEMBER 30, 2008ASSETS

Current Assets			
Petty Cash	\$	56.45	
Regular Checking Account		23,973.57	
Inventory-PX		7,446.80	
Total Current Assets			31,476.82
Other Assets - 2008 Reunion Deposit			500.00
Total Assets			31,976.82
<u>LIABILITIES AND CAPITAL</u>			
Current Liabilities			
Other Current Liabilities - 1st Mar Div	\$	860.00	
Designated Gifts Colors & Streamers		3,320.00	
Total Current Liabilities			4,180.00
Deferred Revenue - Prepaid banquets		1,325.00	
Total Long-Term Liabilities			1,325.00
Total Liabilities			5,505.00
Capital			
Retained Earnings		19,241.01	
Net Income		7,230.81	
Total Capital			26,471.82
Total Liabilities & Capital			\$ 31,976.82

Can Anyone Help ?

Received an e-mail from former L/CPL Kevin Sadais (Somalia Vet) requesting information on PFC John Thomas Nowak, KIA: 3/16/70, Wall Panel 12W, Row 007. He believes John served with Hotel 2/1 at the time but is not sure.

Please Contact Kevin if you can be of help.

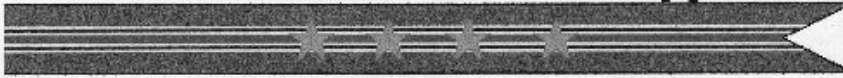
Kevin Sadaj - USMC 89-93 **KSadaj@bcbsm.com**

2nd Bn 1st Marines Battle Streamers for Vietnam Service

Presidential Unit Citation [3]*



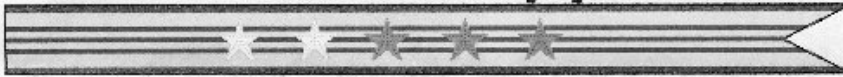
Meritorious Unit Commendation [1]*



National Defense Service [1]*



Vietnam Service [13]*



Vietnam Cross of Gallantry w/ Palm



Vietnam Meritorious Unit Civil Action w/ Palm



The Battle Streamer represents the initial or first award.

A Bronze Star represents a subsequent award.

A Silver Star represents every 5th award.

The Silver and Bronze Stars depicted above represent 'ALL' Battle Streamer Awards for the streamers shown awarded to 2nd Battalion 1st Marines since it's reactivation on March 1, 1941.

The numbers []* shown above represent the awards from Vietnam Service.



New Memberships & Contributions

Please return this form along with your Tax Deductible "Contribution" of \$15.00 : \$25.00 : \$50.00 : \$75.00 : \$100.00 : Other

Payable to: Vietnam Vets of 2nd Bn 1st Marines : And Mail to:

Mario Sagastume : Treasurer
778 Silverado Estates Ct, Chico, CA 95973

Name:

Address:

City/Town

State:

Zip:

Phone:

Cellphone:

eMail:

Is this a New Membership?

Do you wish to receive our Newsletter?

- Year(s) of service in Vietnam: _____ to _____ Nickname if used: _____
- Organization name (i.e. Golf, Foxtrot, etc.): _____ Rank: _____ MOS: _____
- Yes! I wish to support 2/1 and enclosed is my Contribution in the amount of: _____

Your donation is Tax Exempt under 501 (c) 3 - Non Profit.

Donations & Memberships

Initially, members of the Vietnam Veterans 2nd Battalion 1st Marines [V V 2/1] were classified as 'active' or 'inactive' which was determined on an annual basis. Those who paid dues were classified as active and received the newsletter(s); those that did not were classified as 'inactive' and received only an annual notice for the payment of dues.

However, it was noted by the Officers / Trustees that while approximately 15% of the members contributed, V V 2/1 was able to continue with upgraded newsletters and especially, the web site. Some could ill afford the to pay the \$15 while others donated up to several hundred dollars. So it was decided to eliminate the two – tier membership requirement. From the very fortunate or wealthy to those who are homeless or are in state and federal prisons.

During 2006 the Officers / Trustees proposed a change to the By Laws to eliminate the two tier level of membership. The membership voted and it was done. Gone are the 'active' and 'inactive' designations. Now all hands are members for life and everyone on the membership list is sent all publications and notices. Additionally, the requirement for annual dues was eliminated in favor of voluntary contributions from members. We realize that some Brothers are not able to contribute even a dime while others may contribute \$5, \$10, \$50, \$100, or even \$500. However, we believe that V V 2/1 is a Brotherhood and no one, regardless of circumstances, fortunate or unfortunate, is left out.

Please consider making a contribution no matter how small. And, If you are able to do so, follow the instructions below for USPS mail or credit card. All donations are confidential and are known only to the treasurer who has to record it in compliance with US IRS rules and regulations.

Donations to V V 2/1 are tax deductible contributions. All donations are used solely for printing and postage; help offset shipping PX orders, as well as reunion facility fees and charges. None of the funds go to pay for or reimburse any personal expenses of the officers or trustees or any other member. Officers and Trustees pay for their own travel, lodging, meal or related expenses to the reunion and/or mid-year meeting.

Please be aware that in compliance with federal law, all property and proceeds of V V 2/1 is irrevocably dedicated to charitable or organizational purposes and no part of the net income or assets shall ever be to or for the benefit of any director, officer, or member thereof, or to the benefit of any private individual.

Make Donation Payable to:
Vietnam Vets of 2nd Bn 1st Marines

Mail to:
Mario Sagastume, Treasurer
778 Silverado Estates Ct.
Chico, CA 95973

Or donate by credit card from our PX Page using Pay-Pay:
<http://libertyyes.homestead.com/px.html>

Harvest Moon Info Needed

Thomas Miller is still working on the details of Operation Harvest Moon. If you were on that Operation and can contribute any information please send it to Tom.

Include: Your rank at the time, name, home state, unit and MOS.

Send it by email to:

tfmillerini@verizon.net

See Tom's site at:
<http://www.9-11art.com>

Lt Lee Suydam Echo 67-68

1st Lt Suydam has posted his pictures on our Website. Check them out at:

www.2ndbn1stmarines.org/Lee-Suydam/Lee-Suydam1.htm

Or from our homepage click on: 2/1s Companys Purple Heart Ribbon.

Visit Our PX

Support our Organization by visiting and shopping our PX. If you haven't seen all the quality merchandise we offer to our membership, family and friends go to:

www.FirstMarines.org

and on the left side of our homepage click on the blue "Shop Our PX" button...

2 Pin Special from Our PX



\$6.00 Includes Shipping & Handling

<http://libertyyes.homestead.com/px.html>

**MINUTES OF THE 2008 MEMBERS MEETING
VIETNAM VETERANS OF 2/1**

Ben Dickson, Secretary

The meeting was called to order at 0830 by President Paul Mangan.

A call was made for any special introductions and a welcome was given to all the new and first time attendees. Four new brothers were present.

Minutes of the 2007 Members Meeting

The secretary Ben Dickson was introduced and the minutes of the 2007 Members Meeting were read. There was no discussion; a motion was made to accept the minutes. A second was recorded, a voice vote was taken and the minutes were approved as read.

Treasurers Report

Mario Sagastume was introduced as Treasurer. He began by saying that the organization was in good shape financially. From Nov. 2007 to Nov. 2008 sales totaled \$6007.25. Raffle revenues collected were \$4064.00. Donations for member for the year totaled \$ 3200.00, with non-members donating another \$2500.00, Revenues minus expenses leave us with the total net of 22,000.00 for the year.

Mario reminded those present that the financials are available for anyone who desires a copy. The leadership team will always maintain a transparent accounting of the expenses of the organization.

At last year's meeting it was discussed that we invest some of our money to generate income for the organization. Due to the volatile situation in the markets this year it was decided that now is not a good time to explore this option.

Mario called for any of the members who have expertise in this area to contact him to discuss what help could be directed toward this end.

A motion was made to accept this report, and after no further discussion, a second was given and a voice vote taken to accept the report. The motion passed by voice vote.

Communications Report

Vin Burdziuk was introduced as the head of the communications committee and Webmaster for the 2/1 website.

Vinnie stated there are many new items on the website, it is constantly being changed and updated, and it has been extremely successful in terms of the number of visits, or "hits" occurring on a daily basis. All of the 2/1 Updates that Vinnie publishes are posted to the site. An ongoing project to post the 2/1 book "We Remember I" is being put into PDF format to be available for downloading at a later date. The average number of hits per day is 66, approximately 1980/month, with the average length of time on the site at 40 minutes.

Phil Leslie has been updating our Wall of Honor with new and improved search parameters making easier searches by category. It is hoped to enhance the ability to research KIA/MIA's along with other details. It will eventually be posted to the website when it is up and running.

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MINUTES OF THE 2008 MEMBERS MEETING <> Continued from Page 6

The unit awards and history of the unit are constantly being added with stories, recollections, and interviews. It continues to be a work in progress. We have obtained our battle streamers and battle flag which will be dedicated at the banquet. We also have all of the other streamers from 1941 to 1965 to add to the colors. All brothers are encouraged to present articles, information, and stories to Vinnie so that our website remains vibrant and lively with new material for people to see and read. Several brothers praised the efforts focused on finding old friends, locating new members and reconnecting with brothers that have not been with us for a while.

Presidents Report

We have obtained the 2/1 battle flag and streamers. Paul discussed how this came about and gave thanks to all who helped make it possible. A discussion of the standards, flag and pole revealed that all of the details are correct and in accordance with the regulations of the USMC and USN. We should all be very proud of the team effort to make this happen.

A mid-year meeting will be scheduled in the April/May time frame at Myrtle Beach for the leadership team of officers and trustees to plan, coordinate, and implement the goals and objectives of the organization and its members. Paul stated that the team is all volunteer, attendees pay their own expenses and donate their time for the brothers to make the reunions and all other aspects of the group first rate.

The banquet will be this evening. There will not be souvenir glasses available due to an ordering problem. Our rates have been adjusted accordingly. All attendees will receive a set of US and USMC flags for their desktop. The glasses will be reordered but without the 233rd birthday on them.

Paul discussed the growing Legend of the date of the USMC birthday and what day it is on. LOL.

Several brothers made comments of their thanks for being here and how we need to help one another, especially those who don't get around so well.

The length of terms Trustees serve was discussed by Paul, the nomination of the 3 vacancies and their terms were opened to replace the vacancies of Ron Bates, Gene Csuti, and Don Oglesby.

Trustee Elected as follows;

Vin Burdziuk- nominated by Joe Mazzariello. Seconded by Tom Campbell. Passed by voice vote

Mike Valdez- nominated by Paul Mangan. Seconded by Jack Leniger. Passed by voice vote

Doc Ellis -declined <> Ken Shaffer-declined

Doc Weed- nominated by Doc Adams. Seconded by many. Passed by voice vote

Paul next discussed the 2010 reunion and recommendations. Paul continually is in negotiations with venues for prices, and the best business deals. Sites that were discussed:

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MINUTES OF THE 2008 MEMBERS MEETING <> Continued from Page 7

Branson, Mo. - some research on this site has been done. It was brought out that it is a tough place to get to. There is a lack of rental cars and flights. Those who have been there said it is a great site but it is very hilly and tough to get about. This would make it very difficult for a lot of our brothers who have challenges. They may be getting a new airport in the future and addressing some of the concerns so it was decided to table the site for later consideration.

Nashville, Tn.- some research had also been done on this site. It was said to have good venues and the prices were not too bad. This and Memphis will be looked at by the President and the reunion committee for consideration.

Old Business

The by-laws have been changed to reflect the changes requested at the 2007 members meeting. Copies are available to all who desire them. They can be emailed to you or sent by USM.

Vinnie will scan the "We Remember I" book. It will be put on disc by the end of February - March 2009.

We would like a volunteer from each state to act as a rep. The job would entail getting email addresses from the roster and trying to contact old and new members to enhance the membership numbers. A discussion followed about HIPPA issues, identity theft issues, and privacy issues. Mario talked about how the leadership team has addressed this and the resolutions that have been implemented. There has been a very positive response from the brothers and no information is given or released without consent of the member.

Gary Gordon discussed the new guy committee and his defacto chairmanship with Ron's departure. He has been doing an excellent job and has a team already lined up for the year to work on goals that apply to new members and first time attendees.

His team consists of: Larry Wilson <> Juan Herta <> Larry White <> Doc Shaffer

A hearty thanks from the President to all those who volunteer and step up to help.

New Business

Doc Adams gave a very good talk about the Midwest Shelter for Homeless Vets and the work he is doing and what has taken place with that. He thanks the brothers for their support of this great cause and said that they now provide for women vets also which has been sorely lacking in the resources available to them. He asks for anyone to please look for corporate sponsors. A motion was made to donate \$500.00 to the shelter and it passed by voice vote.

Announcements

The breakout session with the vets from 1st Tanks will be at 1430. It should be very good and all of the KheSahn vets may want to attend. These guys were there to pull our asses out on 19 May 68.

There will be shuttle to banquet leaving at 1700 <> Those in the flag ceremony are asked to see Phil L.

Someone requested that we post a listing of service officers for different organizations so the brothers could contact them for help. <> A motion was made to adjourn at 0945. A second was heard and the President asked for a voice vote and all said aye. **Meeting Adjourned.**

Reunion Chairman's Report

Mike Valdez H&S '65-'66

As a new Trustee and Chairman of the Reunion committee I would like to start by saying how much I appreciate the confidence you as members of 2/1 have shown in me by nominating me for the trustee position in the Vietnam Veterans of Second Bn. First Marines. I will do my best to fulfill the duties assigned to me. For those of you who do not know me I will give you a short background.

I served in the USMC from August of 1964 through August of 1967. After completing my training I was assigned to Second Bn. First Marines in January of 1965. I remained with 2/1 throughout the initial deployment until the completion of my tour of duty in August of 1966. During this 18 month period I was assigned to the Communications Platoon of H&S Company.

During this period I participated in Operations Dagger Thrust, Harvest Moon, Jay, Beaver and Hastings. After discharge from the Marine Corp I returned to my hometown of Houston, Texas and attended college for two years. I joined the Houston Police Department where I served for 36 ½ years until my retirement in December of 2005.

My first assignment as a trustee is to assist in the organization of the next two reunions. Our association President has asked me to come up with some ideas to improve the Hospitality Suite and other activities. At the present time, I have two members, Jack Leniger, G Company, 65-66 and Randy Laverne, H Company, 66-67 who have agreed to help with this assignment.

We would like to recruit an additional 12 to 15 members to be a part of a committee, but will take as many of you that are willing to lend a hand. If you are interested in helping us out, please call me at 713-822-1165 or email me at mvaldez@windstream.net. Please remember that both the Hospitality Room and the PX serve a very important role in bringing our 2/1 family together.

Semper Fi, Mike Valdez



Ghost Battalion

By Phil Leslie

Somewhere in the folklore or foggy memories of many of the Vietnam Vets of 2/1, is the term, "Ghost Battalion". The first time I heard it was from my platoon radio man while we were operating in and around Khe Sanh in May 1968. He began with time honored Marine intro, '...you ain't gonna' believe this sh*t, but Hanoi Hannah said 2/1 was a ghost battalion..."

I never gave it much thought until I was preparing for the recent Oceanside Reunion and came across an early 1990's announcement from Doc David Johnson for a gathering of 2/1 veterans. Doc's flyer had a 1stMarDiv blue diamond patch inscribed with "2/1 Ghost Battalion Viet Nam". Being curious, I checked with several V V 2/1 members if they had ever heard the term. Several answered saying they had heard it, but had no idea of where it came from. Some speculated it was when one of the company's was hit hard but reappeared soon afterward.

John Hamilton, [Bn / Regt Tactical Comm] for at least 5 Bn / Regt CO's writes that he became aware of the term in 1966 when he was told that "Hanoi Hanna" had used the term when referring to 2/1 after Operation Hastings. John said that he was an avid listener to "Hanoi Hanna" and says it was quite eerie how often she was correct on 2/1's whereabouts and where our next operating area would be. And, according to Bob Hughes, Gen Chuck Krulak told him that he, Krulak, had never heard of 2/1 being called Ghost Battalion and that The Marine Corps Historical Branch has no record of any Marine Battalion being called Ghost Battalion.

However, while at the 2008 reunion in Oceanside, Col Bill Duncan, [Texas Pete] provided the following. The battalion had been chasing the remnants of NVA forces who had ambushed the Khe Sanh MSR road sweep on May 19, 1968. After several days, the battalion was moving in a wide column formation under cover of darkness across Hill 881. Fox [Tom Lang] was lead and Golf [Clyde Woods] was tail end Charlie with Golf 3 [Phil Leslie] bringing up the rear. Heavy artillery support, many changes of direction, and silence concealed the movement. After completing our movement, the NVA Commander informed his HQ Command that 2/1 had vanished and was no longer in his sector of action. The intercepted NVA message traffic contained a reference to a ghost battalion, a battalion that was not there. As a result of losing 2/1, the NVA commander was relieved of his command.

Clyde Woods [Golf Co] said he recalls Col Duncan telling the company commanders and his staff about the translation of the intercepted radio traffic that referred to a "Ghost Battalion". Tom Lang [Fox Co] says he specifically recalls Col Duncan telling the Company CO's that the battalion's movement thoroughly confused the NVA and that they were jawing all night long and into the next day about where in the hell 2/1 was located.

Thus, is my belief that "Ghost Battalion" is a unique Marine Corps legend that will be attributed to 2nd Battalion 1st Marines.

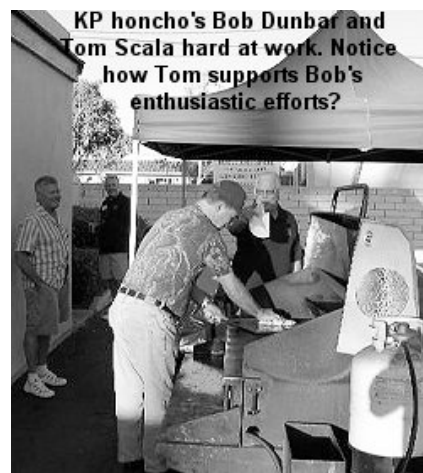
If you have knowledge of this or would like to comment, write to:

Phil Leslie

2209 Cushendun Ln

Garner NC 27529

Or eMail at: pdleslie@mindspring.com



KP honcho's Bob Dunbar and Tom Scala hard at work. Notice how Tom supports Bob's enthusiastic efforts?



Scuttlebutt by John Weed

I was a Corpsman with Echo Company 2/1 from 11/66-11/67. After my service I became a Physician Assistant (P.A.) and worked for over 28 years at the Dallas VA Medical Center until I retired 10/2005. My entire career was on the Mental Health Service with the last 18+ years serving as a Counselor on our Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Out-Patient Clinical Team. The comments/views I'll be sharing are my own and not those of our 2/1 Association. Today my thoughts are focused on the VA and our relationship with the VA.

In Vietnam you were not alone and you or your squad/platoon leader attended briefings that prepared you for that patrol or Operation. In dealing with the VA it feels like you are alone. So what can be done to improve your chances of success. First obtain your military records (admin and medical). This can be done online at: <http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel> but be aware they may not actually send complete copies of your admin and medical records in your 201 file. I had to drive to St. Louis and spend a couple of days there before I got mine and then discovered they had sent some of the originals to the VA's Regional Office into my Claims File years earlier. I was able to drive to the VA Regional Office and obtain copies from them. Obtain copies of all medical records from the VA Medical site you are using by an in person request from the Medical Records Department. Obtain records if possible from any and all private medical providers. Visit our web site: <http://www.firstmarines.org> and follow the link titled "Command Chronology" for your unit/time period to learn if there are records there which will help any claim. Second spend time on: <http://www.va.gov> examine info on filing claims and the links to resource info on things like PTSD/Agent Orange. Third rather than file online use a Veteran Service Officer (VSO). There are Vet Reps at VA's who are VSO's as well as State or County Service Officers and VSO from Organizations like Military Order of the Purple Heart, VFW, Paralyzed Vets of America etc. You do not have to be a member of the Organization to have them represent you. All VSO's are busy and effectiveness varies from one part of the Country to another. Talk to vets in VA Medical Centers or local VFW or American Legion Posts or find a local Marine Corps League Detachment (from: <http://www.mcleague.com/mdp>) as to which VSO's seem to be the most effective in your area. The local VSO may also be able to direct you to local private medical providers for clinical visits which will establish diagnoses and/or treatments which may help your claim. Fourth always send copies of information in to the VA **never** send your only copy. Also stay informed on old and new veteran/VA/Government issues. One helpful email newsletter is: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/VeteranIssues/join> as well as through military.com and other web sites.

Barriers to filing Service Connected claims start first with the fact you are a Former Marine and not "Sickbay Charlie's" and our own "mindset" gets in the way. So many times I have heard: "others need it more than me"; "I was an NCO or Officer and I enlisted and was doing what I expected..." and, "I don't like the process cause it makes me feel like they are calling me a liar...". Those mindsets have to be confronted because the benefits are **NOT** welfare but rather benefits to help for service rendered (your fee has already been paid in full)!

Attending 2/1's Reunions while initially difficult to start and maintain can be extremely helpful in networking; finding people (whether they served with you or other times/units) who know the ropes and having time to elaborate on many important issues which time and space won't allow in articles like this one. If you have ideas for future articles by me feel free to contact me at: docweed6667@hotmail.com as well as if you have a question about something in this article.

If you do email me start a subject line with "2/1 Marine" I'll get to those sooner.

He Didn't Make it Home

Edited Article

VIETNAM: Lance Cpl. Theothis Collins of Neptune remains MIA 40 years later
By Charles Webster <> STAFF WRITER <> September 19, 2008

He died on a savagely hot August day in Vietnam.

The consensus is that 18-year-old Marine Lance Cpl. Theothis Collins of Neptune was killed in 1968 in a hostile landing zone inside the demilitarized zone after an explosion rocked an already tense mission.

Some people contend the blast was an artillery shell. Others think maybe it was a mortar. The official records state it was a land mine.

But one thing is for certain: Collins continues to be unaccounted for more than 40 years after he was last seen running to the rescue of the crew of a downed Marine helicopter.

His Marine buddies say Collins, highly decorated posthumously, brought along that same come-to-your-rescue verve to his time in war-torn Vietnam — a mentality that eventually led to his death when he was just 18 years old.

"He had a total disregard for his own safety. He just got up and started running toward the helicopter," said John Kociemba, a Marine who served with Collins

There was no funeral, but Collins' family and friends did mourn his loss at a memorial service. There is no grave to pay respects, but his name is etched in the granite walls of the Vietnam memorials in Washington, D.C., and Holmdel, where observances are held for the national POW/MIA Recognition Day.



Eyewitnesses say they are certain that Theothis Collins (shown in his 1967 Asbury Park High School year book picture) gave his life for his country amid the chaos of an attack by an unseen enemy.

Two weeks after Collins was listed as missing, military officials changed his status to dead, body not recovered. Because there has been no physical accounting for his whereabouts, he was put on the list of missing in action from Vietnam. His name remains there today.

In June 1992, investigators from the U.S. Department of Defense Joint Task Force for Full Accounting turned over files pertaining to Collins and others listed as missing to Vietnamese officials for their review.

In 1993, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command was notified that two local Vietnamese wanted to turn over items associated with the landing zone where Collins and Cpl. Terry Hoffman were lost. In 1994, the men turned over several items, including Hoffman's dog tag and bone fragments that contained his DNA. Hoffman was identified and returned to his family in Indiana for burial about a year later.

Pentagon officials say there is little information on Collins' case because of the nature of the incident. His remains are considered unrecoverable, so there have been no other investigations, but his case is not closed.

"This case isn't resolved because (Theothis Collins) never came back," said Capt. Mary Olsen, public affairs staff officer at The Pentagon's Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office.



From left, Theothis "Rap" Collins, "Doc" Limey and Pat Moriarty on a break inside a coffee-tree plantation during a patrol outside the Khe Sahn combat base in June 1968.

(PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL A. PIPKIN)

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Theothis Collins died on Aug. 19, 1968. Eyewitnesses say it is an assumed fact, because there is no clear picture of what happened that day. It all depends on who you ask and the perspective they had of the fighting that day.

But eyewitnesses say they are certain of one thing — Collins, whom his fellow Marines affectionately called "Rap," gave his life for his country amid the chaos of an attack by an unseen enemy.

The day started out like so many others in the DMZ. After calling off a mission to search for suspected North Vietnamese helicopters, the men of Foxtrot Company 2/1 Marines were charged with securing a landing zone to give nearly two dozen helicopters a place to come pick up the bulk of their battalion.

"It was a hellaciously hot day," recalled Michael A. "Doc" Pipkin of Snohomish, Wash., a Navy hospital corpsman assigned to Collins' third platoon. "It was just an effort to take a step, it was so hot. You just baked in the sun."

The Marines were tired from their constant movement since they had been inserted into the area by helicopters the previous morning. Now it was time to get out, and get back to base camp.

The routine plan was to simply set up a perimeter security defense around the landing zone to keep an eye out for "Charlie" — the enemy. But things quickly turned from routine to chaos before the first helicopter set down.



Pernella Collins, mother of Lance Cpl. Theothis Collins, is shown in this 1968 file photo receiving the Purple Heart for her son, who is still listed as MIA in Vietnam.

The lead helicopter, piloted by Maj. Harvey Britt of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262 (HMM-262) was the first aircraft to attempt a landing. Britt's and two other helicopters approached the landing zone, located on a ridge that overlooked the Ben Hai River, from about 100 feet in the air hoping to avoid drawing the attention of North Vietnamese Army artillery units on the North Vietnam side of the river.

Britt started to lower his CH-46 "Sea Knight" helicopter onto the landing zone when the first of three rapid explosions rocked the area.

"We weren't sure if it was incoming mortars, or rockets — we didn't know what was going on," recalled John Kociemba of Wood River, Neb., a corporal in charge of the Weapons Platoon for Foxtrot Company 2/1 Marines. Kociemba and his weapons platoon machine gunners were on the ground and on the perimeter when the choppers started coming in and the first blast went off. The platoon stood its ground as the primary element in the perimeter security with a clear view of all that was going on around them.

"It was just a strange type of explosion," Kociemba recalled.

Pipkin was on a different part of the LZ sitting alongside Foxtrot Company's commanding officer, 1st. Lt. Thomas P. Lang, Jr., when the first explosion went off.

"I never heard a sound. You hear artillery shells coming in, and I never heard anything that sounded like artillery at that time," Pipkin said.

Kociemba believes the first explosion that took out Britt's helicopter came from somewhere on the ground — perhaps a land mine, but it could have been artillery or a delayed-action device. The helicopter's rear rotor stalled and the aircraft hit the ground. No one on board was seriously injured.

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A second helicopter piloted by Capt. "Rocky" Darger was hovering off to one side of the downed chopper when it took a direct hit from what is believed to have been an artillery shell. The helicopter exploded, broke into two pieces and the cabin containing three crewmen was consumed by fire. When the front part of the helicopter hit the ground, Darger and co-pilot 1st Lt. Ken Bradley were ejected from the cockpit. Both men quickly made their way to a nearby tree line in search of cover.

Three men inside, crew chief Hoffman and gunners Cpl. John Hutchison and Cpl. Patrick Miles, were killed.

Immediately after the first helicopter carrying Britt hit the ground, a call for help went out among the Marines inside the perimeter of the LZ. "Rap" Collins just reacted, his fellow Marines recall.

"The helicopter fell to the landing zone burning and a call for help to remove the wounded came out," Pfc. David "Rodger" Morris recalled in a statement about the incident. "Collins was the first to leave his position and start toward the downed helicopter."

"While we were running, (Collins) fell, and as he did so, I passed him, there was then a man in front of me and Lance Cpl. Collins in back of me," Morris stated. "We were about 50 meters from the chopper when the third explosion went off. . . . After the dust and rocks had stopped, the other men and I looked back to where Lance Cpl. Collins had been running — that was where the mine went off."

"I was approximately five meters behind Lance Cpl. Collins when an explosion occurred beneath him. After the explosion, my vision was curtailed because of the flying dirt and debris. I staggered away, half-dazed, but returned through the area of the explosion approximately five minutes later. At the time, I observed a large crater caused by the explosion, however Lance Cpl. Collins was nowhere in sight," explained Cpl. Michael P. Wargo in a similar statement.

He was just a few yards away from the helicopter when he essentially disappeared. Several members of his unit were near him and reported that only a large crater existed where he had been seen seconds before.

Collins never made it back home. He was awarded the Bronze Star, the Navy Commendation Medal and the Purple Heart posthumously. His mother, Pernella Collins, who has since died, accepted them.

"It's one of those things that has haunted me. I didn't hear any artillery, but I heard the boom, boom, boom and that was it," Pipkin lamented. "We like to bring them all back, but unfortunately that didn't happen in Rap's case."

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Looking for Help

My name is Tom Nash. I was a LRRP with the Army's 196th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam, 66-67. I am writing to you as I need some help with a request, and I saw all of your email addresses on your website.

I am writing on behalf of a friend. Recently, she purchased a DVD copy of the PBS production of "**American Experience: Vietnam: A Television History.**" While watching the show for the first time, the name of a relative (KIA) was mentioned. His name was Lt Brian O'Connor. He was with 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines when he was killed. The production showed an interview with LT O'Connor's Co - a guy named CPT Edward Banks, as well as a young grunt named PVT Jack Hill. LT O'Connor was the brother-in-law of my friend. My friend was there when the notice that the LT had been killed was delivered to the family so many years ago. To this day, no one in the family ever got a real picture of what happened to LT O'Connor; nor have they ever heard from anyone who knew LT O'Connor. **I like to put CPT Banks or PVT Hill, or anyone who knew LT O'Connor, in touch with the family.** I have already put a note on your message board. Can any of you help me further my search? Your help would be appreciated.

Rangers Lead the Way and Semper Fi, Tom Nash <> LRRP196@hotmail.com



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