

LAST RIDE HOME

A MEMOIR OF THE VIETNAM WAR



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DEDICATED TO MY WIFE, KATHARINA

With all my love and devotion

I couldn't decide whether to dedicate the book, or not. In the final analysis, the only persons I could dedicate it to would have to be my wife, Katharina, and to my children. As for my wife, she is the single most important driving force behind me. As far as the children, of course, they are precious simply because they are who they are and I leave this to them as a legacy.

My wife always pushes me over the finish line, or cheers me on when I need to be picked up. She pushed me to finish this project. I had always talked writing a book, but never seemed to get started, but she changed all that, and I did finish.

She is my motivator, best friend, and manager of my occasional laziness, and she is a wonderful person just to know, and she is fun to hang out with. She has been a great mother to our two children, Chris and Jenny, although I may be biased, I happen to believe she is the best wife in the world!

A simple thank you, Henny [my pet name for her, which she hates] comes from my heart. This book is yours as much as it is mine. I am grateful for knowing you and thankful that you

married me and helped me with our hardships in life all these years. Thank you for being there when I needed you.

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PREFACE

The Manchester and Other Influences

The works of William Manchester are world-renowned. His best selling novel for example, "*Goodbye, Darkness - A Memoir of the Pacific War*" is a compelling story about his tour of duty in the Marine Corps during WWII, and specifically during the battle for Okinawa. I enjoyed his personal story and especially his style of writing, not only about his personal life, but about his experiences in combat. In a small way, or rather I should say, in a rather huge way, he guided me in this task. He published that book in 1979, ironically, the same year I completed twenty years of active duty in the Marine Corps. Today, Mr. Manchester is 100% medically retired from the Marine Corps based upon his very severe wounds suffered during the battle for Okinawa on Sugar Loaf ridge. Neither he nor his publisher, Little, Brown have approved or endorsed my book.

I started this book by doing some very extensive research on one particular operation I was interested in reading about - Operation Harvest Moon which took place in December 1965, and one that involved my Marine infantry battalion (Second Battalion, First Marines). As it turned out, there wasn't much

written about Operation Harvest Moon in official Marine Corps records - a few articles here, a footnote there, not much.

I found the task daunting at first. That operation was my first dramatic taste of harsh combat. We had been in small skirmishes and firefights up till that time, but Harvest Moon topped them all for intensity, and it changed our lives forever.

My search for background information took me all over the Internet, to various Veterans' web sites, a few official Marine Corps historical sites, my own memory of course, and the memories, interviews and recollections of many who served me and who took part in the operation. Their contributions are priceless.

I am eternally grateful to everyone who contacted me and offered advice and assistance, and help set the record straight (see Jim Page's story at the end of the book, for example). I have tried to combine all their notes in the book, or at the end in the section I call "In their own words."

I wanted to tell a story about my life before I enlisted in the Marine Corps, the 20 years I spend in the Corps, but more specifically, the two years I spent in combat in Vietnam, with the focus on my first tour in 1965-66. The highlight of that first tour of duty was our bloodbath during Operation Harvest Moon.

That very long year began for me when we set sail from San Diego in the late summer of 1965, and it lasted until I returned home in the fall of 1966.

During my research, I found two good firsthand accounts of that battle, which some military historians have labeled the "Last Big Battle of 1965." One account was written by retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter along with one of his Marines, former Private First Class Tom Miller. Colonel Utter passed away in January 2001 according to an email from Tom Miller. Tom for his part lost an eye during the battle. He now lives and paints in New Jersey. Lt. Col. Leon Utter commanded the Second Battalion, Seventh Marines (referred to as 2/7), and Tom Miller served under him in one of his companies. The other excellent account is provided from an interview of retired Marine Colonel Harvey Barnum, who at the time was a Captain and who won the Medal of Honor during the latter days of the operation. Barnum oddly enough had only been in Vietnam two weeks. He was an Artillery Officer assigned to Hotel Company, Second Battalion, Ninth Marines (H, 2/9). Utter's and Barnum's units joined elements from Lieutenant Colonel Josh Dorsey's Third Battalion, Third Marines (3/3) and together they provided great support during the operation. Barnum's interview was conducted by Al Hemingway, a contributing editor from Vietnam Magazine in the spring of 1966. He describes his duties as a

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First Lieutenant Artillery Officer (at the time) attached to 2/9 that happened to be with the lead company during the operation. His company was ambushed by the Viet Cong on December 18, 1965.

Seeing his company commander, Captain Paul Gormley, along with his radio operator killed, Barnum strapped on the radio and led the company to success out of the trap. As I said, he had been in Vietnam only two weeks on temporary duty from Hawaii. For his actions and bravery, he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

The central characters in this story outside of the few instances of the units just described, are from my unit, the Second Battalion, First Marines (2/1). This battalion is part of one of three infantry regiments that are part of the 1st Marine Division, housed at Camp Pendleton, California at the time. This battalion would go on to spend a total of 2,077 days in combat in Vietnam. Marine Corps records show that they participated in 44 major "named" operations - more than any other Marine unit in Vietnam. According to the same records, this battalion was given credit for killing more than 400 NVA/VC in each of those major combat operations. The battalion is officially credited with combat time from September 11, 1965 (when we entered Vietnam) until it rotated back to the United States on May 19, 1971. I left the battalion and prepared my trip home on September 6, 1966, a few days after I received my second wound

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(on August 23, 1966). It had been a very long year since I had left San Diego.

My service initially was in Fox Company and then later with Golf Company (January - September 1966).

We lost lots fine men in those two companies during that year in Vietnam - over 100 killed and over 200 wounded. That is a huge number considering our company and most others during the latter months of the year only averaged about 100 Marines per infantry company - some less than that. Those who died gave all they had. I dedicate this story to their memories.

In summary, I am grateful to Colonel Barnum, Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter (may he rest in peace), Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey, Tom Miller, and to all the great Marines I served with for providing me input. A million words are not enough to say thanks.

For those who buy a copy of this book, please enjoy it for what it is - my best effort. I want the readers to know that I struggled to tie together into one comprehensive package that which at another time so long ago seemed incomprehensible. My sole purpose is put some things into perspective and to make history right for those who can't write it for themselves. I wanted to help lend some sense now to at time then when nothing made much sense at all. In war, as they say, the only security a rifleman has is the guy next to him. Close combat is ugly,

nasty, and a very terrible experience for anyone. Many like me went to war as young men with close friends holding high ideals about the cause.

Later, our old friends were gone, the ideal was a hoax, and we were left as old men with faded memories trying to figure out why things happened the way they did. Memories will soon be gone, too.

But, in the former days they were all we had to help keep our sanity in place. War makes men hard when it comes to making and keeping close friends because friends are gone in a flash - a split second - in combat. In combat, all a fighter has next to him is his buddy; maybe not even a real close friend in the true sense of the word; just a guy like him who is scared, cold, wet, and hungry. Soldiers in combat care for each other, and they all bleed the same red. In Vietnam, I suspect, we behaved and acted like our fathers and uncles and neighbors did in wars before: WWI, WWII and Korea. The one main difference is that Vietnam was unlike any other war the United States had ever engaged in the 20th Century. After a few years, people back home didn't give a shit about Vietnam, and it showed. A lot of them took their dislike of the war out on anyone in uniform. They hated the war and everything it stood for. Those in uniform were easy targets for anti-war protesters. It made no difference how loyal or

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patriotic you were to the country, the Marine Corps or the Army. Society wasn't interested in you following orders as good soldiers - society wanted blood, too - yours or their government's.

At the time, most of us in uniform didn't know what we know now. So, now, it's a little easier to talk about that which was anti-American back then. Some believed our national leaders misled us, abused us, and put us aside like an old rag not to be needed again until the next time they needed us to wipe war off their dirty hands in another war far off.

Many believe that our government ruined our destiny by means of the Vietnam War. In some ways, they succeeded in not only ruining lives, but also in damaging the nation for a very long time until the fast actions of the first Gulf War changed ideas again and this time for the better. Many Vietnam vets are ruined for life - physically and mentally. The politicians failed the nation a long time ago. In many ways, they still fail Vets in lots of ways when it comes to proper funding of programs for Veterans. Now after so many years, their actions have been put into a clear historical perspective, so they won't be allowed to have any more Vietnam's because we won't let them. People like me are now focused on politics and public service more than ever before. We watch them, listen to them and ensure

that those in office are fully accountable for their actions as they serve the public and especially to those still in uniform.

They took the same oath of office that I took and have taken for over 40 years.

As for me, I want to hold them accountable for their actions every single day, because it's for damn sure no one held them accountable for their actions during Vietnam. My generation and for those to follow are charged with the duty to keep things right and honest. We must not allow more stupid political errors that we saw in the past to taint decisions about future engagements that our nation might face. We must be decisive whether it's in a stalemated "police action" like the Korean War, or during a huge, decisive success like the Gulf War. Historians can put me in the column along side the names of John McCain, Bob Kerry, John Kerry, Bob Dole, William Manchester, Audie Murphy and so many others who fought in WWII, Korea and Vietnam. We are a special class of citizens who are cut from the same ideological cloth although from different political camps. We all focused on duty, honor, and loyalty to our country. I say that for those who served in Vietnam, we didn't lose the war, we didn't fail; the politicians lost the war, they failed the country and us. Tens of thousands of young men and women lost their chance at life due to political mistakes that in some cases border on the criminal. They died needlessly due

to political mistakes and miscalculations. Making mistakes is one thing and acceptable in some cases, but not making the same mistakes as they did; that's a different matter.

Many of those failures came painfully alive during the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. Vietnam Vets were never given a homecoming parade, or even a "thank you" like their dads, uncles or aunts who fought and won WWII. Most like me just came home quietly. Too many others came home in caskets quietly as well, to funerals and sad good byes from friends and relatives, and all too soon forgotten except by those same families and friends. I will never forget my fellow Marines who never came back, and in part, that's why I wanted to leave this story about them for others to share, even if it's only a small piece about one Marine Corps unit in one year of combat so long ago. I really enjoyed writing this memoir, and I hope those who read it will enjoy it as much. More importantly, I hope that everyone can agree that I have tried to tell the story the best I could, perhaps not like a William Manchester, but a story worth telling nonetheless. Others no doubt could have written this story better because they have the "knack of the pen" - a skill I don't necessarily possess. I had to tell this story my way. I don't think anyone could have told this story any differently because they weren't there. So, this story is also for all those who didn't come back to tell their own stories. I do it

for them, and in their absence, for their honor. We Marines have a simple motto: "Semper Fidelis - always faithful." **It's my message to all my friends, "Semper Fi."**

CHAPTER ONE

Torpid Memories

"War: A wretched debasement of all the pretenses of civilization." -- **General Omar N. Bradley, U.S. Army**

There is not a single day in my life that I am not reminded of the Vietnam War. The reminder may be something as simple as the evening news where some liberal, or anti-war anchor compares Vietnam with the news of the day as it relates to current military actions some place that involves U.S. Forces. Comments like "...no more Vietnams" still bother me. Some people have actually converted that phrase of no more Vietnams into a verb phrase to be banded around freely to emphasize, I suppose, that we'll never lose another war! Even the catchy "Hell no, I won't go" chant echoes that if we do get involved in war, then we must be assured of winning otherwise no one will sign up to fight the next time around. This of course makes the now-defunct "Peacenik" crowd damn happy. The 1991 Gulf War reinforces the point more than I can. Those who served in combat still cringe at anti-war slogans. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, or Marines did not lose the war in Vietnam - the politicians lost the war.

They should all rot in hell for losing it. Am I bitter? You bet I am, and for good reason.

Although it's been thirty-five years since my Marine Corps infantry company had our bloodbath, I still feel contempt for those who were in Congress during the war years. Through those many years, my memory about combat is as fresh today as it was back then although a few details may be lacking on specifics. The passing of time you see gives no allotments for sorting through war experiences. We cannot recycle the images. We cannot forget the faces. The death and the destruction remain real. That's the downside of being a human being, we are the thinkers of all living species. The human brain, the miracle of God's handiwork, is limited. It doesn't allow us to forget horror or death. I've read extensively about that awful war that I participated in during two tours of duty. My two tours totaled 25 months in combat - all in a Marine infantry battalion. That is a lot of combat for any soldier to face. Watching Vietnam movies about the war has also been a huge mistake. War movies for the most part paint a false face of war, not only this war but also most wars in general. Don't get me wrong, I love movies and I like good war stories, if they are relatively accurate. To illustrate this point, I recall the Francis Ford Coppola movie with Marlon Brando, *Apocalypse Now*.

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I saw it and I did not like it. The acting was good, but that was about it.

Some moviemakers hated the Vietnam War so much that they actually took out or tried to take out their frustrations on the public in a two-hour movie. In most cases, they try to convince viewers to hate not only the war, but American military forces who served there. Funny, I didn't see that kind of message in Sands of Iwo Jima starring John "Sergeant Striker" Wayne. Let's face it, WWII was popular because we had a clear cut mission; we had to win. Vietnam movies do not represent that same message. Vietnam movies have not shown that kind of war as it really was lived by the individual combat soldier as seen through their eyes. They were men who faced death on a daily basis as they patrolled the stinking rice paddies, and more often than not, died in those same stinking rice paddies. Combat is definitely Hell on Earth. Many of the Vietnam War movies have forced an injustice on the public because they try to show crazed veterans in maniacal moods killing women and children. They also show GI's burning down Vietnamese hoochs, and slaughtering water buffaloes in the rice paddies in every single film segment. All the Vets are portrayed as being high on dope. Of course, they all throw hand grenades under the bunks of their young, stupid Lieutenants or hard-nosed Sergeants in the ritual the media

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dubbed "Fragging." The movie Platoon for example shows much of the storyboard I've just described. It was a good story and by Hollywood standards, a decent movie.

At least it was better than Apocalypse Now. Platoon was written by co-authors, retired Marine Corps Captain and Vietnam veteran Dale A. Dye and renowned movie director and Vietnam veteran, Oliver Stone. They compressed into a two-hour movie twelve years of war with all its horror and rumor of horror. I saw the movie and I own it on VHS tape. The acting was very good and the visual effects were real, and it deserves all the prizes it won. However, the individual stories highlighted in the movie try to show every single bad event that ever happened in the war, and all in one infantry company, and within a two-hour movie. I spoke about disservice; that part was a huge disservice. Stone is a good director who saw combat in Vietnam, however, I don't think his view of Vietnam can be crammed into a two-hour movie showing examples of every bad thing that was reported to have happened in the war whether they did or not. Many of the plots were stories we read about or heard about from war pundits like Dan Rather, who were young and eager journalists at the time. We Marines used to call these stories "shit house rumors" because that's where most of them originated. If that was Stone's message, then it worked. Others, not necessarily like Stone, have done an injustice to

those fine men who served in Vietnam, tried to do a good job they were ordered to do, and tried to put their lives back in order as after serving in that Hell Hole.

I do not deny that some very terrible things happened in Vietnam, or that some were not caused by our troops. They did and I know they did. There were terrible things like My Lai. In war, there are always terrible things like My Lai, or worse like WWII in Germany with the Jews. That is the nature of war as bad as sounds. It is awful. Strange enough, Stone's partner on movie, retired Marine Corps Captain Dale Dye, is a well-known movie advisor and actor himself. I know Dale Dye and served him for a brief period in late 1964 and early 1965 while we both were stationed at the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station as young Marines. I was a Sergeant and he, at the time was a Lance Corporal. We never served together in Vietnam or in any unit after El Toro but our careers are similar. We both completed 20 years of active duty. We hadn't been close and he didn't remember me when I called him and renewed our acquaintance in 2001 - it had been a very long time. I asked him to look over my manuscript, and he did and I am grateful for his candid opinions and criticism. Like Stone, Dale did a good job with the book and the movie version of Platoon. The story is a typical vivid Hollywood-style over-hyped exaggeration of war experiences. I don't want to sound disrespectful towards Stone or Dye because

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their professional work is quite good. I think it is a trademark of Hollywood directors and producers to show war through firsthand experiences like Stone's and Dye's.

They certainly accomplished that much. Others like Coppola just try to scare the shit out of the moviegoers by handing "red meat" to the anti-war crowds. For movie buffs like me that's not necessarily bad because I'm no movie critic. I like movies and have ever since I worked in the Fox Grand Theatre in my hometown as a teenager. I have always liked movies and I even "starred" in a couple of high school dramas including "Stage Door, Glass Menagerie and Tiger House." I liked the movie "The DI" starring Jack Webb so much that it influenced me more than anything else to join the Marine Corps. In Platoon, Dale Dye plays an Army Captain who commands Bravo Company, the company where Charlie Sheen, Willem Dafoe and Tom Berenger serve. Dye does a decent job of acting, as well he should being a Marine Captain (playing an Army Captain). The movie ends with Dye calling a massive air strike on his own position just as they are being overrun by the NVA. I know Dye and Stone both saw combat while in Vietnam, so this is important to understanding their views about combat. Dye, like me, was wounded three times in Vietnam, and oddly enough we both served in Fox 2/1, but at different times. He joined Fox 2/1 after I left in September 1966, so we never served together in Vietnam. As young Marines

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we served together at the Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) in El Toro, California (now closed).

I worked in the Air FMF Pacific Headquarters (logistics office (G-4) and Dale worked in the main squadron headquarters. After his Marine Corps retirement, Dye went on to make it in Hollywood as military advisor and actor. He has appeared in films mostly with a military or intelligence, action related flavor, like "Under Siege, Outbreak, Firebirds, Mission: Impossible, Saving Private Ryan," and numerous others. Dye has a good reputation as a military advisor, and I suppose part of his deal is for him to get a role in the flick he works on. I understand he owns his "actor/soldier training" camp in England where he "trains" actors to be soldiers. So, he has done well for himself and he should be proud. I thank him for his valuable input and candid remarks about this book.

I received my commission in October 1968, just before I was ordered to ship out for my second tour of duty in Vietnam. I had just finished a yearlong Korean language course at Monterey California. I was recommended for a direct commission under the Marine Corps' "exceptional leadership program." I was a Staff Sergeant at the time with three years in grade. My second tour of duty took me back to the same southern Danang Area of Operations (A/O). It was during that time I would serve with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines (1/7) from November 1968 to December

1969. Since I was finishing an intense language course, I hoped to go back to Korea rather than to Vietnam.

I had served in Korea during my first overseas assignment in 1961-1963 with the Naval Advisory Group. I had no Korean language training then. So, since I now had extensive language skills, I wanted to put them to the test. Alas, that did not happen - a ticket for Vietnam happened. My commission, like so many others at the time, was held up in the United States Senate by a few Senators who did so out of spite and protest over the war. Holding up military commissions was, I suppose, their way of getting even with President Johnson for "his war" and not theirs. After haggling over the Vietnam budget, they finally freed up our commissions. But, it came only after many months of heated debate. As for me, I was angry about that hold because I had to wait months from the time I had been selected and nominated until I put on the gold bars. The delay cost those like me both time in grade and pay, not counting the prestige of waiting to become a Marine officer. Military commissions are a big deal. One's career track is based upon the day that he or she is sworn into office. With visions of going back Korea now gone, I was content to go back to Vietnam for another year. I had a report date of late November 1968. Off I went to a replacement battalion at Camp Pendleton as a brand new infantry second lieutenant assigned as a Replacement Company Executive

Officer. After two weeks of "refresher training," I was back in Vietnam facing a second tour.

Ironically, it was nearly the same enemy in the nearly the same area I had left in September 1966! It still amazes me after all those years it's easy to find so many men my age who "dodged" the draft and thus dodged Vietnam yet they still hold bad grudges against the military. These men managed to stay out of the military because they went to or stayed in college. Some got married and quickly had children. Others held "important" jobs. Many even fled to Canada because they either were chicken or just hated the idea of serving in the military or both. A few just used the war as a great big excuse, and sadly, some had had influential fathers who had plenty of cash to buy them neat, clean ways out of service like people used to do when this nation first was founded and a young man hated the servitude. I guess they still resent those of us who went, served, bled, lost limbs, or were held POW, or who remain shattered today with some mental problems. In retrospect, many think their dodging was correct and sadly, history has proven them right over the years due in large part to the politicians and their piss poor decisions like those of Robert McNamara and President Johnson. Those of us who went and served were right, too, because we were loyal. I wonder what the price of loyalty is these days. Those who dodged service have to be reminded of the word loyalty. They

also need a lesson about patriotism; some think they have a corner on both. We cannot go back and judge history.

We cannot change the results of our actions nor the way we thought things should or ought to have been -- time does not give us that luxury. We do not get credit for being right before a fact, and there are no rewards for 20-20 hindsight! I'm in no position to offer any such wisdom now. It is a well-know fact that there is a price to pay for our American style of freedom. That the best part of being an American. Those who went and died in Vietnam paid the ultimate price. They paid so others could live and dissent if that was their calculated price. Paying for future "freedom" dividends will require future generations to put on the uniform and serve without hesitation. That does not mean they can't question authority; they need not simply salute either as Lieutenant William Calley did at My Lai. They have to serve with pride for self and country. Far too many men ducked their responsibility during the Vietnam War. Those who made the supreme sacrifice paid their dues for those who ducked. This book salutes those who paid that price. For all those who dodged or ducked, legally or otherwise, or ran off to Canada, I leave you this short message from an old Marine. "You have to live with yourself and your conscience. My conscience is clear. I can not and will not judge you. If any judgement is due, then it's between you and God on that fateful

day when you come face to face with your 'moment of truth.' I hold no grudges, and I hold no regrets."

CHAPTER TWO

McNamara's other Edsel: The Vietnam War

In early September 1965, our battalion embarked to an old WW II vintage wood deck fat top, the USS Valley Forge (LPH-8). We left the brand new LPH the USS Iwo Jima (LPH-2) for more operations off Vietnam. During our early deployment off the coast of Vietnam, the Pentagon dreamt up operations for us that were to be series of quick actions up and down the coast labeled Operation "Dagger Thrust." The brand new and more modern helicopter carrier, the USS Iwo Jima (LPH-2 and now scrapped), fit the bill nicely. She would carry us into our first combat. The "Iwo" as the sailors and Marines affectionately called her, was brand new from the keel up. It could carry a battalion of Marines and a squadron plus of choppers at high speed. Thus, the Iwo became our new island in the South China Sea. My unit, 2/1, was the first combat unit to christen her into combat, and as it turned out, it would be quite an experience for both Marines and Sailors -- actually it was a bloodbath! That bloodbath started just before noon, December 10, 1965. At the time, it was a little known operation code name, Operation: Harvest Moon. The USS Iwo Jima and USS Valley Forge would lift

us into battle. The only thing that operation harvested would be 100 Marines that included 20 killed and 80 wounded.

I would be with many of them as they died or became wounded, and many of our wounded later died. Before that day was over, it would become a very sad Christmas for many families and relatives back home. They would find out about their sons and husbands a few days before Christmas 1965, since they had died on the 10th. I wonder if the news came all at once, or did they have to wait until their sons were identified and shipped home, a day that would be closer to Christmas? I imagine the sad memories they hold each Christmas each passing year every since that dreadful 1965 news. This has been my darkness just like Manchester's was about Okinawa. This story had to be told and even if only one person buys this book and reads this story, it will have been worth it. I hope I have covered the most important details as best I can remember them. Those killed in combat are the most difficult to forget. In some cases, it is still difficult to recall much about them, although the time we served together. I hate not being able to remember everything about them, and not having contact with any of those severely wounded. Some I suppose went straight home never to be normal again. That's a great tragedy as well. An event in 1995 or 1996 was the trigger to my zeal to write this book and tell the whole story. I was watching TV and the guest that Sunday

morning was Robert S. McNamara, former Secretary of Defense who served under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

McNamara was on one of those Sunday morning shows talking about Vietnam and about a book he had written that delved into the decisions he and former President Johnson had made. The book, if I recall correctly was his memoir, *In Retrospect: "The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam"* (New York: Time Books, Random House, Inc., 1995), written with the help of Brian Van De Mark. The show was one of those Sunday morning shows like NBC's *Meet the Press*, CBS' *Face the Nation*, or *This Week* on ABC. I don't remember exactly, but watching McNamara perform is important. He was getting some tough questions thrown at him. I perceived that he was on the show hawking his book more than trying to make any sense about the war, or at least it seemed like it from my advantage point. McNamara spoke about the decisions he and President Johnson had made during the early days of the war, and how the two of them ran the war themselves, and about private discussions in the White House. They issued the orders and expected the orders to be carried out in the field thousands of miles away. McNamara expected orders would be carried out without question; most were. Troops in the field at that time were loyal -- sadly, our leaders were not. He so much as said "we ran the war from the basement of the White House and Pentagon." His remarks drew me closer to the TV set. I was

watching the former highest-ranking Defense Department official use TV to hawk his latest book.

McNamara obviously was seeking sympathy about his poor decision-making back during the war. It got me boiling as I moved closer to the TV set. McNamara flung example after example as he jumped all over the screen reliving a trail of bad decisions, nay, in fact, poor decisions and poor judgment. What really got me angry was that he actually admitted that he and Johnson made bad decisions and knew those decisions were bad at the time they made them! I can live with people making bad decisions, because we all make bad decisions from time to time. Our elected officials are no different. I still believe that today. To make decisions that are known or expected to fail, or that probably will fail, is wrong and it borders on the criminal. I cannot accept that, and that was what McNamara was covering. He wanted some sort of public airing of his mistakes; he sought tears from the public for his decisions that cost lives through decisions he knew were poor decisions that were doomed to fail even at the time he was making them. McNamara said he and others, including President Johnson, knew they were making the wrong decisions as they went along. He also stated that that they couldn't get of the war any other way and kept getting in deeper with those poor judgements! What horseshit, I thought. He went on, "...we knew our decisions were weak to poor.

All along we knew we weren't winning (the War) and were not apt to win, but we couldn't tell the American people."

"We couldn't tell them with all the student rioting going on." I was shocked to hear McNamara lay his soul out like that for the express purpose of reinforcing book sales, or worse to gain public sympathy for his criminal acts, for his acts, in my view were and remain criminal! It was a very sad event to witness. As for me, I can never forgive McNamara or Johnson for their decisions. Their so-called leadership was not leadership at all, now that we know many of the facts from back then; their acts were more than poor judgment, they were criminal conduct. Of course, in 1965 and 1966, none of us in the service suspected or knew our leaders were acting like they now told us they did. Some higher ups or members of Congress may have suspected, but I for one did not. In retrospective, I was naïve and thought as many others did at the same time that our leaders knew best, so we had faith in them and took them for granted. Why else would they be in office, right? Surely they would never send us to certain failure, would they, of course not. Therefore, trust, military obedience and blind faith were the orders of the day. I would never have thought differently in those days. I was a good Marine, a loyal and faithful Marine, one who followed orders like many others without question. We thought our leadership was bright and smart, and that they were making

sound, rational judgments on our behalf. Little did we know most of them were incompetent lackeys for McNamara.

Finding out about this type of incompetent behavior has driven me into politics. I have had at times a burning desire to work and change the mindset in Washington. For years, I have had this desire to serve and help make a difference, and if ever elected, I pledge to place integrity above all else in public service. Sadly, we see many incompetents serving in Congress. They are professional politicians, but not professional citizens. Many never served in the military let alone ever served in combat; nonetheless still hold the lives of so many young men and women in their hands. They expect blind loyalty, yet they return nothing except pandering for more votes. They cater to the military hoping those in uniform will salute and say "Aye, aye, sir!" I call this the 'William Calley syndrome' -- salute, follow orders and don't question superiors. The My Lai massacre illustrates my point exactly. I'm long past the stage of blind obedience; Vietnam changed me forever. I don't mean disobedience - I mean skepticism. Others should follow my example and question their elected officials as much as possible. I don't mean petty harassment; I mean straightforward questions to make sure we never have any more Vietnam's. This keeps democracy strong and viable. I'm determined to do what I can to prevent any more Robert McNamara's from abusing power and

trust! In 1965, honesty and leadership apparently did not go hand in hand for many of our trusted public officials.

I try to practice strong, positive leadership in everything I do, and I have for years. I owe part of this trait to my dad and to the Marine Corps. I have at many times been surrounded by good mentors, but at other times, I wasn't so lucky -- I have been surrounded by complete idiots. I wasn't raised to accept stupid decisions or decisions that I thought were stupid.

Acting on my judgment about this has become somewhat difficult for me at times throughout my adult life and in fact, has caused me to struggle with in my later years. This has been especially true as I studied more and came to grips with the Vietnam War and all the political horse shit that was shoveled down the throats of mainstream America. I guess there are plenty of people like me, maybe not as vocal, but still who experience the same dilemma. Of course, this is a politician's dream to have 'blind obedience' no questions asked means a happy citizen, right? I suppose people like me are a politician's worst nightmare, as that guy "Rambo" might say!

CHAPTER THREE

Strong, Innocent Southern Illinois Roots

The path that led me to a Marine Corps career were strong roots planted as a youngster growing up in a small town in Southern Illinois in the early 1940's and 1950's. Those years leading up to the lifetime label of "Once a Marine, Always a Marine" label were fun filled and interesting; not outstanding -but, simply put, typical of the 1950's. I have for a long time wanted to write about my life as a legacy. I wanted to blend my early childhood and my adult life in the Marine Corps since I spent most of my adult life as a Marine. I started giving it serious thought shortly after I found my biological father in October 1987; a search that took nearly 45 years. Since my late teens, I felt compelled to find my biological roots no matter the outcome. I believed then and still believe that I had the right to know who I had been before I was adopted. I needed to know where I came from because I wanted to tell my children where their roots were - something most of my life I never knew about. I met my father in October 1987 when he was 76 years old and I was 46. Ironically, we were both born in October. He on

the 5th and me on the 11th. Throughout most of my life, few people have known I was adopted.

Even so today, writing about it is awkward and to some extent even difficult and uncomfortable. People like to know the details about friends and relatives. Although I haven't shared my life with everyone I know, I suspect some will hold that against me for not telling them sooner about my adoption. But, they will get over it. It's a small aspect of my life I now want to share. So, I hope this book helps them understand me better. I had always been haunted about the circumstances of my birth and adoption ever since I was about 20 years old and on my own in the service. My life up until that time had been as normal as the next kid's in all respects. I found out I was adopted when my Dad told me. I was about 12 at the time. I carried that knowledge and label (adopted) all through my adult life, and one fundamental question always gnawed me. "Who was I really?" I had heard stories so that made the mystery more complex. There had always been a huge gap between what I knew about my birth and told people around me as I grew up, and that which was real. And, that always bothered me. I decided to change all that and find out for myself. It all came together with that first meeting between my biological Father and me in October 1987. I think others like me in similar circumstances feel the same way about being adopted. They always have that

void in their life; a blank spot that haunts them about their true roots.

Knowing that one's parents died when they were young, or knowing that your Mother died in childbirth can be lived with. But, not knowing those strangers who appear in your mind who gave you up at birth, or worse, abandoned at birth, is different. Even if I could not find my biological Father, I wanted to document the search, fill in some blanks, and leave a legacy for my children. Being able to tell them now through this book helps make that task easier. A reunion with my biological Father was something I had always thought about but never thought possible. That possibility haunted me four decades. Even at the outset before I started the search I was stuck. There were few clues, the most important was how to spell his family name. I knew how to pronounce because I had heard it many times in my life, but no one ever bothered to spell it for me. At this early stage, I became discouraged. I tried working through telephone locators; that didn't work. Then I tried those Internet "people" search engines; again, I was stumped. I always ended up at a dead end. I finally got it right from an unlikely contact. My Aunt Nell, my only aunt on my Mother's side, filled in this critical part. I waited to ask her and both of us waited until after my Mother had passed away in 1987 to bring out the missing name. As ironic as it sounds, my aunt knew

my biological family quite well. In fact they shared the same hometown, my birthplace.

The family name turned out to be correctly spelled "Perruquet" (in French: Purr-Qwet). That was my starting point. Up until that point, I hadn't handled the project very well because a lot had been bottled up inside of me. I had more unanswered than answered questions. I couldn't ask just anyone to help me because I hadn't shared my adopted status with many outsiders. In my younger days, I was ashamed to talk about it because being adopted for my generation held bad connotations. And, on top of that, the circumstances of my adoption do not fit contemporary models, so that added to the mystery.

For example, for those adopted in my generation, the subject was considered out of bounds -- a sort of taboo. Adoption for kids in the 1940's was practically a forbidden topic because it conjured up all sort of stories. Adoption remained pretty much inside the family walls. My Dad told me I was adopted when I was about 12, but he didn't make a big deal out of it - he just told me straight out and we left the subject alone for years after that. But, knowing I was adopted all those years didn't help matters since I had to wait 45 years to find my biological roots because no one would tell me, and for many reasons, I didn't ask. Those who did know the details took those

details to their graves with them. I didn't want that to happen with me or to my children and their children.

There was a long dark shadow over my life and I wanted to move out of that shadow no matter the cost. I had the name and started to dig more than ever, but still the questions lingered.

"How would the search end? Would it end? Would I be content with what I found? Would my biological father, assuming I ever found him, acknowledge me? Maybe he didn't want to see me, or maybe he didn't want to be found." These questions kept nagging me. I didn't want to hurt my Mother, Dad or any living relatives who had raised me and whom I had called grandparents, like my grandmother Daisy, who had all the grapes and cherries I used to steal. She was the greatest, but she was not my blood grandmother, yet I still loved her. So, I dedicated myself to waiting until after everyone died to start my search out of respect for them and their memories. I didn't want to hurt anyone, and I hope I have had failed in that regard.

My Mother died in 1987, at the age of 62. She died two years after my Dad passed away in 1985 at age 83. They had been married 42 years and produced my two half-sisters, Karla and Betty. Knowing this did not lessen my desire to know who my biological father was and who my blood relatives were. I wanted to see if his family side had or has serious health issues that would or could affect my children or me in our later years. I

thought I had the right to know, and I still think I had the right to know.

I also think I am now better off for that decision. But, I could not ask my Dad or Mother. So, I waited until they were gone. Lying in that God-awful muddy and cold rice paddy in December 1965 during Operation Harvest Moon, I again asked myself, "Will it all end here? Will I never know who I am or where I came from?" Today, of course, I know all the answers, so a major hurdle has been crossed, but as I lay in that stinking rice paddy in 1965, I had doubts as to whether I'd see my family again; any family -- it didn't matter.

Leaping ahead again, my biological Father died in September 1999 in a VA hospital in Herrin, Illinois. Herrin is not far from Royalton where he lived and where I was born. He died a few weeks before his 90th birthday, so I think there may be some good genes on that limb of my family tree. In fact, one of my newly-found relatives, a sister-in-law, gave me a copy of his family tree. That record shows relatives living well into and past their 80's. The records trace my bloodline to a great, great, great grandfather who was born in Italy in 1805. Further, the record and conversations with my Father show that our roots lie along the Swiss Alps. That was something I had never thought about. Our roots began with Giovanni Agostino Perruquet, who was born on the Italian side of the Alps in 1805. My father said his

relatives all grew up speaking both Italian and French because they never knew which government would be in control.

They spoke both to make sure they'd be on the "right" side thus they didn't want to take any chances by seeming disloyal to either side. Now, I knew where my basic roots started.

As the story goes, I had always been told that my first breath of life came when I was born to my unwed teenage Mother at precisely 5:25 p.m. on a cold, wet windy Saturday evening, October 11, 1941, and I was born at my grandmother's house in Royalton, Illinois. Royalton was and remains a very small rural town in Southern Illinois; population about 1,300. In its heyday and at the turn of the 20th Century, the whole region around Royalton was typical rural coal mining community like so many others in Southern Illinois at the time. After two huge mine explosions claimed hundreds of miner's lives shortly after WW I, most of those small towns closed their mines, never to open them again. In those days, miners had poor safety conditions and although the money was good by standards back then, their life expectancy wasn't too good. If one did not die in a mine accident (which was common), or wasn't maimed for life (just as common), they were likely to end up with "black lung" disease which would kill them just a few years later than normal anyway. Those mines and their accidents remain a big part of the history

of Southern Illinois. I didn't remain with my mother very long after I was born for a couple of reasons.

Apparently, my grandfather kicked her out of the house soon after he found out she was pregnant. She only came back after he died earlier that year; a few months before I was born. Out-of-wedlock births back then were taboo. There were nothing like they are today where Hollywood stars brag about their illegitimate children as they seek more publicity and live in penthouses. My Mother's family was dirt poor so that added to their misery. My Mother was only 15 at the time I was born -- she would turn 16 two weeks after I was born. She was convinced to, or perhaps forced, give me up for adoption for economic reasons if for no other. Adoption was a topic left to lawyers and agencies or adoption dealers who had inside information and connections, a lot like today. There were no 'adoption ads,' no money changed hands and no high-priced deals were struck. In fact, families like mine in those days hid their daughter's pregnancies. Some were successful; others were not. Most babies were given up for adoption through word of mouth contacts. In worse cases, girls left town never to be seen again, or if they ever came back home, their story was that they had "been visiting relatives in Arizona," or some other faraway place. People either did or did not believe them, or refused to admit

they did. Either way, talk about teen pregnancies was a forbidden topic.

In extreme cases, newborns were as they depict in the movies, left on doorsteps to be abandoned in the hopes that a needy family would provide for the child's welfare and raise them decently. I was lucky because I was adopted to a nice family who lived not far from Royalton. In less than a year, I went from James Marvin Brown, illegitimate child of teenage mother, to Danny Marvin Francis, legitimate adopted son of Ivan B. and Lucille Francis from Du Quoin. Du Quoin would be my home for the next 18 years until I left when I enlisted in the Marine Corps. Du Quoin is still the place I visit and the place I call home. It like Royalton is a small town with a population averaging around 6,000. The Francis family had no children of their own. My Dad had a son from his first marriage, a son James Ivan. Dad's first marriage ended in the tragic death of his first wife, Marie, who was killed when she fell from the back of pickup truck in 1927. Dad re-married. His second wife who turned out to be my adopted mother, Lucille Stowers. She had a daughter by her first marriage, Margaret, who everyone called Tommy because she acted like a Tomboy -- a nickname that stuck with her whole life. I grew up in Du Quoin, which was my dad's hometown and had been for several generations before that dating back to the mid-1800's. After graduation from high school in

June 1959, I enlisted in the Marine Corps to get away from this Smalltown, USA.

I wanted to travel and see the world, and the Marine Corps offered me that chance. My first stop would be San Diego, California. I enlisted for travel and adventure and not for the money. In those days as a new Marine I was paid \$78.00 a month. I didn't enlist for the GI Bill, either; it did not exist back then. All in all, I had a great time growing up in Du Quoin. I did well in most high school sports, but academically, I was average. In my graduating class of June 1959, I think I ranked near the bottom of the 90 or so of us who graduated. In other words, I was a solid "C" student. I was bright, but didn't have much support from home regarding excelling in school. My Dad had only a 6th grade education, so anything above that was considered good for his generation and the same applied for my Mom.

My high school class was nicknamed "The Last of the 50's" since we were finishing in 1959. We did have many first's. For example, we were the first class to complete four full years in the new high school, which opened when we were freshmen. The old high school, some 100 years old had to be torn down. The new building was a one-story facility with wings, a new thing in those days and incidentally, my Dad helped build that school. In the summer months during its construction, I used to enjoy riding my bike to the work site and watch its progress. I would

bring his lunch nice and fresh to him on the days he didn't carry it himself.

My mom said that helped keep his lunch warm and his drink cold. Seeing me graduate from high school was an honor for dad because I was the first member of his family to graduate from high school. His sixth grade education for his day, was a major feat. He became more proud later in life when I graduated from college and earned my Master's degree. My Dad was a remarkable man in many ways. He always spoke highly of me to his friends and about my achievements in school and in the Marine Corps. In many respects, he was my number one cheerleader as I grew up. He always encouraged me to finish anything I started no matter what hardships were involved. I think he tried harder for me because I was adopted and he wanted the best for me. He always tried to give me things he never had. Even with his 6th grade education, he was smarter than most men I ever have known. He had more common sense than most men I've ever known, too, and he was politically very savvy. One could see that he was cut from the FDR and Harry Truman mold, which fit his time exactly. He took pride in looking out for and speaking out for those he called the "little man" (blue collar workers like himself). Dad was not very tall (only about 5'6"), but he was very big in his values and character, and he had a good reputation among peers.

I don't remember much about my adopted Mom. She died in 1946 at the age of 42 when I was five years old. I have to stretch my memory to even recall what she looked like.

The one thing I do remember though is her funeral. I recall it clearly, because it was my first formal affair, and the biggest event in my life at the time. Going to a funeral, any funeral, is not a pleasant affair for anyone, and it can be especially unnerving for a five-year old child. I remember that family members and distant relatives who came to the funeral held me up next to her casket and instructed me to "Kiss Mommy goodbye." I didn't know what death meant, so I followed their instructions, thinking, I suppose that we'd be meeting later, and that my peck on her cheek was merely a short interlude to a later meeting. I wondered, "Where is she going in that pretty box with all the flowers?" I don't remember whether anyone actually told me she was dead, or if they did, explained it to me what dying actually meant. I know that after the funeral that I went back to my normal routine life, playing with my friends, who never mentioned her death, except to say that I had lost my Mom. That's about all I remember about my short life with her. My Dad died in January 1985 and my Mother died in 1987. Readers at this point may be wondering, what's the connection between my adopted Dad, Mother and this whole story? There is a connection, and it is one most people find to be the most interesting. As I

said, my Dad had one son, Jim, by his first marriage. Jim served in the Army Air Corps during WW II and after the war, like so many other men, was home waiting for his final discharge.

He lived in Du Quoin for a while until he took a job and moved to Dayton, Ohio where he would later raise his own family while working as an Air Force civilian at Wright Patterson Air Force Base there. He lived there until he met an untimely death in 1972 from cancer. After the war, Jim was home enjoying life, and one particular day he and Dad were downtown hitting the bars and enjoying a few beers together. I guess they were making up for lost time because they were having a great time according to the next phase of the story. At one tavern, Dad noticed this young woman sitting by herself at a nearby table. He asked Jim if he knew who she was, and that he'd like to buy her a drink. Jim glanced at her, and then quipped matter of factually, "Her? Oh, that's Ethel Brown, Danny's mother." I don't know what happened next, but apparently Dad went over to her, sat down, bought her a few beers and made some sort of deal. He must have been very powerful in his argument, because that following September, he and my Mother were married. Dad had just turned 45 that August, and my Mother was one month shy of her 21st birthday. It had been only six months since his second wife died. I remember very clearly the day Dad brought my Mother home and introduced us for the first time in my life. He took in the

middle of kitchen with both of us and said very simply, "Danny, this is your mother. Ethel, this is Danny."

I still find it significant the way he said "your Mother" and not Mom, not new Mother, not new Mom, or anything philosophical like that. He clearly said, "This is your Mother" if by saying those exact words, he was erasing the mystery that had surrounded my adoption for the past nearly six years of my young life. In his own way, he was setting the record straight for everyone to know including my Mother and me. Dad wanted everyone to know where we all stood on the issue after so many years - hear it once and that was it - no more talk about it. The reunion had ended a chapter in my life and opened a new one at the same time. At the time, it didn't mean all that much to me being only six years old, and it would be some six or seven more years before he explained the adopted part. When that time came, Dad in his true fashion got us together and explained adoption to me, but he never said anything about where or who my real Father was. I guess he felt it unnecessary. He explained it without much detail, explained it only once. We never spoke about it or my Father the rest of his life, and he died in January 1985. Besides, any explanation at that age probably would not have meant much to me anyway and I think Dad was wise enough to realize that. I now know that his words were carefully chosen to convey the precise message he wanted to convey

requiring no further discussion. His explanation of such a sensitive subject says volumes about his character.

It was the type of man he was - a man of a few, yet direct words - simple, firm yet very unstylish. He loved me and suspected, rightly so, that I loved him so bringing a man into our lives that apparently did not want me would have been futile. An interesting chain of events had unfolded right before my eyes and I was lost in time. Here was a man who had adopted me at age one with his second wife who dies when I'm six. He then meets and marries my natural Mother shortly after his wife's death. I have always suspected but although Dad never expressed it to me personally, I'm sure he was pleased with our reunion and his accomplishment. Had he not meant her that faithful day, I might have ended up searching for her as I did for my Father. For dad, however, it came natural. To him, it was logical, if not based upon a very educated plan. It shows the kind and thoughtful man he was. He would always think of others before himself. Now, I don't know if he actually loved my mother at the time they met and married or not, but as they grew older, I'm sure he loved her very much. They had two daughters, my two half-sisters, Karla Kay and Betty Jean. Karla was born in 1957 and Betty in 1964. Dad lived a long, interesting, yet very difficult, hard life.

He buried two wives, his parents, his only natural son, an aunt who lived with his parents most of her life, and his only brother, Roy who died in 1957 after a severe asthma attack.

My Uncle Roy presents an interesting story, too. He was sick most of his life with asthma, and he remained single after his first wife died in the late 1920's. He managed to raise three sons who all served in WW II. His eldest son, Sanki was killed early during WW II. Fred, his second son, died in 1988, having lived most of life in a VA hospital following a breakdown in the war. Fred received a VA disability check every month his entire life, but he never spent one single dime. He put every check into the bank and never used the money in any way. He saved it all. After he died that little fact came to light in 1986. He had \$140,000 in the bank and no will. It was now left for family members to pick and fight over. Much of it ended up going to relatives whom he never met. I got a share of \$20,000. I honestly think I was the only family member to have received his money who actually met him. One time I visited him when my dad took me to the VA hospital to visit Uncle Fred. Roy's youngest son, Willie Jack, served in the Marine Corps during WW II. He made landings and fought at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. He died in the late 1970's, but none of us were ever notified at the time of his death. That fact only came out while the lawyers were searching for close relatives to Fred to give the money to

them. It was in 1987 that I found out that Willie was dead, had a family, but none of them could be located either. It was if he had never existed. Willie was my favorite "cousin."

He was a handsome, daring and playboy sort of guy who always brought young women home to visit during the holidays. But, he finally settled down, got married and had several children. One thing about Willie has stuck in my mind. He always owned and drove a new car every single year. When he came to visit, he would let me sit in it and "drive" it anywhere. That is as long as I didn't leave our front yard. I would sit in his car for hours, steering and going everywhere my imagination would take me. My dad never owned a car as I grew up because we were very poor after WW II. He inherited property and real estate from my grandfather, his father Burt who died in 1958, so he had some money, but wouldn't spend it that way. In fact, Dad ended up with five houses which were all located on the same street where I grew up. My grandfather had been smart enough to invest in real estate even during the days of the great depression. They weren't worth a lot, but through the years gained in value and still stand today well taken care of by their new owners. I last visited the old homestead during a high school reunion in 2000. Dad was like many men of his day, hardworking, poor and proud of life and caring for his family above all else. He was a common laborer, part time farmer, and as a common labor, deep

into the labor movement. Dad worked hard to protect the rights of the little man, as he used to say, who were just like him, and he loved Harry Truman like a brother.

He used to tell me stories about his early days, back in the 1930's and 1940's, when he worked as a coal miner for a period of time. The rest of his life he was a common laborer and hod-carrier. From time to time he would be elected as his local's secretary-treasurer, mostly because no one else wanted the job. But, I could also see that he enjoyed the job. I never knew Dad's true emotions because he didn't show them very much. Oh, he would get angry as everyone does, and he did have a hot temper, but he never showed it much. I never saw him hurt anyone physically. Verbally was a different matter. He would challenge government and management authority in a minute if he thought they were wrong or abusive to him or fellow workers. It didn't matter if it was at work, or at City Council meeting that he regularly attended. Elected officials were all fair game for him. When he did get angry at me, which was seldom, all he had to do was look at me and say "Danny, I told you not to do that, or Danny, don't do that, or Danny, stop that, or Danny, did you hear what I said?" That's all it took. I never back-talked him and I didn't ask for second opinions, because none were needed nor welcomed once dad laid down the law. I knew that when he said something he meant it and he didn't have to repeat himself,

and he didn't like to repeat himself. Dad would not have fit very well with the generation of kids we see today.

Today too many demand to "know why" when told to do something, or question a senior's authority. Dad gave orders and he expected others to carry them out without question unless they were unsure what he meant. He was seldom wrong and seldom did I see him make a poor decision. If I wasn't sure, I would ask for clarification and when I did, he always took careful time to explain the "how" part, but seldom would he explain the "why" part. Just telling me something was plenty of "why" enough. Through the years, his simple advice and logical approach would serve me well in my Marine Corps years. Dad would have made a good Marine Gunnery Sergeant since he was a firm believer that one did not question authority when directed to do something that those in authority thought was right and proper. He expected people to trust his judgment. Dad raised me that way because it was the way he was raised; he didn't know any different standard. The Marine Corps would reinforce his philosophy in me, and Dad was proud of me and my service in the Marine Corps because I think he saw his handiwork in action. Dad's advice and direction came in handy more than once in my life. He was very popular among his Union peers and still today from time to time when I visit Du Quoin, I will meet an old friend of his in Du Quoin whose Dad or Grandfather heard about

my Dad and they still talk about Dad and his Union work. That is his legacy.

I would sometimes attend a Union meeting with him and afterwards, he and some friends would go to his cousin Lyle Francis' tavern and talk for hours while I listened to them or sat at a nearby table or played pool. Some of Dad's labor philosophy rubbed off on me. I am a staunch Labor supporter.

He was critical of management and he believed they used and abused the average worker like himself thus he fought hard to make sure that did not happen. Dad was the type of person who would give you fifty cents of his last dollar if you asked for it because he remembered how tough things could be for workers like he. He used to tell me stories of the Labor movement back in the 1920's and '30's. More than once he said he was forced to take a midnight ride in the trunk of a speeding car after being beaten up. He had been beaten up simply because he was a Union organizer or stood up against management on some labor issue. He said management hated unions, and they would hire thugs to beat him up, throw him in trunk of a car and drive him far out in the woods where he was tossed in the nearest ditch to freeze to death. That kind of life style made him a tough fighter for labor rights, which he never wavered on as long as I knew him.

Dad had some weaknesses, however. He was a heavy smoker most of his life, smoking mostly non-filter cigarettes like

Chesterfields. He also drank heavily at times, usually on Friday nights as he played poker with his friends.

I don't know if he won or lost - he never said. My mother never asked. He provided well for us, so even if he lost, it didn't matter, we were taken care of. He never abandoned his family for beer or cards, and he enjoyed both. Even with these two vices, he never deprived his family of anything we needed or wanted. If I asked for something, and if he thought it reasonable, he would get it. I remember once he bought me a used bicycle because we couldn't afford a brand new one. Even though it was a used bike, it worked fine and I kept it for a couple years for my newspaper route. Dad's family always came first, and he really enjoyed life, even when the odds were against him, and that seemed to be most of his life, but I never saw him down at any time. I also never saw him relax or take a vacation that amounted to more than a day off. He was a kind man, a firm man, and a fair man. He taught me how to appreciate others and their plight. He taught me to never look down on anyone because of their job status, their color, their religion, their life style or social condition, especially those less fortunate than us. He taught me to appreciate and respect people for who they were not on what they looked like, what they owned or where they worked. He basically treated everyone the same until they shit on him and then he dropped them from his social list and he never

looked back. He was loyal to those around him, and he expected loyalty return. He respected everyone and most respected him.

Dad taught me a lot about the value of these things, and I try to practice them to the best of my ability because I think they are good values. His values and growing up in a small town like Du Quoin were good for me. Although our economic situation was drab it was not uncomfortable.

Growing up and not knowing you are economically strapped is a good motivator later in life when you see how others are far worse off than you are. My environment made me both tough and humble. I think I possess a good knack to distinguish between right and wrong, and especially to tell when others are bullshitting me. Dad always told me, "No one can bullshit a bullshitter." I didn't fully understand what he meant at the time, but I learned later in life and it came in handy from time to time. One weakness I do have is something I picked up from my Mother - I'm softhearted, although some wouldn't admit that I am. My Mother always told me, "Danny, you're too softhearted. You get hurt easily because you trust people too easily." She was right, I do. I guess I'm like her in that regard and we both have learned things the hard way due to that weakness. I see that weakness in my two sons as well, Danny and Chris. I sometimes find it hard to recognize those around me who are not loyal, and therefore allow them to take advantage of me before I

realize what they have done. That comes from being too trustful and not being alert to those who are deceitful.

I believe one should be trustful of people until they find out differently later. Later you find out differently, then you change your mind; sadly, sometimes it's too late. One should trust and be loyal to those around them. Judging others that way takes skill and careful observation and maybe just plain luck. I admit, I'm weak on that trait; alert, but weak. To a certain extent I'm also a shy person in many ways although I like to cut up and joke and that disconnect tends to confuse people who don't know me well. Some say I come across as very strict and serious by my outward appearance and nature. I do have a stern look that I inherited from my grandfather Brown. That in a sense that turns people off who don't know me well. I like an occasional thank you, but I don't like a lot of praise heaped on me. I am quick to thank others, and as a boss or supervisor of others, I take great pride in taking care of people who work for me. The Marine Corps taught me that and then they reinforced that principle for 20 years. In part, that's why I rose through the ranks quickly and became successful early in my Marine Corps career as others struggled for higher rank around me. My early childhood definitely helped prepare me for the rigors of the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps, by way of analogy, helped me like the Army helped Alvin York during his service in WW I.

The military has a unique way of doing that for young men and women who would otherwise not see their potential expand.

The military gives one plenty of opportunities for growth and expansion. As we all grow older, we hope we will also grow wiser and smarter. Logically, we are then supposed to appreciate our parents for their efforts to raise us.

In a small way, I hope this book helps my children take heed of the [good] advice I now hand down. I hope they will try to build on it and then practice it as best as they can with their own children the way I have tried to with them. As one travels through life, which can be cruel and difficult at times, yet enjoyable at other times, one hopes that their children learn and follow valuable lessons and don't have to learn life's experiences the hard way. One need not practice or train to be miserable [an old Marine Corps adage]. My children now have a record of the paths that I traveled and stumbled as I grew older and wiser [even though at their early ages they'd never admit that Dad is wise let alone smart]. Someone once said "...it's amazing how smart our parents become as we get older."

This book is my story as much as it is theirs. It is something they pass along to their children. I want this book to be an historical road map, a diary of sorts to be updated from time to time by others, and especially for the families of those I served with in the Marine Corps who are mentioned in my story.

Those I served with who made the ultimate sacrifice so that those like me can live to write books about them will live forever in all our hearts and minds. I worked very hard in life to find my roots because I didn't want my children or grandchildren to be raised without knowing their roots. This then is their record -- I challenge them to preserve it. I remember one time reading a story that referenced an old African saying. The book was titled, "Bury My Bones, but Keep My Words: African Tales for Retelling by Tony Fairman with illustrations by Meshack Asare." This book deals African folklore and the premise is that tales were better when spoken and handed down rather merely through writings. Stories were passed down from generation to generation to give more meaning to the story. I think much of our rich Afro-American heritage follows that logic. Americans, collectively in my view, don't hand down stories by word of mouth like the Africans did. So, this book is my story, now left to be handed down and spoken about. The best example of this surrounds my grandfather, James B. Brown, whom I am said to have inherited that awful frown from. He died a few months before I was born, so I never knew him, and no one every told me much about him, either. I have always wondered why. I did know my grandmother Myrtle Brown quite well. But, even she

did not talk about him. Today, there is no one left alive to tell me about him.

All I have are a few ideas and rumors, but no facts. I also know little about my grandmother. She moved to Du Quoin soon after my Mother married my Dad in 1946. My mother and I used to go across town and visit her on weekends. She died in 1951 from cancer when I was nine years old. She was only 46 years of age.

Cancer was so unknown back then that people actually thought you could "catch cancer" so the word was not even used in public. The best part about visiting her was having her serve us chilled cling peaches. It was ritual-like, and even today, one of my favorite deserts is still peaches. Kids need to know things like that about their grandparents. They need not grow up knowing nothing about their grandparents. That is one regret I still carry in life.

I remember that after I graduated from high school and was thinking about joining the Marine Corps. But, since I was only 17 at the time, I still needed my parents to sign for me. One time, Dad took me aside and said, "Listen Bud [dad called everyone Bud], go in and do your time. If you like it, stay and get a pension while you're still young. Don't turn out like me. Get that pension while you're still young, don't work your ass off like I did and nothing to show for it fifty years later."

He was telling me that because his father had told him that at one time I'm sure. But, I never had a grandfather who would tell me things like that.

I suspect, but don't know for sure, that my grandfather Brown hated my Mother since he threw her out of his house when he learned she was pregnant with me. I don't think he did because he was a bad man. I think he did it because it was his way of life for the times. But, I'm not even sure about that, either.

I can't confirm that and no one has ever told me differently, it's just my suspicion. So, in the long run, Dad's advise was the best advice I ever got from anyone. I doubt my grandfather ever gave anyone any good advice like that. This is the point I'm trying to make when I say good traits like that need to be passed own as stories to help others live a full and respected life.

Searching for my biological family turned up some interesting notes that helps put this all into perspective because there is plenty to learn from my biological father's side of the family tree. Even as I started my search I didn't give much forethought to what lay ahead. There were many unanswered questions like, was my father still alive? Was he married? Where did he live? Did he still work? How old was he? Does he have children? What does he look like? I was very

selfish because I never thought about his family, his life, his wife, or his children. I didn't even think about any shock or damage they would suffer if we met suddenly.

I only thought about pleasing myself, not anyone else. I assumed, in a selfish way, that they would welcome me with open arms like some long lost brother and son. As it turned out, he was alive, retired, in good health, father of eight children, age 87 at the time, and married to the same woman for nearly 55 years. It also turns out I am the oldest of his total of nine children.

This discovery immediately gave me five, half-brothers and three, half-sisters that I had never considered. I also have two aunts. One lives in Marseilles, France, and other lives in Royalton, not far from where I was born. My Father has 30 grandchildren and 38 great grandchildren, so my new family turned out to be quite large. He also has scores of nieces and nephews who live from coast to coast. These people are my new relatives. He served in the Army in the late 1930's and ended up making tanks and tank ammunition during WW II at the Joliet (Illinois) Army Ammunition Plant. Later, bought and operated two grocery stores. One was in nearby Herrin and the other in nearby Dowell. Royalton is his hometown as well as my mother's and her family's. It seems their families knew each other even before my

birth. My adoption later on [taken away from Royalton] seems to have served both families well and erased any embarrassment.

Royalton is only 12 miles from Du Quoin. My Father went on to live and ultimately die there.

He now lies beside his parents, my grandparents, in the Catholic portion of the cemetery in Royalton. Up until I completed this long search and discovered my new biological family, I had been an only child, at least until 1957 when my sister, Karla Kay was born. I was 16 at the time and a sophomore in high school. Then my second sister, Betty, was born in 1964 while I was in the Marine Corps. The three of us did not grow up close; that too is regretful.

As I lay in that stinking rice paddy up to my ass in Viet Cong in December 1965, I hoped my life wouldn't end there. I wanted to live my remaining years with my family, whichever family it turned out to be, real, adopted, or biological, because at that time, it didn't matter. I prayed hard that God would allow me to live and that he would help me live a full life and complete life that would enable me to find an unwritten chapter in my life; my roots. Writing about those memories has in some respects been a little easier than living them. As I said, my youth prepared me for the rigors of the Marine Corps as well as with most of my values being passed down from my Dad. For example as a kid, I used to play a lot of "Army" in the

woods not far from our house. Friends and I would spend hours out in the woods running, jumping, and hiding and playing "Army."

I did a lot of daydreaming about all those John Wayne movies, and then after watching Jack Webb star in the movie "The DI," I was sold. That movie pushed me over the edge right into the Marine Corps and right out of high school. Although I grew up as the only child, I had plenty of playmates in our neighborhood. One particular family stands out and worthy of mention: the Bunton family. Carson and Ruth Bunton had six boys and no girls. The boys ranged from oldest to youngest, Billy, Jimmy, Danny, Jerry, David and Mike. They were a rough and tumble bunch like any family with six boys. Jerry and David were one year apart and I was one year younger, so that teamed the three of us up much of the time. David ended up being my lifelong friend for nearly 40 years. Although he was eight months older than I, we stayed together right into high school because he had failed the first grade and I caught up with him when I started the first grade. We remained together through our junior year of high school. At that time, and in the grand old Bunton tradition, he dropped out of high school at age 16, waited until he reached 17, and enlisted in the Navy. Dropping out put him right behind Jerry who had dropped out the year before and was now serving in the Navy in San Diego on an oil

tanker. Mike broke that cycle. Being the last Bunton I suppose entitled him to do that.

Mike actually went on to graduate from high school, but was promptly drafted into the Army where he was also just as promptly sent to Vietnam where he served a year in the Signal Corps. All the Buntons, except Michael and Jimmy, went on to earn their GEDs in the Navy. Actually were a pretty smart bunch of guys and ended up getting pretty good scores and good jobs in the service. Simply put, their parents, even as much as I loved them both, just didn't push education or high school completion. Each son would drop out of high school just like clockwork and just as fast, enlist in the service. In those days, one could join the military without a high school diploma.

It was nothing like today with the "All-volunteer" force and Congress demanding 90 percent of enlistees possess a high school diploma. Even at times in the good "old days" and in extreme cases a juvenile would get lucky when a judge would give them a choice, "Join the Army or go to jail." That too has changed. Felons can not hide in the military today.

The Bunton family head, Carson, was a hardworking coal-miner who drank too heavily and worked too hard his entire life. He was a quite man and seldom spoke to me all the years I grew up around him, but I liked him because he always treated me like a son. I guess I let him down - I went on to graduate from high

school. Early Easter Sunday morning in 1950, he was in a very serious car accident.

A train hit his car and nearly killed him. It happened right in the center of Du Quoin as he was driving home from work and after stopping off too long for a few beers [it was later revealed]. He wasn't killed, but he was seriously injured with a broken back. He remained under constant medical care for years. He never went back to work, instead, he went back to the bottle while waiting on disability checks each month. He hit the booze heavy; probably more so to help with the pain in his back. There wasn't many days that I didn't see him pretty well plastered and not feeling any pain. He ended up suing the railroad for not having a proper signal in place [which was true] downtown.

After many years of legal battling, he actually won the suit along with a very huge settlement at the time, well over \$100,000. In those days, that was a huge amount of money. Although he had been drinking when the accident occurred, he was not proven not to have been at fault, so the judge held the railroad libel and he got the cash. He was very lucky. He took the money and immediately "retired" to the local Eagles Hall where he usually parked and commenced to drink himself to death. In spite of his heavy drinking, he was not an abusive man; he was very good to his family and those who knew him. He died in the early 1980's from too much alcohol.

As he lived, he set a good example for all his boys with his excessive drinking because they all learned very well and all hit the sauce heavily as he did, all except Jerry. He never did drink much, apparently taking after his mother. The term alcoholic wasn't used much in those days except behind closed doors so we didn't pay much attention to heavy drinkers like we do today. Back then, we just chalked it up to a life style quirk. The Bunton boys were all survivors in spite of their heavy drinking, which was well documented in our little part of the world. Today they would be classified as alcoholics, and their lifestyle would not go unnoticed, or worse. Growing up with those boys made my life a little harder than it should have been, but the upside is that it prepared me for much harder days in the Marine Corps.

Jimmy and Jerry still live in the Du Quoin area. I don't know where Danny is because no one seemed to know exactly where he lives, but he's rumored to still be drunk and somewhere in Southern Illinois. Sadly, cancer took Dave and Mike, and Billy died in 2002. The news about their deaths came to me after the fact because over the years we lost contact. I still find it hard to comprehend that they both died that way and at such early ages. Dave became very successful later in his life even

with all his hardships. He last worked as college security officer at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale.

I'm not sure what Mike did later in life after he left the Army, but I know for a time he worked in the last remaining coal mine in Du Quoin and drank like his brothers. They both left families and kids. I heard that the campus police department gave Dave a very big and dignified funeral. I'm glad to have heard that. He was a great friend, even with all his bad luck. He turned out to be a solid citizen after so many hard years before. I didn't even know that Dave had died until late in 1999 when I was home attending a high school reunion and Jimmy told me as I paid him a visit at the hold Bunton homestead. It was a shock to hear Dave was dead after so many years of our friendship. Later, Jimmy told me that cancer had taken Mike, too, so I had a double shock the same day. Mike was a Vietnam veteran, so he got a full military funeral in Du Quoin. I bet that was something to see for that little hick town.

Dave earned his GED in the Navy. That along with some good advanced Navy training helped carry him into college. That in turn helped him earn some college credits which helped him land a good job in law enforcement in the Springfield Capital region. I remember once he told me about a gun accident he had while working as a police officer that caused him to have an early retirement. Dave was responding to a domestic house call. As he

approached the front door, a man leaped out with a shotgun aimed directly at his face.

Dave leaped back, pulled out his pistol, but in his excitement, he discharged it before he could get it clear of his holster. He ended up shooting himself in the hip and scaring away the shotgun toting man as he heard Dave's gun go off. Dave suffered a serious wound and left active duty as a police officer shortly thereafter. He got a small disability pension, so he ended back in Du Quoin. From there, he went to SIU and ended up as an criminal investigator.

As kids, the Buntons and I never got into trouble with the law, but we came close a few times; nothing serious like drugs or hardcore crime. The most criminal thing we did was steal our dad's cigarettes and go off into some hayloft to smoke hoping we didn't burn down the barn in the process.

Like many other boys our age, including my lifelong friend, Ron Danbury, who still lives near Du Quoin and someone I've been close to since the second grade, we would ask older boys to buy us beer on Friday nights after the high school football game. This worked out nicely because some of the older guys, although under age like us, were able to let their beards grow and then they would pass for 21 which made buying the beer easier. We used to have contests to see who could "chug-a-lug" a quart of Fallstaff or Stag beer first without puking first as part of our

rite of passage into manhood. I seldom puked first; but, had my share nonetheless.

That experience should have prepared me for the ship ride from San Diego to Vietnam with a stop in Okinawa in the summer of 1965, but it didn't, because I puked all the way to Okinawa.

CHAPTER FOUR

Puking All the Way to Okinawa

We pulled out of San Diego Harbor on the night of August 10, 1965 and headed for war in Vietnam with a scheduled stop in Okinawa. We sailed from San Diego at night as most military units have done for years in time of war to keep the move secret and out of sight of any enemy detection. It was a day that changed my life forever. It was the day my unit, the Second Battalion, First Marine Regiment (hereinafter referred to as 2/1) set sail for war. That voyage marked the beginning of a long 13 month overseas tour of duty that would take me into combat for just a week short of 12 months. I would not see the United States again until mid-September 1966. It's funny how we selectively remember some things and conveniently forget others. We go on to spend a great deal of time sorting through them trying to manage and keep them separate. For example, I recall very vividly how strange it was that "wartime" troop deployments always leave under the cover of darkness, yet attack at dawn. To keep the enemy off guard and garnish the element of surprise we were told. I suspect it was that our leaders wanted to have us so pissed off about losing sleep and attacking so early in the morning that the enemy wouldn't stand a chance as we can

screamed ashore as Marines are famous for doing. This deployment started out like all others before.

There was no exception to the old Marine Corps time tested principle of get up early and wait. We pulled out of San Diego just before midnight. I remember thinking at the time, we're going to war, but it doesn't seem like it. I guess I had thought it would be more exciting like a John Wayne movie. There would be bands playing and crying sweethearts standing at the pier tossing roses toward us as we pulled away from the pier and disappeared over the horizon. But, it wasn't like that at all. All I saw were 1,000 bleary-eyed young and old Marines trying to load ships in the middle of a pitch dark cool night wondering when they'd get some sleep. There were a few family members there, but they had to keep their distance according to orders. Things were very hectic at the pier all night long. Going to war was not forefront in our minds and had not sunk in yet. The most important thing was to find a good bunk and head [toilet in Navy and Marine Corps jargon] and get some sleep. Up went the anchors and off we went, but not until some lucky sailor collected his anchor pool bet. Sailors and Marines aboard ship always bet on the precise time the ship's anchor will be dropped in a new port or when it will be lifted as they pull out and set sail. There's big money in those anchor pools. I know all about those pools because I pitched in but never won

a dime. Seems a lucky member of the anchor detail always won. Well, there we were, on our way to war in Vietnam.

Our voyage to Okinawa took about twenty days. I was seasick most of them. We left San Diego harbor aboard the USS Bexar (APA 237) at midnight, August 10, 1965 and headed off to war! The Bear, as her crew affectionately called her, was a Haskell class Attack-Transport ship (APA/LKA) that was built and launched in July 1945. She went off the active Navy rolls in September 1976. Later she was sold and then turned into scrap in June 1982. The Bear's photo appears later in the book.

A day or so out of port, we formed a convoy with one other ship, whose name I don't recall, but it was the one which carried the bulk of our battalion's heavy equipment such as jeeps and heavy weapons. The Bear only carried troops and our personal gear, which was about half of the battalion's total strength. During the voyage, we sometimes caught glimpses of each other in the wide-open sea. I surmised it was more military secrecy at work. It didn't matter anyway because a lot of us were too sick to care who was sailing along side. As I said, the "Bear" was a neat old vintage WW II ship. In fact, she was so old at the time, that she still had those old canvasback racks (bunks) - Marines call any type of bed or bunk a rack. Those old racks hung from the ceiling of the ship, called bulkheads, by chains acting as ropes. To conserve troop space, each troop

Francis/Last Ride Home/70

compartment's stack of racks was six or so high depending on which part of the ship's area (hold) you were berthed.

In the smaller spaces, they were only 2 to 4 racks high. They were plain canvas without any type of mattress. My platoon was berthed in the forward, port side of the ship (front, left).

Shipboard life is tough even under the best of conditions and this old WW II ship was no exception. It didn't take long to find out how our troops felt all cramped up on similar ships bouncing back and forth waiting for D-Day in 1944. One feels like a sardine in a can with lots of other sardines. There was little difference between those soldier sardines in the English channel in 1944 and we modern-day Marine sardines - we all puked all the way to our final destinations. They puked on their way to Normandy, and now I was puking on my way to Vietnam. History, unfortunately hadn't changed much in that regard for the infantry. If we had anything in common with our earlier brothers in arms, it was our common bond of being seasick for days on end. I don't think I found my "sea legs" (adjusted to ship life) until early in September when we embarked to the flat bottom aircraft carriers. I say flat bottom because the carriers, USS Valley Forge and the USS Iwo Jima, were just that - flat bottoms. In fact, all carriers have relatively flat bottoms for stability. I never puked on any carrier because they didn't roll like the old Bear did. It should come as no surprise that I

didn't miss moving from the Bear to a carrier. May the Bear rest in peace though!

Passing time at sea isn't an easy task especially while you are as sick as a dog most of the time. On troop ships there is plenty time to be seasick and plenty of time to do not much of anything depending on one's rank. NCO's had a good time while the troops filled plenty of work details. Ships after all, are supposed to be whistle clean. We spent a lot of time playing cards, looking for Privates who knew where to hide from work details, or we stood in chow lines for hours on end. I was a Sergeant and squad leader, so I had first choice about the rack I would sleep in for the next 20 days. My judgment proved to be both wise and smart. I picked a top one not really knowing why at the time, but it turned out to have been a brilliant choice. It was smart to get the top rack because if you didn't, you were likely to get a face full of puke from the seasick guys one or two, or more bunks above you. I tried to restrain myself as much as possible - so I got a little pail and kept it handy so I didn't drown my the guys sleeping below me. The actual voyage was uneventful except for the seasickness. We had no enemy subs or anything like that which our dads and uncles witnessed in WW II. Except for the seasickness, it could have passed for sea cruise without the shuffleboard, of course. The puking was bad enough, but trying to eat without becoming sick again was next

to impossible. The only cure for seasickness is good old dry land.

One probably thinks that after puking your guts out that a good solid meal might be in order, but not on a Navy troop ship crossing the Pacific Ocean in the hot summer. Seasickness stays until you either get your "sea legs," or lose weight. I lost weight and didn't recover my land legs until we landed on Okinawa. Most of the time, I just lay in my rack eating saltine crackers, sipping a little water, and promptly lost 10 pounds. Eating on any Navy ship especially the old ones like the Bear was a real feat, at least for those who could eat. It usually turned out to be an all day affair. The chow lines (only two: port and starboard) were long, very long and very slow.

Sometimes, they would shut down one in favor of the other, and that meant you had to fight the damn line all over again. They seldom served from one side - seems it had something to do with the way the galley was designed, plus they couldn't seat all of us at once. A typical day would see us standing in line for morning chow and then getting right back in line to wait for the lunch line to start forming and then in line for supper. I surmised that some troops (those who could eat three meals a day) stayed in line for the whole trip - 20 days! For those who could eat three square meals a day, it was no easier because they had to stand in line practically all day. So, since we had

little else to do, it didn't matter much. Navy chow is good -- for those who can eat -- so, waiting wasn't too bad.

It wasn't bad, that is, for those who didn't get seasick. At least they didn't have to puke all the way to Okinawa. There is an old Navy custom at sea. They hold boxing matches called "smokers" during long voyages overseas. Opponents, whether both sailors, or one sailor and one Marine, they dress like boxers, are treated like professional boxers, train (usually) and they wear protective headgear and fight three rounds of three minutes. The ship's medical personnel stood close by to monitor the fight, and they would stop it if it became necessary or too bloody. The matches were designed as wholesome clean fun to help relieve the pressure of the ride and seasickness - and they did help in that regard. Since we had plenty of Marines on board, the Navy hoped to challenge us to several good matches and see which service was the best. We knew we were better than the sailors, but we needed to prove it to them anyway. When it came time for my company, Fox Company, to put up a boxer, we drew a blank. No one wanted to volunteer; no one wanted to enter the fray. Everyone kept at us to produce a contender from Fox Company. Other companies started laughing at us. Out of frustration, and somewhat convinced that no bodily harm would come, or if it did that it wouldn't be long term, so I volunteered to be Fox' candidate. That was a huge mistake! I

suddenly became an instant hero, but that stardom lasted only one day.

Actually it lasted not much longer than the scheduled three, three-minute rounds. The old timers, the ones who knew the ropes, offered me plenty of advice like "...you have to roll with the ship -- watch your balance," and other on-the-spot "expert" boxing tips. For example, "roll with the ship" meant that when the ship rose up or went back down that I should lean forward or backwards, or when it rolled left or right (port or starboard) that I should lean the opposite direction of that roll (if the ship went left (port), I should lean and/or roll right (starboard), that was to help keep my balance. Boy, was it confusing and a lot to remember in such a short period of time, but I tried. It was all designed to help keep the ship and me in total weight balance. Okay, I thought, I think I have it! I thought I had it down pat that is until the bell rang for the first round. Just before the bell rang to signal the first round, the two of us went out into the center of ring to be briefed by the ref just like on TV except there was not "ladies and gentlemen" type introduction. Just a simple, this is Sgt. Francis from the Marines and Seaman So and So from the Navy - I even forgot his name. We took our corners, sat down and waited for the second bell - the one that started the fight. I remember overhearing someone say (probably so I would overhear

them) that the sailor and I were similar in height and weight, but that's where the differences departed.

They also said he was a "former golden gloves champ from the Bronx." I was a simple naïve boy from a small town in Southern Illinois and the term 'Golden Gloves' meant absolutely nothing to me. Nonetheless, champ carried a huge meaning to me, but everyone told me not to sweat it that he probably was an old champ. I knew a little about New York and the Bronx from watching all those Saturday morning serials at the matinees wich starred the "Bowery Boys," Satch, Louie and Slip Mahoney, so I surmised that guys from the Bronx and Brooklyn were tough New Yorkers with funny accents who came from tough neighborhoods and one of them was about to beat the shit out of me! What happened after the bell rang is anyone's guess. Even until this very day, some 35 years later, I still don't know exactly what happened, only what others told me. Events went something like this. First I was reminded that it was now recorded as the shortest fight in Naval history. Oh yes, I remember now. I lunged at him, trying to keep my balance, trying to remember all my instruction about "roll left, swirl right or lunge left, duck right, or swirl right and weave left, or lunge...!" Shit, I confess, all I remember was very confused and very excited - it was after all my first boxing match, and I'm sure to everyone

watching, it showed. I remember the crowd was yelling their heads off, even the officers and NCO's.

I remember making a single glance around the ring as I heard and saw the officers, who were all sitting up front, shouting and cheering wildly as any sailor or Marine would do. They enjoyed the show. Then, Bingo - the lights went out and I along with them. I went out cold -- one punch and it was bye-bye land. I figured I was out and as cold as one of old Davey Jones' codfish 10,000 feet below where I landed. Luckily, my fight was the last of the day, so people probably had their fill. Later after I woke up, I found out that I was hailed as the "Hero of Fox Company. I was their champ even though I had lost my first and last professional fight. I was the champ not for winning, but for my feeble attempt if not my boxing style in defending Fox's honor by having someone show up to get killed. Not having a boxer in the smoker was kind of a shipboard sin -- it showed weakness and damn it, Fox was not weak. I hope they enjoyed every second of that historical fight because my ears still ring today! It was a lesson well learned and one learned I should have avoided, but couldn't out of honor. We Marines always said to each other, "never volunteer for anything." I broke that rule and paid dearly, but it was all in good fun and I was the talk of the town for weeks. But, I continued to be seasick during that voyage, and I continued to lose weight. It was weight I

didn't need to lose. It was also weight I would not regain over the next 12 months no matter how hard I tried.

I left San Diego in August 1965, I was a solid 170 pounds. When I came back in September 1966, I was a skinny 140 pounds, and I was as brown as fall berry bush. I'm convinced to this day that the best way to lose weight is to take a cruise, get seasick, and then buy new clothes once you get back to land. Land ho! Okinawa, here we are! Roll out the red carpet! We anticipated a short stop in Okinawa for some jungle training and "weatherizing." Many of us, like most in the American public, didn't even know where Vietnam was at that time. Likewise, many of us had never been to Okinawa, let alone any other overseas base. I had never been to Okinawa, but I had been overseas before. My first overseas tour had been in Korea with the Naval Advisory Group from 1961 to 1963, but I had flown to and from Korea. This was my first taste of shipboard life. There were plenty of old "salts" (those Marines and sailors with extensive service at sea) all lined up with their seagoing tales guaranteed to thrill us and prepare us for the unknown life aboard ship. It was all geared for greenhorns among us, like me. In the final analysis some of the old "salts" didn't equate the trip as going to war any more than I did because most of them even with their extensive overseas experience hadn't been in combat. Going to war would be a first for them as well. Little did any of us know

at the time that all of us would have to prove ourselves in combat a few days before Christmas.

Our training had been good, very good, and typically Marine Corps style. However, no amount of training, no matter how realistic it is can ever prepare anyone for their combat engagement, their first firefight, their first mortar barrage, their first enemy artillery attack, or for witnessing their combat death. Only experience in combat brings the reality of war clearly in view. The movies try to make combat appear real, but that's only Hollywood. They can't capture the actual combat experience few men or women ever know or feel. Only combat documentaries capture the realness of war. Most men who experience combat and see death up close or experience wounds themselves don't talk about it very much except on rare occasion and mostly with fellow combatants. For a long time, I didn't know why, but I do now. I always thought, hey, tell us about war and help prepare us for the rigors of combat. Mostly they did not. In many cases, we had no combat-tested Vets around who had combat experience and thus could relay some advice. The ones who did, didn't want to talk about it. They don't talk about combat because they felt that those listening either won't believe their stories, or that they would think they were exaggerating. Some, I suppose would think they were making up wild stories to make themselves look good. In the end, most simply don't talk

about war except amongst friends and old comrades. That, too, usually happens later in life as they mellow in their views.

The hazard there is that old memories start to mix things and it's hard to separate fact from fiction. In some cases, like mine, memories become hardened views about war and combat as we see how our nation gears up for war again. We start to measure whether it for a reason or not. I know a lot of old timers who never got any closer to combat than a front row seat at a John Wayne movie, but boy do they have some tales to tell. Most of them probably worked in the rear areas sorting hot beer cans. They now tell and re-tell war stories as if they actually lived them firsthand, and each time they speak, the action is more real [for them] and their listeners. These storytellers are easy to spot. As for me, I feel comfortable telling my story in this book because I've tried to blend in my experiences, those of others with their perspectives on the same actions, and historical accounts. I feel comfortable speaking to Veterans or young soldiers about to go into combat, like I did with my oldest son, Danny, before he jumped into Panama with his Army parachute regiment (1/504 PIR) to help capture General Manuel Noreiga in December 1989. He was one of the 22 Army soldiers wounded in that action, and his back and leg are still not normal today although he managed to jump again into combat with them during the Gulf War where he remained for nearly a year in

1991. I have spoken about Vietnam when asked directly to speak on the topic in public in the past.

Nowadays, I feel more open to speaking out against war in general. What made me so "anti-war" were the LBJ and McNamara stories about their decision making follies. I believe we should only go to war if we are directly attacked. At times, it may be necessary to go to war if directly threatened, or as a last resort to protect our so-called national interests (usually easy to identify such as economic security over oil). That last resort also may be to defend our allies like in Korea. But, we should avoid war at all cost, and make that commitment only when all other means have broken down and war is the only solution. Once started, we should use all our resources and forces to get the job done quickly and not prolong it like we did in Vietnam. We must avoid war as much as possible, but we have to be razor-sharp and ready to fight and win in short order if needed. Most people equate "war" like that which they see on TV or on the big screen. War isn't like that. War is awful, unpleasant, numbing, nasty, and holds lasting consequences for those who experience it. As I stood there and watched San Diego disappear quickly into the dark night, I didn't feel like we were going to war in part because I wore those silly "rose-colored glasses" all the anti-war songs spoke about. War to me, like so many others, was Hollywood. No amount of military training can prepare one for

the horrors of actual combat, especially for the infantryman. The task is impossible.

We need lots of training before we ask young men and women to go off and die for their country. To me, nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, brings out one's pride and honor and dignity more than having survived in combat. Those who have endured combat, I think are the first to say, "We should avoid war at all costs. Fight if we must, but take all steps to avoid war as much as possible." Having firsthand information about combat is important to any trooper going into battle for the first time. In 1965, we were well trained and prepared, technically and physically, but we were not ready mentally for the rigors of combat or for the shock of death or massive injury. Each one didn't know how they would act or react under enemy fire once friends started to die around them, nor how one would react when wounded himself. No amount of training or training scenarios can prepare a soldier for their first combat engagement -- their first firefight -- their first battle. In our entire battalion few had combat experience because the war in Korea was just a dozen years old by 1965. Even our battalion commander, Lt. Col. Bob Hannifin, had some Korean War experience but not much. In Fox company, we were somewhat lucky. My platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Arvin Swanson, had combat experience from Korea. A few

others had served during that war, but had not seen any action. "Swannie's" experience would prove invaluable.

He would take over the platoon after Lieutenant Charlie George, our platoon commander [now a retired Colonel living and teaching in 29 Palms California] was wounded on December 10, 1965 during Harvest Moon. Sergeant Swanson, "Swannie" as he was called by Fox company senior NCOs, took over our platoon when George got hit that day. In turn, I moved up to his job as platoon sergeant since Sergeant Bob Hickman (our Platoon Guide and senior to me) had been killed at the same time Lt. George was WIA. In this one fight, I went from squad leader to platoon sergeant in 10 hours. It was something totally unexpected. Landing in Okinawa was also an unexpected adventure. Land Ho!

So that's Okinawa! Our first stop and finally, dry land! Okinawa, that little-known island paradise lying a few hundred miles south of Japan, and the place that cost so many lives on April Fool's day in April 1945 during the invasion. But, in August 1965, Okinawa was still under U.S. control (although it was a Japanese Prefecture). It had been under U.S. control since the end of that last great battle of the Pacific campaign, which also ended up being the last big battle of WW II. I wondered as I looked toward shore and as we anchored, how friendly, or unfriendly the locals would be today again since a huge force

was again "invading" this tiny island. Okinawa remained under U.S. supervision until it reverted to Japanese control in 1973. That reversion is an interesting story.

I was serving in Okinawa from 1973-1974 when reversion was scheduled to be in full bloom. Now, everyone knows the Japanese are perfectionists at doing just about everything they set out to do. So, making a transition from Western standards back to Asian standards from their point of view would be a piece of cake. It was right up their alley to be treated like any precise operation. There are many things to consider when a nation goes from western forms of doing things back to eastern ways. Okinawa was no exception. However, the transition went very smoothly as only the Japanese could pull it off. There were few hitches. In fact, they approached the transition task like a well-oiled military operation. For example, about 45 to 60 days before "T Day [transition day]" the Japanese government began running videotapes on TV, day and night nonstop. They all had the same script and the same message: drive carefully, drive slowly, look "right and then left." Now this last part was a huge change because the natives, the people of Okinawa, had been driving on the right side of the road on western-style roads [like we did] so they were used to looking "left and then right" as we Americans are taught. Safety became priority number one and rightly so, so their taped instructions pointed out clearly the

differences between the U.S. (bad way) and the "right way" (good Japanese way). Some political messages were there, too, regarding the "wrong way vs. the Japanese way."

Anyway, the ingenious Japanese wanted to make sure everyone knew that the "right" way would be to convert not only driving but their thinking as well. This meant not only that their citizens but that U.S. Forces personnel well serving on Okinawa would all use the "other" side of the road just like they did in mainland Japan, which had been copied from the British style of driving. I think the task became harder for the people of Okinawa than for Americans because many of us had owned and driven Japanese cars all along, but on the other side of the road according to rules of the road for our forces stationed there. The Japanese pulled off this difficult task as precise as they did the military operation on that fateful April Fools Day, 1945 so long ago. They were just as smooth and just as skillful in both operations.

In 1945, as allied planners worked out the final details for the invasion of Okinawa, many predicted heavy casualties on the beach, as what many called the greatest battle of WWII to end the Pacific campaign was about to take place. The Japanese for their part were not fooled on that April Fool's day -- the allied planners were fooled! The Japanese knew what they were doing by sucking in the U. S. forces and attacking when they

were ready, not when the planners were ready. The Japanese plan worked perfectly for the first hours just as they planned.

The initial landing and beach action went virtually unopposed, but not as anticipated, and then all hell broke loose, also not anticipated. Things changed in short order as our forces started moving inland -- right where the Japanese planners had predicted. Allied plans called for a short, bloody campaign just beyond the beaches -- a trend that served us well across most of the Pacific. Now, however, the last die-hard Japanese commanders had other ideas. Our side hoped for a short invasion, mop up action, and then on to the invasion of Japan itself later that year to finally end the war. The other side had other ideas. They knew they could not win here, so they planned to stall as long as possible the invasion of the "homeland (mainland Japan)." It almost worked. A lot of military planners thought that because Okinawa was such a small place and so near Japan that the job would be easy. Okinawa is small, no doubt about that. It's so small in fact that in later years, while serving there, many of us would ride our bicycles around the island in only one day. In 1945, we were wrong though! The initial light and virtually unopposed landing took everyone by surprise, but it didn't last very long. As our troops crossed the beaches, Japanese Kamikazes arrived on the scene just as the Japanese military perfectionists had planned and they started to

wreak havoc on our ships anchored in the various harbors and out at sea. Then all hell broke loose inland as they had planned.

The Japanese were dug into every hill and mountainside that this small island offered. It became apparent quickly that this "last" Pacific campaign would now take months not days -- weeks and not hours. The Japanese strategy was suicidal and simple: Suck the Allied forces inland where they could no longer get daily support due to close in fighting, inflict heavy casualties, and hope for the best knowing full and well they were outnumbered and destined to die -- at our hands, or by suicide. William Manchester writes about just up close and personal it got for him in his book, Goodbye Darkness. He writes firsthand about combat and death as he saw it and nearly died in it. Manchester was a Marine Sergeant working as a Intelligence Scout Team leader during the battle of Okinawa. He later was severely wounded and nearly lost his life. In his book, he gives a powerful personal account of the battle for a place history calls "Sugar Loaf." He tells us how time can play a trick on our minds as the years pass, and the battles have long ended. He paints a vivid picture of how that battle and others leading up to the invasion of Okinawa continued to rage inside the mind soul for years after the battles themselves had long ended. His memory is vivid and so are the details of his experiences. His story is about his personal adventure and travel back to visit

Okinawa and see again the spot where he was severely wounded and nearly died. He said it helped take away his darkness.

He went back to visit "Sugar Loaf" hill. It may have been called labeled "Sugar Loaf" but to Manchester it was anything but sweet. One book reviewer had this to say about Manchester's story, "...this book is a very personal quest to find what he (Manchester) calls a place where he lost his youth and nearly died as a young Marine ... a place that is gripping and haunting."

As I stood there looking at Okinawa over the side of my ship in 1965, it didn't look that way to me. Okinawa was as I saw it a beautiful island that had been transformed. Any thought of it holding haunting memories of war were far as far as I was concerned and besides, Manchester's book had not even been written in 1965 -- he wrote it in 1979. Now, 35 years later, and after a different era, after a different war, Vietnam has left itself to haunt me just as Okinawa must have haunted Manchester after all those years. Oddly, he went back to revisit Okinawa and turned back on the light that had put him into darkness as a young man. I don't feel I am trying to rid myself of any darkness by opening up the light through this book as Mr. Manchester did in his. I have never had a cold wet dream, or profusely sweating at nights, or flashbacks that resulted in hostage taking at McDonalds coupled with shooting up the post office, or demanding millions in ransom for some terrorist act.

I've never had bizarre thoughts like that; many Vietnam Vets have. I do have haunting memories nonetheless.

On one hand, I cherish all the good memories on the other hand, and I'm saddened about all those who died so young. They lost their chance at life. Writing allows me to carry forth memories about my comrades who lost their opportunities, so I can tell the story for them since they cannot. William Manchester went back to Okinawa to get rid of his darkness by facing Okinawa and that awful place where he nearly died. He tried to figure out why he lived and others around him didn't. A few of his closest friends died in one sudden blast from a huge explosion that wiped them out instantly and left him severely wounded. His friends were erased from the earth in a single second; he left with hundreds of shrapnel wounds and years of memories and a lifetime to contemplate. His search for an answer is and remains one of the great mysteries of war where soldiers ask this simple question: "Why did I live and others all around me die?" Many other questions go unanswered, too. Is there a magic formula to ending all this madness? Is there a reason why things like that happen or turn out that way? Who decides who lives and who dies in war? How can it be God's way if God is supposed to be loving and a peaceful? I thought God loved us all, so how can he allow things like that to happen? Then I pause, of course, God loves us -- all of us. He didn't cause

those events to happen directly, indirectly, yes. Man causes war and only man can prevent war.

God gives us life and the tools to live a good life albeit everyone's tools are not as sharp as the next person's, but the chore to make them sharp and working is up to us, not up to God. God gave human beings one element that no other living creature possesses, the ability to think and be rational. In the end, God holds us accountable for our actions. It's called judgement day. As for me, I wouldn't want it any other way. My best analogy would be this. God gives us the ability to design trains and allows us to be smart enough to make them run on time. But, God doesn't valid our tickets for the trip, nor does he operate the trains or keep them safe for us to travel. Those responsible things are left for us to figure out and manage. As a young man growing up with a very religious Mother, I was always told that God "works in strange ways." That is an understatement because he surely does; sadly, many of us just don't get it. As a young Marine for example, William Manchester tells us he jumped ship while recovering from a minor wound just to get back into combat with his unit because, as he writes, "They (my men) need me." He did that against medical orders, why? He put that nearly fatal decision this way: "It was an act of love. Those men on the line were my family, my home. They were closer to me than I can say,

closer than any friends had been or ever would be. They had never let me down, and I couldn't do it to them."

"I had to be with them, rather than let them die and me live with the knowledge that I might have saved them. Men, I now knew, do not fight for flag or country, for the Marine Corps or glory or any other abstraction. They fight for one another. Any man in combat, who lacks comrades who will die for him, or for whom he is willing to die, is not a man at all. He is truly damned." Were I to possess the hand of Shakespeare, I couldn't have written words more beautiful, or as true as those. He captures the words every infantryman who ever saw friend die in combat would say and feel. Perhaps my darkness appears and disappears on these pages, but unlike Manchester, I have no intention of going back to Vietnam to find out if I have darkness waiting to be erased or not. Okinawa was my light for a few days before the darkness set in - exactly the opposite of Manchester's. I find that ironic, if not mystical in a strange sort of way.

We were scheduled to spend only a few of days in Okinawa before embarking on the USS IWO JIMA and heading for the coast of Vietnam. We were going to conduct operations up and down the coast. They were dubbed "Dagger Thrust" strikes. Staying on Okinawa only a few days was the best part because most of us

wanted to get to Vietnam and into battle -- how naïve we were at the time.

Silly kids wearing rose-colored glasses thinking that war and combat would be like running through the woods playing "Army." But, Okinawa had its up's and down's as well. There was no extended liberty because most of the villages were off limits, so that made the girls off limits as well. We were told we didn't have time. For a bunch a horny young Marines who had been on ship for 20 days, it was not the news they wanted to hear. Some of the guys in Fox had been here before, and some of them still thought their "girlfriends" were still waiting in one of the local bars, just for him to return. Anyway, some of these guys proved valuable for those who dared enough to break the rules and sneak out at night for what was dubbed "short time." These guys knew where all the holes in the fences were because they had worked the fence line on earlier tours. Since the fences were seldom repaired, the horny guys knew them by heart, some even had maps. There was a strict curfew in affect in Okinawa at the time, and it had been in place for years, but that didn't stop the horny guys! If they wanted a good time and wanted to stay out late at night, they had to sneak out and go through one of the temporary exits (entrances). They had to sneak out and then sneak back undetected early in the morning or late at night if they didn't elect to spend all night in the

ville. If caught, is was a guaranteed office hours (short of a Court Martial) or commander's mast and certain loss in stripes.

Some guys took chances -- they were the "career PFC's" in our company. They were easily recognizable -- four years in service and still a Private. For some of them, this last rite in Oki for a "short time" would be their last good time, but we had no way of knowing it at the time. This easy route to sex and threat of losing a stripe and money never made any of them think twice. It gave them the freedom to get a "short time" (for ten bucks), sneak back through the hole in the fence just in time for 0530 reveille, and hope that no one had seen them. I was a NCO and squad leader, so setting the example was my mantra. I decided to remain as loyal as possible to my wife back in California so I didn't sneak out, and I didn't have the heart to report anyone. I recall thinking, what would I do in six or seven months after the urge increases. In Vietnam there'd be sneaking out to the ville. In the meantime, I would try to be a "straight arrow." After a few days of jungle training and getting used to the awful heat (Okinawa's heat was supposed to acclimate us to the heat in Vietnam), we embarked on the USS Iwo JIM and headed for war. The Iwo was not like the USS Valley Forge (a ship we would later also serve on). Not at all. The Iwo Jima was not a converted WWII carrier -- it was brand new and had been built from the keel up. It was specifically designed

for troops and helicopters. The USS Valley Forge on the other hand was a totally different experience.

The "Happy Valley" had the old style WW II wooden flight deck. We would stay on the Iwo a month or so and then were scheduled to move to the Valley Forge while in the Philippines sometime in early October. A word about the "Happy Valley" (as the crew called her). Her keel was laid in September 1943, and she was commissioned in November 1946. She was reclassified several times and had many different missions before becoming a helicopter carrier designed to carry troops like us around the South Pacific and South China Sea. She was decommissioned and struck from the Naval records in January 1970, finally being sold for scrap in October 1971. There is a special section about the "Happy Valley" later in the story. As we readied to sail from Okinawa, we linked up with our air support, our Marine helicopter squadrons. One which carried troops had the UH-34D (Utility Helicopters). The other squadron was our gunship squadron, the UH1E, nicknamed "Huey." All loaded up, we headed off for Vietnam. We were now officially designated Special Landing Force (SLF). We were going to conduct strike raids (Dagger Thrusts) up and down the coast wherever needed. At one point in time, we were scheduled to have some down time in the Philippines that was to include more jungle training and then back to Vietnam. One such operation stands out in my mind early

in September. We were told to be ready to support the landing of the U.S. Army's First Cavalry Division soon to arrive.

But, before we did that, we managed to get some liberty in Manila, and that I looked forward to. All the bars in P.I. were supposed to be better and cheaper than in Okinawa because Okinawa still used U.S. dollars and the P.I. used Pesos, so the exchange rate favored us cashing in our green backs for Pesos. More importantly, there were no fences to sneak out and under from to reach the ville, but we did have a curfew nonetheless. All had to do was look sharp and walk off the ship right into Manila and get laid. Nights in Manila were nice, except the occasional fight between drunken Marine and sailor which seemed to occur each night as some sort of rite of passage.

I had never been in the Philippines before so I was looking forward to having a good time -- and I did. It was on our second return trip to Manila, and it happened to be my 24th birthday, October 11, 1965. Not only was Manila good and the break welcomed, but I had an old high school reunion on the ship with one of my old high school classmates. He was a native of Du Quoin like me but he was a Lieutenant (Richard "Dick" Haines). Dick was a Huey pilot in the gunship squadron. There we were together in service for the first time. We had a little reunion, and that was nice. Dick and I played football together in high school; he a senior and I a junior. After his service

obligation, he went back to Du Quoin, settled down and became a financial investor.

In October 1965, during one of the "Dagger Thrust" raids, we had a bad "friendly fire" situation that I had to testify to about that involved Haines' squadron, although not him personally. We had just concluded one of those famous "McNamara Sweep and Clean" operations. Fox Company was all saddled up and moving to the high ground where the choppers would take us back to the Valley Forge. We had settled in and was just sitting around waiting when suddenly, Hotel and Golf Companies came under enemy fire out in front of us down the hill and across a wide open area. They immediately called for close air support and in this case it meant Haines' squadron of Huey gunships. From our vantage point, we could see the two companies engaged with the VC near a huge tree line, so in a sense, we had a grandstand seats to watch the Huey's attack below and almost right in front of us. In swooped two Hueys roaring right from behind us and heading straight down the hillside towards Hotel Company. Then something terrible went wrong. They had no sooner cleared our position than they started their "guns hot (guns and rockets blazing away) attacks toward the tree line. The best laid plans of mice and men often fail as they say, and at that moment, they failed miserably. The Hueys zoomed in and unleashed heavy 2.75 rockets and M-60 machine gun fire, except the trouble

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was, they hit short their fire ended up right on top of the Marines down near the tree line.

It didn't look pretty from our advantage point. I remember our radio operators shouting "Abort, Abort, Abort, friendlies under fire." The attack didn't last long; just that one deadly run. I don't remember the exact count but Hotel had at least two or three Marines killed and several more wounded. It didn't matter, whatever the number, one friendly fire casualty is one too many! That evening, the squadron commander and our battalion commander (Lt.Col. Hanifin) held an "informal" investigation back on the ship. Haines knew me and knew I had been there, so he asked me to come down and tell the panel what I had seen. I told them exactly what I saw. The Hueys shooting over the heads as they crossed the hill behind us toward the area where our guys were attacking a tree line, and that it looked like some rounds fell short as best I could tell from my advantage point. That was the end of my story. I had just described my first "friendly fire" combat accident (because they are accidents; sad accidents, but nonetheless accidents). I never found out what action was taken against the pilots, or which pilots were involved, but I know it was not Haines because he told me so, and I believed him. He told me he was not flying one of those of the lead Hueys that fired short, although he too saw the action off from one side. I had one friend, Sgt. John Lawless who had

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been in Hotel Company that day and was wounded; not serious or life threatening, but got him evacuated anyway.

I last saw him when we were stationed at Camp Lejuene, North Carolina a number of years later. We lived next door to each other in base Capehart housing for a while in 1973, and he still never forgave the choppers for their friendly fire attack that killed his Marines and wounded him and others.

I wonder if the chopper guys ever went on and got their short times in Okinawa or in the Philippines?

CHAPTER FIVE

Celebrating with the 1st Cav Division

Now that story about the Army and our support for them.

Getting into combat in those early days was easy because we used helicopters and not horses. We had them right there with us on the ships. We had been with a couple of different squadrons since the moment we left Okinawa. Now we were supported by HMM-261, who was called the "Echo Mike" squadron. They were called "Echo Mike" because EM was their tail identification letters. They were officially Marine Medium Helicopter (HMM) Squadron 261 (HMM-261 for short). Every Marine Corps aviation squadron has a ID number, letters and numbers, painted on their tails, wings, or fuselage. The choppers we had back in 1965 were the now-defunct UH-34D, a single-rotor, slow-moving helicopter that carried only 7 to 10 full-loaded troops. These H-34's didn't carry much else. They could lift a small vehicle, but that was about it. They were slow and they were easy targets. Our choppers had EM painted on their sides and noses along with a set of glaring eyes painted on the front like those "tiger teeth" in John Wayne "Flying Tiger" movies. Echo Mike was one of the more seasoned and battle-tested squadrons in Vietnam during

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these still early days of the buildup in 1965. They eventually left Vietnam in the summer of 1966.

They were the first squadron to support us on the Valley Forge, and then for a short time later while we were on the Iwo Jima. EM's nickname was "Porter's Bulls" - a name they got from their first combat commander, Lieutenant Colonel M. B. Porter. Porter also held the distinction of being the squadron's first Purple Heart recipient. When they left Vietnam in 1966, they left behind an enviable record for others to follow. Initially, they arrived in Vietnam on June 21, 1965, and for over a year, they participated in some of the largest Marine Corps operations in those early days of the war. Operations Operation Piranha, Harvest Moon, Double Eagle, Utah, Hot Springs, Texas, Indiana, Montgomery, as well as several small commando-type operations that 2/1 conducted (those Dagger Thrust).

Echo Mike's list of firsts is enviable. For example, during the month of July 1965, they participated in the first night strike against the Viet Cong aptly dubbed Operation Midnight. Operation "Starlite," (some say Starlight) is framed as the first huge and dramatic Marine Corps offensive operation of the war. Echo Mike performed massive troop lifts, numerous re-supply missions, and hundreds of medical evacuations. They made gun runs during each mission, which for an H-34 was not their

primary mission because all they had were two M-60 machineguns sticking out of each window on either side which sprayed the area as they landed and offloaded troops.

They were slow and easy targets. They weren't "gun ships" like the UH-1E's. Operation "Starlite" by any measure was an unqualified success. The Navy awarded the squadron a Navy Unit Commendation. On August 23, 1965, and shortly after "Starlite" they were the first squadron stationed at Danang East, later renamed to "Marble Mountain Air Facility." From this new base which remained pretty much the choppers' home during the war, Echo Mike continued to ferry Marines into battle. They also carried Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers and Australian "Diggers." During tow of the Dagger Thrust Operations, they flew in some of the worst weather imaginable.

One of the first operations took place during the monsoon season just east of Saigon. The heavy rains seemed to follow the squadron as they launched operations in I Corps Area. I Corps, pronounced "Eye Corps," was in the northern sector of the country. (Author's note: We were in both of operations. These were the prelude to Harvest Moon). In January 1966, the squadron again came ashore, this time in Chu Lai air base (the area where Starlite had been conducted). They stayed there until they left Vietnam later that year. Echo Mike was also a highly decorated Marine Corps squadron. Their crews received 45 purple hearts, 22

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Distinguished Flying Crosses, 2 Silver Stars, 12 Bronze Stars, 5 Navy Commendation Medals, 10 Vietnamese Crosses of Gallantry, and over 2,000 Air Medals.

They flew 11,859 combat flight hours with 121 choppers that were hit by enemy fire some 273 times. They lifted over 2,315 medical evacuations as they flew a total of 38,090 combat sorties (one sortie is one plane flying one combat mission). They ferried 47,522 troops into combat and those missions included 7,237,867 pounds of cargo. While doing their duty, they expended over 32,610 rounds of ammunition supporting ground troops. Their motto was "...we came, saw, and did our job." I wouldn't argue with that one bit! One final note regarding Echo Mike. In my platoon, there was a Corporal named Eugene M. Cantwell, lived somewhere in Connecticut. We called him "Kid Cantwell" after some boxer, but for no particular reason except it sounded good. Gene wasn't a boxer, but he had a "baby's face," so the name "Kid" stuck. We called our EM squadron "Kid Cantwell's" squadron" because they both had the same initials "Echo Mike." I haven't seen Cantwell since he left Vietnam. He was lucky because he managed to leave early having served a short tour before he joined 2/1 and we left for Vietnam again for a full tour. He probably went back home.

Our battalion had the opportunity to help the U.S. Army 1st Cavalry Division come ashore in Vietnam. Part of this story

worth remembering is a part that only a Marine will understand -- the term "green side out, or brown side out."

Green or brown, depending on the season and terrain, dictated which color helmet camouflage cover we were to wear for certain field operations. In California, for example, it could be a half-year of green side out and the other half brown, depending on how soon the foliage changed its colors. This of course enabled us to blend into the grass and surrounding foliage with ease. Marine Corps helmet covers in those days were reversible, so the task could be done quickly if the weather or terrain where we were going had already changed before we did. In any large organization, there are always some people who never get the word no matter what. In the service, at least in the Marine Corps, we called those people who never got the word the "10 percent." They never got the word no matter how many times it was repeated or disseminated. Some would always get it wrong. Every unit I ever served in had their 10 percent. Sometimes out of sheer frustration, I think, our higher HQ would change the word on purpose just to test us. When things did not go well, we'd say "green side out or brown side out" to show our frustration as well -- that phrase came to mean that you'd better check the facts in order to head off any shithouse rumors. During the war in Vietnam, it was always "green side

out" for our helmets because Vietnam was green all year round, but we still had our 10%. But, for screw up's, "brown side out" was the winner hands down.

From mid-September when we arrived off the coast of Vietnam right up until were scheduled to go ashore permanently, somewhere around December, our battalion conducted a dozen or more high-profile "Dagger Thrust Raids" up and down the coast of Vietnam. Because 2/1 was designated the SLF (Special Landing Force), we had the capability to fly into any area and all hours of the day or night to support American troops, Vietnamese forces, or anyone else who was in trouble. In most cases, we went ashore via helicopter but in some operations, we would combine air and sea and attack. In those cases, some companies would go via chopper and the rest would hit the beach from Amtracs - Amphibious Tractors, or as some called them "Steel Coffins." In those early days, we in essence were pioneers for what contemporary Marines call "Your 9-11 force -- on call 24-hours a day, 7 days a week." I think I can speak for all of us when I say we had great respect for the sailors who worked side by side with us as we moved between the Valley Forge and Iwo Jima and back again. The USS Valley Forge deserves special mention for several reasons beyond her being an old WW II rust bucket of an aircraft carrier. Everyone, except those in earshot of senior officers, call the Valley Forge the "Happy Valley."

For the life of me for a very long time, I couldn't figure out why. Later, we found out that she was called happy not because the sailors and Marines were glad to serve on her.

She was called "happy" because in the olden days she was supposed to have had a high rate of homosexuality -- higher some said than any other ship in the Pacific Fleet or the entire Navy for that matter. Of course this depended on which sailor's version you chose to believe (assuming it was true). As for me, I don't know whether the stories were true or not because I knew of no such incidents, however, even in 1965 the name still stuck. Now, in some circles those words were fighting words, and many a Marine went to knuckle city over being called "Happy" by other sailors we would encounter while on pass in P.I. Such cat-calling normally came from other sailors not attached to the "Happy Valley" who were mostly drunk and itching for a fight. I have included some historical facts about the Valley Forge at the end of the book. She had a long and glorious history in spite of the name-calling. One of those SLF operations deserves special mention because it involved our support for the landing of the Army's First Cav Division in Vietnam. The actual support was labeled "routine." But, as was the case in some of those "routine" landings, they turned out to anything but routine, so we always had doubts about anything being routine. This particular operation sticks in my mind and was rekindled when I

heard about Hollywood's plans to make a movie at the First Cav in Vietnam called *We Were Soldiers*, starring Mel Gibson.

We were briefed to fly ashore, occupy some high ground overlooking Qui Nhon harbor and provide cover for the Army's landing. This particular operation, in retrospect, turned out like so many other "routine" operations that should have been labeled "ridiculous" rather than routine. Anyway, here's how that all unfolded. We were to fly inland, take the high ground, occupy a company size area overlooking Qui Nhon Harbor and react to any trouble that would interfere with the Army unit coming ashore below us that morning of September 10, 1965. Okay, that sounded simple enough, "hold and defend the high ground" around the harbor and react accordingly. I assumed we would be a blocking force as the Army troopers stormed the beaches below. We landed unopposed, took up our positions on the high ground overlooking the harbor, and dug in. Actually, we had pretty good seats for the upcoming Army assault. Most of us had been in many amphibious landings and training exercises, but most of us had never sat down and prepared to watch one as we were about to do, so I remember thinking this would be a good lesson in amphibious operations to see by our sister service. There we were, dug in, fat dumb and happy waiting the Army to come ashore below. We were at the ready; razor-sharp and combat tested. We waited, and then we waited and then we waited some more. We

could see the ships near the harbor and we could see plenty of movement below, but no Naval gunfire and no air strikes.

What was going on was not what we expected. Hours went by and then things started getting boring. Our adrenaline wore off hours ago and now there we sat watching a combat assault that did not take place. We continued to sit there all hyped and primed and ready to fight, but all we saw were a few Navy LSTs hit the beach, drop their ramps and unload soldiers carrying their dufflebags over their shoulders as a few helicopters circled overhead. Our radios kept chattering, but that was about it. As it turned out nothing happened. I guess we were thankful for that, but we had been ready and nothing happened as we thought. There was no enemy opposition, either on the high ground or down in or near the harbor or on the beach. What was the big deal about we all wondered. It was not any amphibious landing I'd ever seen before but we continued to hold the high ground as ordered. We expected hordes of VC to attack the landing force, it never happened. Not one single VC showed up. There right below us was the glorious 1st CAV Division coming ashore -- administratively. They weren't storming the beach at all; they were wading ashore. They weren't attacking; they were stumbling ashore. They weren't throwing hand grenades and firing their rifles; they had their duffel bags flung over their shoulders and as far as I could see, that was the only weapons

they carried. Their weapons, ammunition and heavy stuff as it turned out, came ashore later after they "secured the beach."

They landed, but their fighting equipment came ashore in those huge metal containers called CONEX boxes. To this day, I still wonder why in the hell we were ordered ashore thinking we were providing combat support when all we saw was an admin landing. I often wonder what would have happened had they been attacked in the harbor. There was no way in hell we could have reacted and provided them support from where we had been on that high ground. This one event turned out to be an early indication of the more stupid chapters in a war that were to follow as the years and war dragged on. I did some research on the 1st CAV's trip to Vietnam and found it was conducted like a typical Army overseas deployment. This is how the history books reports that deployment. Their movement from the United States to Vietnam was code-named, "Operation: PAT." It was planned and scheduled to be completed in three distinct increments.

Each phase would include an Advance Liaison Detachment, an Advance Party, and a Main Body. The Advance Liaison Detachment was composed of 32 officers and men. This group was led by Brigadier General John S. Wright, Assistant Division Commander, called B Group. They departed the United States by air on August 2, 1965. They arrived in the Republic of Vietnam two days later. Of the 32 men in the Advance Liaison Detachment, 28 were pilots

including, of course, General Wright; the others were individual unit executive officers.

Their mission was to coordinate with, and gain experience from Army aviation units already in Vietnam since the 1st CAV (Airmobile Division) was brand new Army concept designed just for Vietnam (almost everything was helicopter transportable), they were the "new kids in town." First, they needed to acclimatize themselves to terrain and weather, and become familiar with flying conditions in Vietnam's central highlands.

The Advance Party made up of about 1,040 officers and men, left Fort Benning, Georgia, between August the 14th and 20th, 1965. Moving with 152 tons of cargo (including nine UH-1B (Huey) helicopters), the Advance Party traveled to Warner Robbins Air Force Base near Macon, Georgia. From there, they were deployed on aircraft provided by the Air Force's Military Airlift Command (MAC) who flew them aboard C-130 and C-124 aircraft from various locations. The first leg took them to Travis AFB in California and then on to Hickam Field in Hawaii and then on to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. This large party finally all arrived in Nha Trang, Vietnam between August 19 - 27. Nha Trang is located on the eastern coast of Vietnam. These two advance forces joined at An Khe, 36 miles inland from the Qui Nhon Harbor, and just north of Nha Trang. There, the Cav began to establish a temporary base camp near the An Khe air strip as the

Army's 101st Airborne Division's 1st Brigade, provided security for this phase of their arrival in country.

The third and final phase of troop and supply movement found the bulk of the Division departing Fort Benning and deploying by troop and cargo ships of the Military Sea Transport Service. Approximately 13,500 men left Columbus, Georgia in mid-August 1965. Moving by train and bus, they headed for Atlantic and Gulf ports of embarkation. Six troop carriers, four aircraft carriers, and seven cargo ships were employed in the over water movement. The 1st Brigade loaded on the USNS Geiger, the 2d Brigade on the USNS Buckner, and the 3d Brigade on the USNS Rose. The Division rear, Support Command, aviation battalions, and various combat support units loaded on other non-combatant ships that included the USNS Darby, Patch, and Upsur. The troop ships departed on 16 August 1965 from Charleston, South Carolina. The other four ships departed during the next four days from Charleston and from Savannah. More than 470 of the Division's rotary and fixed wing aircraft were crowded on the carriers USNS Boxer (sister ship of the Valley Force, by the way), Kula Gulf, Croaton, and Car. The Boxer alone had over 220 aircraft, including four flying Cranes from the attached 478th Aviation Company, over fifty CH-47 Chinooks (helicopters), and all of the ASA (Army Security Agency) platoon's Mohawks. The first of these carriers, the

Croaton, sailed from Mobile on August 11th; the remaining three departed on subsequent days.

The Card also left Mobile, and the Boxer and Kula Gulf sailing from Mayport Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida. Their packing had began in early July and continued on a round-the-clock basis until "D-day (depart day)." The general cargo did not move until August 7, 1965 when the first of the seven cargo ships sailed from New Orleans. The sea movement of this third echelon traversed the world moving both east and west. As the Boxer sailed eastward into the Mediterranean and through the Suez Canal (arriving in Qui Nhon on September 9th) the other aircraft carriers and the troop and cargo ships sailed westward through the Panama Canal, stopping at Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines, and arriving at Qui Nhon beginning September 11, 1965 (the day we started our support). As these troop ships approached Vietnam a second echelon in the main body deployment departed Fort Benning. They flew in 18 Caribou aircraft from Lawson Army Airfield on September 3 en route to Hamilton Air Force Base in California. This first and longest leg of the trip took an average of 17 hours and was completed without incident. Shortly thereafter, on September 6, the aircraft departed for Southeast Asia, with fuel, maintenance, and crew stops at Hawaii, Wake, Guam, and the Philippines. On September 18, 1965, the 18 Caribou arrived at Vung Tau; made a short stop and flew

on to An Khe. This was the first time an entire Caribou Company had ferried organic aircraft across the Pacific.

On September 13, 1965, the Darby dropped anchor in Qui Nhon Harbor which also happened to be the Division's birthday, or Organization Day, and it is unlikely that anyone concerned in the Division's activation in September 1921 foresaw it. But, Gen. Kinnard, with customary foresight, had prepared an Organization Day message which newspapers of the ships carrying the Troopers published on this the Division's 44th Birthday. He proclaimed, "The eyes of the world are fixed on this Division. We are the embodiment of an exciting new tactical doctrine. Whatever lies ahead, we will prevail. We are THE FIRST TEAM."

As it turned out, while the 1st Cav celebrated their 44th birthday, we Marines of 2/1 guarded their cake by holding the high ground around the harbor. I still give thanks that nothing serious happened. Everything went off smoothly, and they landed safely, and we went back to our ships with new "war stories."

That October, they would have their first bloodbath in a place called the "Ia Drang Valley." There would be written about that battle and one battalion in particular - the one Mel Gibson would star in. After Ia Drang, 1st Cav would see plenty more action. They remained in Vietnam until 1972. They were one of the first combat divisions to depart Vietnam. They paid a heavy price to fight for freedom just as we did. We were and remain

brothers bound by a common bond known as what I call the "infantry thread."

In retrospect, helping the 1st Cav with their "combat landing" in Qui Nhon should have been a precursor for other nutty or stupid things that would happen over the next year, but it was not. None of us at the time were clever enough to see the road ahead. We were young, naïve and aggressive and we had a job to do for our country.

Our first bloodbath would come during Operation Harvest Moon in December 1965, only a few months after the 1st Cav fight at Ia Drang. And, the prelude to all the operations that were to follow would be the Dagger Thrust raids up and down the Vietnamese coast.

CHAPTER SIX

Dagger Thrust Raids

To make the picture complete as we conducted those raids up and down the coast of South Vietnam, I compiled a series of official press releases about those raids. These were sent to the people back home and until I found them, I had no "official idea" how were doing. I still don't know, but these press releases seem to help!

Dagger Thrust I - September 25, 1965:

"Saigon 26 September - A military spokesman revealed today that a lightning U. S. Marine Corps raid was completed this morning on the Vietnamese central coast. He said that a thousand or more Marines landed by helicopter and landing craft Saturday morning on a peninsula about 260 miles northeast of Saigon. The Leathernecks returned to their ships today, after destroying the Vietcong bunkers and trenches on the peninsula, and meeting some light snipers fire. The Marine Raiders landed on three different parts of the Vung Mu peninsula in a campaign called "Operation Dagger Thrust. Four waves of men and equipment went ashore in landing craft from a Seventh Fleet Amphibious Task Force 15 miles south of the port city of Qui Nhon. Another force of

Leathernecks swept into the base of the peninsula by helicopter to keep any Vietcong from escaping."

"Some Vietcong tried to escape in junks but were battered by Navy jets when they fired on the Marine helicopters. The raid was preceded by air dropped leaflets warning the civilian population to stay clear of the Vietcong, and promising that the Marines mean civilians no harm. The spokesman said that only a few Marines were wounded in the quick campaign, all of them by sharpened stakes hidden on the jungle trails." (Source: Unclassified Navy Communications)

Dagger Thrust IV and V November 30 & December 5, 1965: The following message from Commander SEVENTH Fleet (7th Fleet) is quoted for the information of all hands.

"I wish to extend my heart felt well done to all the officers and men who participated in the Dagger Thrust Operations which were conducted at Lang Ke Ga and Phu Thu. You have taught the enemy that the Vietnam coast is open to our highly professional Marine Amphibious operation. Congratulations to all hands and best wishes for continued success." Signed, Rear Admiral J.W. Williams, Jr.

The following message from Commander Task Force 79 (CTF 79) is quoted for the information of all hands:

"Again you have demonstrated the true effectiveness of our Navy-Marine Corps team. My hearty congratulations for a most

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successful strike against the enemy. Well done." Signed, Major General Fields

The following message from Commander in Chief U. S. PACIFIC Fleet (CINCPAC) is quoted for the information of all hands:

"The results of the Dagger Thrust raid on the enemy at Phu Thu are very gratifying. Successes of this nature prove the value of detailed planning, accurate intelligence and surprise. This exemplifies the strength and versatility of the SEVENTH FLEET Amphibious Forces. To all who planned and participated in this amphibious operation - Well Done." Signed, Admiral Roy L. Johnson.

The following message from CTF 76 is quoted for the information of all hands:

"At the time of parting I want to extend to you and your Marines my sincere thanks for a job well done and wish you fair winds and following sea in the tasks that lie ahead. You and your BLT (Author's note: My battalion landing team) can look back with pride on four complex and demanding operations that required the utmost in skill from our Navy-Marine Corps team. I am particularly pleased that your last raid was successful." Signed, Rear Admiral Wulzen (Source: USS Valley Forge Plan of the Day dated December 9, 1965)

Dagger Thrust V - December 5, 1965:

"U. S. Marines from the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Ready Group struck at suspected Vietcong positions near Phu Thu, thirty miles north of Qui Nhon on 5 Dec."

"This was an amphibious raid named Dagger Thrust. The first wave of Marines departed from the Landing Ship Dock Monticello (LSD 35) and with support from M-38 tanks moved unopposed over the beach to the objective area. Subsequent waves went ashore in landing craft from the Attack Transport Montrose (APA 212). Simultaneously, helo units from the Amphibious Assault Carrier Valley Forge (LPH 8) (Author's note: The author's unit) touched down farther inland. Fourteen VC were reported killed by body count with another eleven estimated killed, friendly casualties were light. The landing was support by Bon Homme Richard (CVA 31). Naval gunfire support was provided by the destroyers Orleck (DD 886) and Hubbard (DD 748). Prior to the landing, boat lanes were cleared of small fishing vessels and junks by Market Time patrol craft. The Seventh Fleet Ready Group is commanded by Captain Thomas P. Weschler, USN, of Erie, Penn embarked in Valley Forge. Rear Admiral Donald Wulzen, USN, of Hamilton, Ohio, Commander Amphibious Forces U.S. Seventh Fleet, observed the operation from his flagship USS Eldorado (AGC 11). Fifteen Vietcong have been killed by body count by U. S. Marines from the Seventh Fleet. They conducted a combined amphibious helo assault named Dagger Thrust early yesterday morning near Phu Thu

approximately 30 miles north of Qui Nhon. Marine casualties have been light. The first wave of helos received heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire in the landing zone.

Marine armed Huey's (Author's note: Lt. Dick Haines) immediately came to their aid with rockets and suppressive fire." (Author's note: This was the 'friendly fire' I discussed earlier that fell on Hotel Company).

"By late afternoon yesterday the Marines had secured the entire objective area. They encountered only light sporadic contact prior to setting up defensive positions for the night. Civic action teams have already commenced humanitarian work." (Author's note: This note appeared at the end of the press releases): "The USS Valley Forge (LPH 8) is still in the Free Mail area." (Author's note: "When ships or troops pulled out of the "combat zone," their free mail service stopped as well as their monthly "combat pay," which explains why many folks wanted to be in the "zone" near the end of the month in order to draw combat pay. We in the infantry and other combat support units in country liked to chide those who used this routine farce to come to Vietnam on the 30th of the month and leave on the 1st of the next month, thus they "earned" credit for two months of "service in a combat zone" -- that then would equate to two months combat pay -- something we in the infantry always found disgusting.)

The following message from Commander Amphibious Forces, Seventh Fleet (CTF 76) is quoted for the information of all hands:

"The fine teamwork and close coordination of the Navy/Marine striking force in the outstanding planning and execution of the second series of Dagger Thrust operations. Once again, Navy-Marine teamwork has been amply demonstrated. Please extend my personal congratulations to all hands for the hard work, wholehearted cooperation and superior skills, which made these combat operations so successful. Well Done." Signed, RADM Wulzen

The following message from CTG 76.4 is quoted for the information of all hands:

"At 1800H (hours) on 6 December 1965 one of the truly significant events of the war in Vietnam came to a close. At that moment a vital force of over 4,000 officers and men, Navy and Marine Corps, submarine, surface, and airman, ceased to exist as a poised rapier, having struck twice. In striking, the Force had ranged over 300 miles between blows. They have achieved success in the face of the Northeast Monsoon; had back-loaded, unreped (Author's note: A Navy term for under way replenished and refueled), made ship to ship transfers in order to be ready for a new target within 36 hours of the old, and

demonstrated guts, determination and know-how in a thousand ways. The enemy was taken by surprise."

"Ships steaming and off-loading in total darkness, silence topside and on communication circuits, moving by a strict time table for hours. Each man played his part carefully, and achieved phenomenal results. The might of BLT 2/1 transported by HMM 261 (the Echo Mike H-34 squadron), and the landing craft crushed the Vietcong at the objective. The loses were at least 20 to 1 against the enemy, and that makes no claims for the beautifully executed strikes of the carrier aircraft and our Huey's and the accurate destroyer gunfire support. It was a Sunday they will not soon forget. As we go our separate ways, thank you to each and every one of you, sailors and Marines, for displayed teamwork, responsibility, bravery and ingenuity. You are a credit to our country, and you have earned the title Fighting Men." Signed, Commodore Weschler

(Author's note: This was the last official message sent out about Dagger Thrust)

"A very special well done goes to our medical team who, working under very difficult conditions performed miracles of surgery and medicine to salvage every single patient. They have brought them aboard and sent them off to shore hospitals with every expectation of recovery. From everything I have read and

been told, the battalion ashore conducted itself in accordance with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps. The score board indicates overwhelming success for our side."

"It is with sincere regret that we head north to off-load this fine group of men not only have they been tremendous fighting men ashore but truly fine shipmates in every sense."

(Author's note: 2/1 was going ashore from shipboard life to land operations). From where I sit on the bridge of Valley Forge - A well done to all hands who make up this competent and smoothly functioning Navy-Marine team." Signed, Capt. Madson, Commanding Officer, USS Valley Forge (Source: USS Valley Forge Plan of the Day, dated December 9, 1965).

As noted, this last message was posted December 9, 1965, but it turned out to be old news for us, for on the eve of December 9th our thoughts were on the events that were to transpire the next day, December 10, 1965. D-Day and Operation: Harvest Moon! It was unknown to us at the time all these messages were being written and transmitted to the public, that most of it dealing with the enemy losses were bullshit, nothing more, nothing less. (Author's Note: Note the careful wording "estimated enemy deaths, or approximate number or enemy casualties."

During the rest of the war, this type of reporting about enemy losses would not get any better nor more truthful than these early reports! Robert McNamara was at work already and none of us knew it yet! We were his second Edsel!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Official Version of Operation HARVEST MOON

There are only a few official versions of OPERATION Harvest Moon and the few that do exist are sketchy and lack details of any real personal experiences. This obvious gap made writing this tiny aspect of that war so long ago truly an interesting and challenging task; a task I strongly felt that history needed to know more about. There are few official details but there are plenty of blank spots in Marine Corps history pages about this operation, which some have dubbed the "Last Big Battle of 1965."

I have tried to blend in my firsthand account, that provided from Colonel Barnum's interview, the story from Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter and former Corporal Tom Miller, and my old company commander, Lieutenant Colonel (then Captain) Jim Page, in an accurate picture of that 10-day battle that took place between December 10-20, 1965. Historically, it was the last big battle of 1965, there is no doubt about that since the Army's 1st Cav Division had already suffered their bloodbath in earlier in October and November 1965 in the I Drang Valley. I always felt that the official version of Operation Harvest Moon

was too short and too one-sided. The version I present through this book has three sides.

All of those sides are based on first-hand eyewitness accounts of those who participated close in to the fighting. History now has the opportunity to help anyone decide which side they like the best -- the official shorter version, or mine and those who fought with me. First, I present the official Marine Corps version. Then, I put it along side the firsthand stories from Utter, Miller, Barnum, and Jim Page. The differences are stark. Events are presented exactly the way we lived them, not the way some historians think we did. Finally, I blend the historical version with my comrades' versions to my own fist hand account, the way I and my squad and platoon lived it. The Marine Corps version sets the stage with only a few major actors. I fill the stage with the real people -- those who played the major roles in that fight during those horrible 10 days. Acting like a producer or director, I try to fill in the blank spots. I want nothing unsaid or untold about this story, and believe me, there were plenty of blanks to be filled in. There probably are others still left unfilled, but I have to draw the line some place. I believe most questions are answered through this book. Who were the actors, what were their roles, and how did they play their parts in this saga? First, there was

my unit, the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines (Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hannifin commanding).

Starting just before noon on December 10, 1965 (D+1 since the operation had already started one day prior with Vietnamese troops in action). We became the focal point for many others in this story. Support infantry battalions were the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines (Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter) and the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines (Lieutenant Colonel Josh Dorsey). Air support was provided by and included HMM-161 (Lieutenant Colonel Rex Denny), HMM-261 (Lieutenant Colonel Mel Porter (Echo Mike squadron who landed my battalion), HMM-361 (Lieutenant Colonel Lloyd Childers). Direct air support (the little that we had) was provided by our own detachment of UH-1E gun ships (Hueys from VMO-6) which included my old hometown high school friend, 1stLt. Dick Haines. There were several elements from the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines who also played a significant role, primarily Hotel Company (1st Lt. Harvey Barnum, Company Artillery Forward Observer). This is how the operation unfolded according to official Marine Corps records. If anyone does a simple internet web search at Yahoo! for example and they type in the words Operation Harvest Moon, they will get this exact version. (Author's note: Any editing is mine, and I have not changed the gist of the story otherwise in that editing):

"Operation Harvest Moon/Lien Ket-18 (Vietnamese code name) directed that a 5th ARVN (Army of Vietnam) Regiment go into the Que Son valley and find the VC."

"This Regiment would consist of a Headquarters Group, and 1st and 11th ARVN Ranger Battalions. They were to enter the Que Son Valley along the Thang Binh/Hiep Duc road on December 8, 1965 (D-Day). The first objective that first day was to sweep and occupy a point south of the village of Que Son. This valley lies some 8 miles southwest of Route 1. (Author's Note: the main highway that runs the full length of Vietnam from North to South -- something like US 101 in California). According to allied intelligence sources, the 1st Viet Cong (VC) Regiment was located west of this area. Friendly forces were told that contact was not expected until the second day, around December 10th (D+1 or D+2). On December 9th, Lt. Col Utter's unit (2/7) was to be inserted behind the VC regiment. Two-seven was to force the VC eastward into the advancing ARVN trap. Lt.Col. Dorsey's battalion (3/3) would be inserted to reinforce Utter as the need arose. (Author's note: The VC had other plans and learned Murphy's Law quite well: If it can go wrong, it will go wrong. That which was planned to go right didn't because the VC didn't wait for 2/7 to land and set up their sweeping positions. I guess they cared less about 3/3 too, because they didn't wait for them to move up, either.) The VC struck early against the

ARVN Ranger units. This early attack screwed up the Allied plan even before it started; the enemy is unpredictable like that sometimes."

"The U. S. Marines had to be committed ahead of schedule. The 5th ARVN Regiment had left Thang Binh on schedule with the Ranger Battalion on the right of the road, and the Regiment's 1st Battalion on the left. During the first few hours, the advance was uneventful. At 1330 hours, about half way to Que Son the Rangers were ambushed by the 70th VC Battalion. The enemy had allowed them to close within twenty meters and then opened fire. In the first 15 minutes of the battle, the Rangers lost a third of their personnel and they were overrun." (Author's note: The following extract comes from a report filed by an American advisor who was with the ARVN force: "They attacked in a mass and hit us from all sides ... people were dropping around us right and left). "The badly mauled Ranger unit was able to withdraw to a position 1,200 meters to the northwest. From there, they called in Marine air support. Skyhawk jets (A-4 jets) from Marine Air Group-12 (MAG-12) stationed at Chu Lai Air Base. They attacked the VC while Marine helicopters moved in to evacuate the casualties. The first ARVN Battalion attempted to reinforce the Rangers but was unable to cross the road because of enemy mortar fire and the air strikes. Later in the afternoon, General Lam (the ARVN Commander) used 10 UH-34Ds from

Denney's HMM-161 to move the 1st Battalion, 6th ARVN Regiment up from Tam Key. He wanted to get them into place to reinforce the surviving Rangers and establish a night defensive perimeter."

"The next morning, the 5th ARVN Regiment command group and its 1st Battalion bore the weight of the VC attack. Although the battalion had been probed during the night, it had not seen heavy action. On December 9th, at about 0645, the 60th and 80th VC Battalions struck. In the heavy fighting that followed, both the 1st Battalion and the regimental command group were overrun. The ARVN regimental commander was killed and the ARVN force was scattered to the south and east. At about the same time, another VC battalion attacked the 6th ARVN Regiment to the northeast. This ARVN unit managed to hold its ground. At this point, Brigadier General Henderson decided to commit his Marines. At 1000 hours, UH-3Ds from Lt.Col. Denny's HMM-161 and from Lt.Col. Childers HMM-361 lifted Lt.Col. Utter's 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines from Tam Ky. They lifted them to a landing zone 5 1/2 miles west of the ARVN troops. After the landing, the battalion started to move northeast. They secured a hill mass some 2,500 meters from the landing zone by late afternoon. Utter's unit encountered only a few Viet Cong as one of his platoon leaders complained, "The enemy always seemed one step ahead of us." The same afternoon, General Henderson directed Dorsey's battalion to land 1 1/2 miles southeast of the 5th ARVN Regiment's 1st

Battalion and then move to link up with the shattered South Vietnamese unit."

"Dorsey had left Danang by motor convoy that morning and was at the logistics support area on Route 1, about 3 miles north of Thang Binh. Lt. Col. Porter's HMM-261, the SLF helicopter squadron on board the LPH Valley Forge, (Author's note: The choppers known as "Echo Mike"). They were assigned the mission of ferrying the SLF into a landing zone southeast of the 5th ARVN Regiment's command group and its 1st Battalion. Dorsey's unit (3/3) landed at 1400 hours. An hour and a half later, his Lima Company made contact with elements of the ARVN battalion and pushed northwest toward Hill 43, 1 1/2 miles from the landing zone. Before the Marines could reach the hill, they ran into a force of 200 VC. A fierce firefight raged into the early evening. Supported by Marine air and artillery, Dorsey estimated that his battalion had killed 75 VC. Eleven Marines were dead and 17 wounded. The VC broke contact as darkness fell and the battalion established night positions. The next morning, the Marines took Hill 43. There they joined 40 South Vietnamese soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment. On December 10, 1965 (D+2), Brig. General Henderson ordered Utter (2/7) to drive east and Dorsey (3/3) to push northwest to compress the enemy between them. The avenue of escape to the south was to be

closed by Hannifin's 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines (Author's note: My battalion flying from the Valley Forge). This battalion was the Special Landing Force Battalion (SLF)."

"They would be heli-lifted into the area by HMM-261 (Porter's EM squadron). At about 1100 that morning, 15 UH-34Ds from the Valley Forge lifted the assault elements of Company F (Author's company) into a landing zone near the hamlet of Cam Lo. The site was located about 5 miles southeast of the village of Que Son. This village was named for the surrounding mountain range. As the helicopters started to land, they came under heavy 12.7mm machine gun fire. The enemy was firing from emplacements on Hill 407 some 1 to 2,000 meters to the south. The intense, heavy caliber fire surprised the Marines. (Author's note: The word "surprised" is an understatement). During this action, Marine Col. Michael R. Yunck, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing G-3 Operations Officer (3rd MAW) had volunteered to act as Tactical Air Controller (Airborne) for the assault mission. Yunck remembered, "We thought the LZ was far enough from the hill to the south to nullify effective fire from that distance. We pretty well scrubbed the immediate area of the LZ." (Author's note: As it turned out Yunck, Henderson and the others were all wrong. The scrubbing of the LZ was grossly insufficient and shortsighted because they had landed us right in the middle of a

huge rice paddy. As soon as we hit the deck, the shit hit the fan. By any definition, that is not a well-scrubbed area.)

"As the assault helicopters lifted off quickly under fire, Yunck maneuvered his UH-1E over the landing zone to locate the enemy gunners, but in the process was wounded by a 12.7 round. His Co-pilot, Major Edward Kuykendall, took control of the air operation. He then directed the remaining helicopters carrying Hannifin's battalion command group and Company G (2/1) to land in another LZ further west. Fox Company at the first landing site was in deep trouble. The enemy kept the Marines under continuous machine gun fire and then opened up with mortars and small arms fire as the day progressed. The Marines took what cover they could in the open rice paddies and waited for reinforcements. Since the rest of the battalion had landed to the west, the Task Force commander, Brig. General Henderson had to order assistance. He ordered Utter's Echo Company (E/2/7) to move south and offer aid to Fox Company. As they pushed southward, they were hit hard on their right flank. After some difficulty and fierce fighting, they managed to reach an area from which they could support Fox Company. Fox Company shortly thereafter was able to begin withdrawing under the relief force's covering fire, but not until some ten hours after the first helicopter had landed. Finally, Hannifin's battalion

command group along with Companies G and F, and Company E from Utter's 2/7 battalion, all joined forces. Both Companies E/2/7 and F/2/1 had suffered substantial casualties during the day.

There were 20 dead Marines and over 80 wounded. As darkness fell on the battlefield that day, Maj. Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) Lew Walt arrived, and then he relieved Henderson. He then appointed Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt to head the Task Force. General Platt appraised the battle situation and ordered another of Utter's companies up to reinforce 2/1. His Golf Company (G/2/7) arrived at 0300 the next morning. The search and attack into Phouc Ha Valley was about to begin. On the December 11 (D+3), the Task Force maneuvered to consolidate its position. Gen. Platt now airborne in a helicopter studied the terrain from which Fox (2/1) and HMM-261 had received such extensive fire on the 10th. General Platt radioed that he was surprised his chopper did not draw any fire and surmised that the VC must have abandoned their positions. He thought they left Hill 407 during the night, so he ordered 2/7 to seize the hill -- they accomplished that task without opposition. In the interim, Dorsey's 3/3 was searching the area north of Hill 407. At the same time, the remaining two companies of Hannifin's 2/1 (Echo and Hotel 2/1) were heli-lifted from the Valley Forge to join the battalion. By the end of the day, it was apparent that the enemy, except for a few snipers, had vanished. General Platt

suspected that the regiment had retreated into the Phouc Ha Valley -- a smaller valley paralleling Que Son Valley, 5 miles to the southeast. The Phouc Ha Valley was known VC base area."

"On the afternoon of the December 11th, Gen. Platt was paid a visit by Army Brigadier General William DePuy from General Westmoreland's J-3 (Joint Operations) staff. DePuy suggested that USAF B-52s from Guam strike the objective area before the Marines entered. General Platt accepted the offer and the first of several B-52 raids occurred on the morning of December 12th. General Platt got back on his helicopter and observed the first strike. He then directed Dorsey (3/3) and Hannifin (2/1) to move their battalions in to exploit the bombing mission. During the afternoon, 2/1 deployed south, and 3/3 moved along two ridges, Hills 100 and 180, which overlooked Phuoc Ha Valley. During that night, General Platt ordered 3/3 to move 1,000 meters to the north so that the B52's could strike again. The next morning, after the second B52 air strike, the two Marine battalions entered the valley. They entered from both the north and the south. While searching the target area, 3/3 did not find the 1st VC Regiment, but they discovered large amounts of enemy supplies and equipment. The two battalions remained in the valley for the next few days, but encountered little organized resistance. (Author's note: As we moved through the area later, I saw dead VC lying all along the trails. I remember thinking at

the time, "...they are quite dead but have no wounds. They had been killed by concussion. From that day forth, I gained a lot of respect for the B-52's as I saw their handy work up close).

"As 2/1 and 3/3 operated in the Phouc Ha Valley, 2/7 sought the VC along the northern bank of the Song Chang River. This river is also known as the Khang River; it lies seven miles south of Que Son. They then turned eastward toward Tam Ky, sweeping the southern boundary of the main Harvest Moon objective area. The Marines had more trouble with the weather than the enemy, and except for occasional snipers. During the prolonged search, the battalion slogged over 20 miles through extremely rugged terrain, varying from rice paddies to jungle-covered hills. In doing so and on December 18th, Utter and his battalion (2/7) got his long sought after "contact. On their last leg of the long trek, 2/7 came face to face with the 80th VC Battalion in full strength. Earlier that morning, Utter had evacuated 54 Marines suffering from immersion foot. The battalion moved out in column formation with Golf Company (2/7) in the lead. Close behind and in trail were Fox and HQ Company (2/7), and Hotel Company from 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines which had joined 2/7. The units moved along a narrow road, which wound through hedgerows bordered by rice paddies. The VC allowed the lead company to pass through Ky Phu and then they opened up. The hit Golf Company which had been the advance guard. At

first, Utter thought that the enemy force consisted only of a few snipers. He ordered Golf to clear the area south of the road and moved Fox Company."

"Fox had just passed through the East end of Ky Phu when enemy mortar rounds dropped on H&S Company. They were still in the open paddies west of the hamlet. Two VC companies then tried to enter the gap between Fox Company F and H&S Company to envelop Utter and his command group. First Lieutenant Nicholas Grosz, Jr. later recalled that he crossed the area between his company and the battalion HQ group and told of the deteriorating situation. Realizing that he was engaged with a major enemy force, Utter ordered Fox to turn and attack. Those main positions were on the right flank of his H&S Company. Now supported by "Huey" gunships and accurate artillery from Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, Utter counterattacked. His Fox Company rolled up the VC from the rear while H&S Company fought its way into Ky Phu. According to Grosz, who accompanied the lead elements of Fox Company in the attack, "Once we got them going, the VC just broke and ran. It was just like a turkey shoot," he later said. At the rear of Utter's column, Hotel remained in contact with the enemy. A VC company struck the Marines from both flanks and the rear. Both the company commander and his radio operator were mortally wounded. First

Lieutenant Harvey C. Barnum, the attached artillery forward observer, did what he could to save the two dying Marines."

"Barnum strapped the radio on his back and assumed command. The young officer rallied the company and the Marines established a defensive position on a small hill north of the road. After four hours of fighting, Barnum led Hotel Company into Ky Phu and rejoined Utter and his battalion. (Author's note: For his act, Barnum would be awarded the Medal of Honor). By nightfall, the fight at Ky Phu was over. The 80th VC Battalion broke contact leaving 104 bodies on the battlefield. Over 76 of them killed by the artillery fire. Utter's unit had sustained 11 Marines killed and 71 wounded. The wrap up started the next day, on December 19th, with all three Marine battalions completing their movement out of the operation area. For all practical purposes, the operation was over. Operation Harvest Moon/*Lien Ket-18* officially ended on December 20, 1965 with all allied forces returned to their respective enclaves or ships. What was the cost? The combined USMC-ARVN operation had accounted for 407 VC-NVA killed and 33 were captured. A total of 13, crew-served and 95 individual weapons were captured, as well as 60 tons of food and ammunition which was taken from Phuoc Ha Valley. U.S. Marine casualties were 45 killed and 218 wounded. General Lam's ARVN forces suffered 90 killed, 91 missing, and 141 wounded.

Most of those heavy casualties occurred during the first two days of the operation (December 8 - 10, 1965)."

This is the end of the official version of Operation Harvest Moon, which was not without serious problems that several "after-action reports" revealed. For example, the hastily established provisional headquarters elements, the fast moving ground situation, poor weather conditions, and the large number of tactical aircraft. All of these things happened over the Que Son Valley at various stages, and caused coordination and control difficulties. Marines learned valuable lessons in air/ground coordination (a serious lack of it during the early stages of the battle) that would prove valuable in future operations. Operation Harvest Moon truly was the last of the big battles in 1965. These large-scale efforts had become a regular feature of the war forces under General Walt during the last half of its first calendar year in country. III Third Marine Amphibious Forces conducted 15 Battalion-size operations or larger during that period. American intelligence agencies indicated that during 1966, General Walt's forces would face even larger enemy forces. They based their assessment on reports of more NVA troops entering South Vietnam to join their VC comrades.

The big unit actions were only one aspect of the Marine war nevertheless in I Corps. Lt. Gen. Victor Krulak would later write:

"We cannot be entrapped in the dangerous premise that destruction of the VC organized units per se is the whole answer to winning the war, any more than we can accept the erroneous view that pacification and civic action will solve the problem if major enemy forces are free to roam the country side." According to Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan information concerning Operation Harvest Moon was severely restricted. According to him, the 5th ARVN commander was told his mission "was to be a routine sweep and clear" along Highway 1 to the vicinity of Key Lam. Upon reaching the vicinity of Thang Binh [the regimental commander] was brought to the "bunker" at Danang about 1500 on 7 December. He was apprised of his actual mission. General Thi warned us not to discuss the operation with any of the ARVN except a few in his headquarters and that of General Lam's." The fact that at 1330 hours, 8 December the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion walked into a "prepared" ambush is prima facie evidence that the regimental commander was kept in the dark. But, apparently the commander of the 1st VC Regiment was not. Colonel Mike Yunck was the 1963 Marine Aviator of the Year. He was awarded his second Silver Star for his actions during this operation. He lost a leg

which had to be amputated as a result of the wound he suffered during the battle. One early casualty from Fox 2/1 was Captain James E. Page, my Company Commander.

For most of the day, I and my squad members as well as many others were led to believe that Page had been pronounced dead on the battlefield early in the fighting and had been rolled up in his poncho awaiting evacuation. Most of us thought he was dead until early the next morning, some 16 hours after he was declared dead, our Navy Corpsmen (Doc Bob Greeding and Doc "Sandy" Sanderson) while checking and double-checking toe tags and preparing the grim task of getting the bodies ready for evac to the ships discovered that Page was alive, not dead. The story goes that Bob Greeding screamed and leaped back while checking Page that when he touched Page's face, he found it warm, not stone cold. Dead men are supposed to be cold, Page was warm! Greeding then detected a faint heartbeat - Page was alive! They got Page onto a chopper and out of the area quickly back to the ship. We had seen a miracle. Page totally recovered and later retired as a Lieutenant Colonel after serving a third tour in Vietnam where he was shot in the leg. He now lives in Lady Lake, Florida. His last command, oddly enough when he retired was as the Commanding Officer of 2/1. Jim sure went out in style. At least that's the story many of believed for a very

long time. Jim Page sets the story right with the "truth" as he tells it at the end of the book in his version of "Blood on the Harvest Moon."

It makes no difference what we believed, he's alive and well and he was damn lucky, and we're damn lucky to have had him as our commander.

Retired Colonel Harvey Barnum was performing temporary duty in Vietnam from his permanent station at Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor as a 1st Lt. Artillery Officer with 9th Marines. He volunteered for 60 days of "on-the-job" training under the Marine combat indoctrination program. He won the Medal of Honor. He was not even wounded. His version of the story follows later. For further reading, I recommend the following: True Valor, by Timothy S. Lowry (Berkley Books); and U. S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965, by Jack Shulimson and Major Charles M. Johnson (History & Museums Division, HQ, U.S. Marine Corps). There is no doubt that Operation Harvest Moon was one of the early Vietnam mistakes, and sadly, more where to come later as our year in Vietnam progressed. Many operations were simply nonsensical operations, but being good soldiers, we obeyed our orders, sometimes not knowing any better even as we obeyed. Actually, we talked a lot about them being stupid at the time we performed our duties, but that was about all we did, talk -

being non-political at the time and in uniform, we had no other choice except to be good soldiers and we were. Many of the same stupid things like the 1st Cav "Harbor landing" would later look like a Boy Scout outing.

Other stupid things like being told to keep our hand grenades taped on our belts, or to wait until we took enemy fire before returning fire, or not to put a round in our chambers until fired upon. In other words, wait to get shot at or worse hit and then defend yourself, if you have time! Our leaders had taken our training tactics so seriously that "safety first" was more important than life. These idiotic orders were called "Rules of Engagement." I still snicker at the name, and wonder "rules for whom?" They damn sure weren't for our safety! I still cringe at the thought of knowing that a Marine or soldier could have died before he chambered a round to shoot back or get the tape off his grenade before the enemy got the tape off his! As the war progressed, we learned more of these lessons the hard way. These rules were later shit canned in favor of common sense rules. Most of the early rules I suspect had been dreamed up by some fat office jerk in the rear who wore spit shined boots and starch in his underwear who got angry at "grunts" who came into his HQ with dirty hands and boots and a few days of beard. In later years during the Gulf War, Generals like Colin Powell, Norman Swartzkopf and Charlie Krulak would remember such

silly shit like that from Vietnam and make sure it didn't interfere again with combat operations in new wars. Safety is always number one, but all bets are off when some enemy soldier is trying to kill your raggedy ass.

They pledged it would never happen again, and I think the outcome of the Gulf War proved they were right. As an Assistant Division Commander of the 2nd Marine Division in the Gulf War, for example, Major General Charles C. Krulak, had learned his lesson well from our experiences in Vietnam. His father, Lt. Gen. Victor Krulak tried to get his message about lessons learned to Gen. Westmoreland and Secretary McNamara. However, he was unsuccessful; they did not listen. Some of the problems the elder Krulak faced while dealing with those two military leaders are noted by many writers of military history and from Krulak's own papers. One writer observed for example, "While the two top Marine generals (Krulak and Greene) received a hearing of their views, they enjoyed little success in influencing the MACV strategy (developed by Westmoreland and McNamara) or overall U.S policy toward North Vietnam." According to Krulak, Secretary of Defense McNamara personally told him that the "ink blot" theory was "a good idea but too slow" (Noted in Krulak letter to McNamara, dated November 11, 1965, Box 4, Krulak papers and Krulak, "First to Fight," p. 186). Historians had this to say about that exchange as well: "Interestingly enough,

former Secretary McNamara makes no mention of this letter or these conversations with Krulak in his memoir, Robert S. McNamara In Retrospect, "The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam" New York: Time Books, Random House, Inc., 1995."

One truly has to wonder about the "military genius" of Robert McNamara and Gen. Westmoreland even after all these years! I later would serve with the younger Krulak in the latter part of 1966 while we both were in Golf Company. We had gone overseas together, he in Golf and me in Fox. He like his father, was a Naval Academy graduate, and the youngest of three sons. He would go and earn a fourth star and become Commandant of the Marine, obtaining one more star than his father. Two other Krulak brothers served in the military and at one time, all three were in Vietnam at the same time (the 1965-1966 timeframe). This was the same time their father commanded all Marines in the Pacific region. The oldest brother, Victor, Jr., was a Navy Chaplain. The middle brother, Bill was a Marine Captain in 1966, and he was our Regimental Assistant Operations Officer when we moved to Hill 55. The Krulaks were a big military family. I remember in September 1966 while I was in Danang waiting for my flight to Okinawa and then on to California, Lt. Krulak ran across his father in the airport terminal. He made a special point of introducing me as one of his Sergeants. Later, he recommended me for a direct commission,

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which I received in October 1968 -- just in time to go back to Vietnam for a second tour of duty in those same stinking Que Son mountains, too!

Author's Version of Operation Harvest Moon

Fox on the Run

There we were, 100 Marines from Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division stuck up to our collective asses in rice paddy mud and thousands of VC. We would later find out that our unit had been up against elements of the elite 1st Viet Cong (VC) Regiment along with three independent VC Battalions and as well as several supporting VC companies (special weapons units). For them, it was a field day -- a shooting gallery. We were like fish in the proverbial barrel for about 10 long, miserable and naked hours. I say naked because we had no cover, no concealment, no artillery support and virtually no air support. Why we weren't wiped out that day, had the enemy charged us in full strength, remains a mystery to me till this day.

I guess I'm biased about the events of that awful day, December 10, 1965, but for good reason, I was there and lived through it, and after all these years, I still believe my version of Operation Harvest Moon is more comprehensive and more personal than the official Marine Corps version. I also include in my biased reporting, the views of several others who shared that battlefield with me and Fox Company that dreadful day.

However, even my best assessment of that one-sided battle (at least the first day of it anyway) is left to military historians and the readers. As I said, my version comes from firsthand experiences because my Marine rifle company was the first unit to step into that deadly trap on that fateful day. This is how I recall that fight.

I was in the first helicopter that landed not far from the small Vietnamese Hamlet of Cam Lo at the base of the Que Son Mountains. I led my 14-man squad from our two choppers and we jumped into that rain soaked rice paddy little before noon on a slightly dreary day that soon became our Hell on Earth. Official Marine Corps field reports are typical field records -- factual, non-personal -- somewhat precise, yet not very personal. For example, I was never interviewed about the battle. I never provided input into the official record. I don't know of anyone personally at the time who did. I did find out some 30 years later that Jim Page had been interviewed while he was recovering in the hospital in Hawaii, but that was about the extent of our side of the story.

Fox Company was the lead infantry company that day and we were the first to be inserted into the region just as the official record indicates. Further as stated in the sanitized version, we definitely were in deep trouble from the beginning.

No sooner had our helicopters started their final approach into the designated LZ (which I found out later, was the wrong LZ and Jim Page confirms this screw-up, too) than the enemy opened fire on us with heavy machineguns. Helicopters are no match for heavy caliber machinegun fire that greeted us. My helicopter was first in line as we started to land. We took a few rounds; luckily no one was hit. The bullets made a 'snipping' sound as they came up through the floorboard and sides of the plane. How no one was wounded or killed at that moment remains a mystery to me after all these years. Nothing could be done because we were on final approach and pulling up and away was not an option. I and my squad were in lead helicopter that carried part of my 14-man squad (Corporal Dave Goodwin and his fire team). The rest of my squad and remaining first platoon's (2nd and 3rd squads and Lt. Charles George, platoon commander) were in the second through the sixth or seventh helicopters. As the first squad leader, I had the distinct honor of being the first to leap from out and face the unknown that day. I leaped out and turned to wave on my squad members and direct them to cover the way we had been briefed, "... get out and fan out to the northwest facing the hill mass, take cover and return fire if fired upon." What an understatement, "...return fire if fired upon." Little did they know what the word 'if' would mean in that short time span.

The shit hit the fan even before we leaped out. I jumped out and headed for the nearest rice paddy dike at the same time yelling for my squad to follow me and spread out. Little did I know at the time that that rice paddy dike would be my shield for the next 10 hours. Soon, our entire 1st platoon came into the landing zone and they too were leaping off the 'choppers and heading for cover. Due to the fire and confusion, it took us a while to get organized, if one can call it organized. In essence, my squad went one way and the Lieutenant took the other two squads and our machine gun section and headed straight ahead. My squad was covering our left flank which was exposed to the enemy on the horseshoe hills to our left, front and right. We were boxed in. The remaining helicopters were able to drop off the entire 1st platoon, all of 2nd Platoon, and a fire team (4 men) only from 3rd Platoon. Also managing to get off the birds was our three machine gun sections, part of our 3.5 inch rocket section (Corporal Carl Kirksey, Arlington, Texas), and the Company "Jump CP" which consisted Captain Jim Page and his radio operators (Cpl. Len Senkowski, Chicago), Gunny Joe Thurmond and our XO, 1st Lt. Barry Beck (Midland, Texas), and a couple of our Corpsmen. That was it - we totaled about 100. I can't speak for every infantryman, but I know that after seeing death up close and personal, that we all tend to think, "Damn, I'm sure glad that wasn't me - that poor SOB."

I had that exact thought all day long. In the two rifle companies I served in during that year in combat, first in Fox and then with Golf Company, I saw more 50 of my fellow Marines killed in action and easily three times that many wounded. Many of those wounded were seriously wounded and warranted further evacuation to the United States. Many more were "walking wounded" (that is they got patched up and stayed in country or in some cases, stayed in the field with minor wounds). Multiple wounds were not uncommon in a firefight, but you could only get one Purple Heart for each action, unless the wound was clearly a second or a third or a fourth (after being treated by a Corpsman - then, the count started all over again). I remember for my first wound and first Purple Heart, later on February 28, 1966, I had been clearly hit many times, but only got credit for only wound due to the one action it happened in. That's the nature of war, I guess. Each Marine who was killed or wounded was a good friend; maybe not a close personal friend because of my rank and position, but nonetheless a fellow Marine and comrade.

I have been determined to not forget their names or their service, and that's part of the reason for this book. It reminds me of that fellow who thought up the idea for the Vietnam wall, when he said, "...it's about the names, isn't it?" I think his name was Jan Scruggs? It is about their names and their faces; we must never forget them.

It will always be their names and their faces. I hope I haven't missed identifying any one of them. I researched death information from official Marine Corps records, so I assume they are correct and accurate. Who were these Marines? Why did they die and I live? I still don't know the answer to that question. Each loss was and remains a devastating one. Two stand out as the hardest. The first Marine killed was in my squad - the first Marine I ever saw killed in combat - was Lance Corporal Barry J. Sitler from Compton, California. Barry was one of my three fire team's automatic riflemen. Each squad of 14 had three automatic rifles; we called them AR Men.

Marines always use abbreviations because they are easier than shouting out whole sentences. I'd shout "AR's up" for example and everyone knew what that meant move up the automatic rifles. "Guns up" meant move the machineguns up. "Tubes up" meant to move up the (60mm or 81mm) mortars. In combat, there is no time for long for niceties and long drawn out sentences. We do lots of shouting and usually in otherwise incomplete or incoherent sentences. We shouted those utterances because they are essential when time is not a luxury in the heat of battle. After we landed, we took cover behind the nearest paddy dike thinking of immediate cover and searching for some concealment, too. The dikes offered cover but not nearly enough and certainly no concealment.

In theory, if the enemy can't see you, they can't shoot you. That day the VC certainly could see us in plain sight and exposed right down to our souls. We were exposed to withering machinegun fire. The heaviest was coming from our immediate front some 500 to 1,000 yards away. The fire was intense and nonstop. As we sought cover, I yelled back to Barry to jump back behind the rear dike and cover our rear flank, not knowing if there were enemy there or not. Things were moving fast and a detailed analysis was not in the plan. I saw him move and jump over the dike and take up a firing position. A short time later, I looked back and saw him slouched over the dike. He looked like he was taking a break or relaxing.

I yelled over to Corporal Dave Goodwin who was my 1st fire team leader a good personal friend, to crawl back and check on Barry. Dave crawled close to where Barry was, and then he yelled back, "he's dead." Barry had been hit in the spine and broken right into by the enemy heavy machinegun fire we later found while sweeping the hills. They were those huge 12.5mm anti-aircraft machine guns. Barry was a little guy, so I'm sure he died instantly without suffering. Suffering in combat is the worst way to die. I don't think he suffered because none of us heard him scream or call out for help when he was hit, so I think he didn't suffer. Barry's death stays with me because I liked him very much, and he was the first killed in my squad.

To this day, I still have a hard time forgetting his death. At times throughout the day, some bright spots seemed to take hole. One occurred that I did not see but was told about later from several eyewitness accounts. Sergeant Frank Pruitt, our Weapons Platoon Machinegun Section Leader managed to get one of our guns up and on target. Frank commenced to have a machine-gun dual with the VC. He must have fired a thousand rounds at them. By doing so, I think Frank kept them at bay and from attacking us. Frank Pruitt was big guy, some would even say "overweight" by Marine standards, but it never bothered him in the field or that day, either. Frank was an old time sergeant, big, jovial and a great machine gunner and teacher.

Later in early 1966, Frank several others were reassigned from Fox Company to a newly-formed Combined Action Company (CAC). This occurred shortly after Fox's numbers dwindled during Operation New York (February 28, 1966). One night, Frank's unit was caught in a nasty ambush. Frank was shot up badly, and although he lived, I understand he had some serious health side effects. But, on this day, Frank was trying to pay back the VC tit for tat, machinegun for machinegun for the damage they had inflicted on us earlier in the day. Quite a few other Marines died that day due to heavy machine-gun fire. Most died instantly without suffering.

If I was going to buy it, I remember thinking, "I hope I get hit fast and don't suffer - please take me quickly, Lord." Suffering slowly and then dying would be the worst part, assuming one had a choice. Short of dying instantly, many of us wished for a "million dollar wound," a wound that was a through-and-through wound. Those wounds were the kinds that went through the flesh and didn't hit bone or cause serious damage. That wound would be the ticket home without serious injury just like they say in the movies: "Just a flesh wound." War is NOT like the movies. That day, we had no flesh wounds, no Hollywood make up; the blood was real - the dying was real. Picking and choosing one's wound is not a matter to be taken lightly. The next day we had started our climb up those hills to chase the VC when a member in Echo Company got what we thought was a "million dollar wound" as he had been shot in his calf and looked fine to me as I walked by. The Doc's were busy patching him up, but at some point in the process, he looked down and saw his wound and all the blood, and there was a lot of blood to be sure, but the wound appeared to be a real "million dollar wound" because he was shot straight through the fleshy part of his calf. I remember thinking, man, you're going home, take it easy because he was jumping all around in a frenzy. Then suddenly he got a strange expression on his face, went into shock and died right there on the spot, quick and fast without fanfare.

I'll never forget him. His name was Lance Corporal Dennis Manning from St. Clair, Minnesota. I would have never believed what I had seen. The wound, painful to be sure did not appear to be so life threatening, but shock in combat can be a killer! It killed him in an instant. Our Docs had always spoken about shock and how to treat it, but this was my first taste of seeing someone die from shock.

The other Marine killed early in the day was my good friend and fellow NCO who was our platoon guide, Sergeant Robert D. Hickman from Wheeling, West Virginia. Bob as our platoon guide was to make sure we got food, water and ammunition and be second in command after the platoon sergeant in the event he was a casualty. Everyone who was a Sergeant called him "Hick." Bob was damn good at his job; the best I'd ever seen. He could get things when others thought supplies were gone. To this day, I don't know how he did it; we never asked and he never said.

He always got the best stuff and that's all that mattered whether he begged, borrowed or stole it. Not knowing how he did it made things work a lot better. Bob always got the stuff we needed, no questions asked. Bob was a few years older than I, and he had been in the Marine Corps since the Korean War after a short stint in the Army (I think 2 or 3 years). I had only six years service at the time, but we were both sergeants. The age but not rank difference made me feel uncomfortable at times.

Bob was more like an older brother than fellow NCO. I had made my rank in a non-infantry job and Bob had been straight infantry all along. Making rank was tough in those days, so he was considered an "old time Sergeant." Bob was a great guy, quiet, a little shy, but always helpful and infantry smart. Bob was a heavy smoker as was I at the time, so we shared many cigarette breaks when we could. I remember one day in early November 1965 and just a few weeks before HARVEST MOON while we were in the Philippines that Bob got a letter from home with a picture of his newly born fifth son. He had not seen his son, who would be about 35 today. He has grown up not even knowing his dad. I still find those things hard to comprehend or to forget. I tried to contact Bob's family a few years ago as my family and I drove through Wheeling on our way back to New York from vacation in Illinois and Ohio, but I had no luck. After a few hours the heavy fire slowed down.

My squad and some people from 2nd platoon and the jump CP started moving toward where our dead and wounded were in the hopes of moving them to the rear. I managed to get up to the spot where I had seen Lt. George, Swanson, Bob Hickman and Pvt. Bill Stocker (Boulder, Colorado, from my squad). They all had been together all day long after they jumped out and ran forward. The rest of us were their rear and left flank. The sight was shocking when we got up to where they were.

They were all just lying across the rice paddy dikes or propped up like they were taking a break, waiting for orders. But, they weren't waiting for orders or taking a break. They were all dead right there where the VC mortars had taken most of them out hours before. They all looked like they were resting, all peaceful and lined up neatly in a row. What struck me the most was the condition of their deadly wounds. Their wounds looked like a doctor had taken his time and neatly cut away portions of their faces, heads and bodies. Mortar shrapnel does odd things to the human body when it hits. There was not much blood because the rice had soaked it up long ago by the time we got there. I stood there numb and in awe trying to remember who they were or what had happened just a few hours before. I couldn't remember anything. It had been a few hours before that we were all laughing and joking back on the ship waiting to fly into combat. Now, they were gone.

Our Docs were busy attending to all of them doing what Corpsman do for the dead. I didn't see Bob Hickman at first or recognize him among the casualties. Then, someone pointed him out to me as they turned him over. There was no mistaking it; it was Bob. He was slumped over the dike on his right side. I looked into his face. He looked quite and peaceful; pale, almost gray in color. Bob had been hit in the chest right where his flak jacket was open.

For all his goodness, Bob never zipped or closed his flak jacket. He said he hated to wear one since they were heavy and cumbersome. He said it was too constraining or uncomfortable. I often wonder had he zipped it up would he have lived. Only God knows that answer! The rest of us are left to wonder and ponder the possibilities of "only if." But, I can tell you that from that day forward, I insisted that my men always wear zip their flak jackets, and that they keep their helmets on. Even in his death, Bob Hickman managed to teach us all a very valuable lesson. Sadly, it was his last lesson to us.

Our entire platoon machine-gun section was wiped out - all KIA. Lieutenant George and several others were lying there seriously wounded. George had a huge piece of his thigh torn away by a large chunk of shrapnel and he had a shoulder wound. It looked like his pistol holster had helped take the impact of the wound, otherwise he would have lost his leg. When he left and Swannie took over. Since Bob Hickman was the next in line for Swanson's job, but was now dead, too, I moved up to take over as platoon sergeant. That "advancement" entitled me to a pistol as a leader, so I turned in my rifle and took the lieutenant's pistol and "lucky holster." I considered it my lucky rabbit's foot! After a few more hours, the impact of the long day started to sink in as night come upon us and the rain started all over again.

It was if we weren't wet enough from lying in those stinking flooded rice paddies all day that we had to sleep in the mud and pouring rain all damn night. Odd, that very morning most of us had eaten early chow together on the ship at 4 in the morning. Now, even before we could have lunch and some 10 hours later, many of my comrades were dead right in front of me in that lousy stinking rice paddy.

Bob Hickman, Barry Sitler, Jim Brock, Bob Craft, Ronnie Cummings, Mike Grannan, Acie Hall, Joe Moreno, Les "Ski" Puzyrewski, John Wilson, and Lloyd Vannatter (Lloyd actually died in Doc Greding's arms overnight waiting for morning and a helicopter to carry him to the ship). None of us had seen death like we had that day - in such large numbers and in such a small place like those rice paddies. That image has never left me. Many were wounded. From my platoon, Lieutenant George, and from my squad, Pvt. Bill Stocker, who was shot in the shoulder, and Cpl. Richardo "Marty" Martinez from East Los Angeles. Marty was from second squad. I remember seeing Marty just standing there being patched up by one of the docs. Marty like Bill Stocker had a very serious gunshot wound in his upper forearm and he was in great pain and it showed. Marty managed to get out that next morning on one of the early choppers. I haven't seen or heard of him since. Odd, I remember that he always carried a journal and took meticulous notes.

That notebook was one of those old ugly green Marine Corps logbooks that were used when one of us stood Duty NCO. He said he was taking notes for a book someday. I wonder if he finished his book. As noted earlier, our company commander, Captain James E. Page, was one of the first to be hit by machinegun fire and declared dead. Page was shot clean through his chest by a heavy machinegun. He was wrapped in his poncho like the other dead to be left for over 10 hours in the mud and blood waiting to be moved to the rear. Many of us thought he was dead all day long. Caring for the living and wounded took priority over those already on their way to heaven, so they just lay there waiting for their final trip back to the ship and then preparation for their long flight home. In all our misery and early the next morning, God stopped by and paid us a visit. Doc Greding, Doc Orr, and Doc Sanderson were finishing their grim task of rechecking bodies and making sure each was tagged. It had rained all night so sleep was not an option for anyone, so the Docs kept busy writing and re-writing body tags and bagging personal affects to make sure they got everything right. None of them wanted to falsely identify anyone, so they checked, double-checked and in some cases, triple-checked. Doc Greding and Doc Orr were rewriting body tags because the overnight rainfall had washed away some of the ink from the earlier tags. They were going about their grim task.

One of them, I think it was Doc Greeding, screamed, yelled something, and leaped straight up into the air in total shock. It seems that as he was re-checking Captain Page, he found Page's skin warm, not fishlike and cold like a dead person's skin feels. After a further check, it was determined that Page had a weak pulse. He was alive, not dead at all as we all imagined. At first, the news was shocking, but that soon turned to joy and happiness all rolled up into one burst of excitement. Our "Skipper" had lain there all night in that awful wet cold mud alive after we all thought he was dead. It would be many years later until according to Jim Page's own version the real story was revealed. Page actually had been cared for on the battlefield, heavily sedated, and presumed dead by those who saw him (since he was not moving much as all). We thought he was KIA all day and all night, when in reality, he was not dead - close to it, but not dead at all. A combination of the medication, cold wet mud and damp air, and God's intervention had slowed down Page's bleeding helped keep him alive.

Even Doc Greeding didn't know that when he examined first rechecked Page's casualty tag. In fact all the Docs has been very busy all day and night with over 100 casualties, both KIA and WIA. Doc Greeding just assumed that Page was dead, thus adding to the shock of the moment. Jim Page was quickly evacuated out on the first available 'chopper.

Talk about your average every day old miracle no matter how it unfolded! Wow! It was my first, and I prayed it would not be the last. Jim Page survived his terrible chest wound, and in fact went back to Vietnam for another tour where he was shot in the leg. He later went on to retire as a Lieutenant Colonel. To end his glorious career, he last commanded 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines. He went out in style and now he lives in happy retirement in Lady Lake, Florida. We maintain contact through E-mails several times a year. Those who don't believe in God or his truly marvelous ways have never seen God's work as we did that day.

All three stories, Page's, Yunck's, and Barnum's are truly inspiring. The good Lord was sure watching over those three during this operation. It has been said that God works in strange ways -- I don't doubt that for single minute. I often wonder could I have done anything different that day especially when it came to giving orders and directing my squad. I like to think the things I did that day were right and proper, but some memories haunt me. I try to rationalize that in the heat of the battle one has to follow their instincts and training and hope for the best. We were under heavy enemy fire and at times, I didn't have time to think about tiny details or what if. Having the benefit of 20/20 hindsight some 35 years later of course is easy, but it was not easy then under those conditions.

There was not time to think, no time to rationalize, and no time to take a vote or no time to start a popularity contest. Leaders had to act and they had to act fast - it was left to years of training and instinct. To illustrate this point, I knew at one point after the mortars hit our guys up front that we needed help, big help and we needed it fast otherwise we were all going to die. I was not about to die in that stinking hellhole under those conditions, so I decided to do something. We had been washing our rifles in that stinking rice paddy water and smelling like pig shit and all the while our guys were dying all around. No one seemed to be able to do anything and no new people were arriving to help us either - it was up to us and us alone to care and support ourselves. I recall vividly thinking, what the hell, it's up to me. But, the question remained, how? In those early days of the war, we didn't have very good radios and didn't have radios down to the squad leader level as they do today. All we had was one platoon radio and Lieutenant George had it with him up front.

In today's Army, practically every soldier has his own radio. By today's standards back in 1965, we would have been considered "low-tech." The one platoon radio we did have was one of those "push to talk" kind left over from the Korean War (PRC-6 or PRC-10, of I recall correctly). We also had one or two company radios, but nothing fancy (I think they were PRC-10's).

In short, communications was poor. All day long, I didn't have a radio and no one was near me that had one, either. Lieutenant George had our platoon radio, but he was way up front, so that was no value to me. I had nothing to communicate with him or anyone else except screaming, and that was hard to do, or a few "hand and arm" signals, but neither of those two things were very effective that day. And, certainly neither could be used to call for or control air strikes, or to point out targets for artillery. We needed air and we needed it fast because at least a couple of times I was sure I the VC massing for an attack. A couple of times, I thought I saw them testing us by coming out and then darting back into the foothills up front. If they decided to burst out of those hills in any kind of full strength, they could have finished all of us off in short order. If they made any strong advance, they surely would have killed us all, but for some strange reason they did not attack, they just stayed dug in blazing away at us all day. I didn't know their exact plans, and I really didn't really care. I had plenty of worries of my own. I was concerned, but not worried. I was also damn scared every single minute, but I tried to keep a clear mind as I thought, "I need get up to Lieutenant George, or to the Company CP, and find a radio operator and tell them what I saw, where I saw it, and what I suspected even if I was wrong."

In my assessment of an already bad situation, I knew that our company CP was some distance away from where I was because from time to time I could see Marines crawling around. Then I made up my mind - I decided what to do. I tossed off my pack and cartridge belt and told Dave Goodwin to cover me that I was going to dash to the CP and try to get some air support on the hills in front of us, he agreed and said good luck. I figured if I was going to run across the rice paddies (actually on top of them) that I'd better travel light, so I tossed off my gear. I wouldn't need any equipment - but, I would need to be fast and lucky. I don't whether I was thinking clearly or not, but I remember picking out a route there and back. "Get ready, get up, run like hell, dodge and weave, find a radio, get air support and then hope for the best." Well, that sounded simple enough. In high school, I was a quarter miler, not a speedster by any high standards, but pretty fast nonetheless. Now, 1965 at the ripe old age of 24, off I flew minus my track shoes.

I needed to sprint across an area about the length of a football field or maybe a bit longer. I wouldn't be running in a straight line, and I damn sure wouldn't have any downfield blockers out front, so the distance would be longer and more dangerous; perhaps 10 or 12 rice paddies long. That doesn't sound like much, but in a muddy rice paddy, that's good country mile as they say.

I looked at it this way, "Okay, just imagine it's a football field and you have to zig and zag to get the touchdown." That sounded easy enough. How naïve I must have looked or sounded to myself at that moment. Today as I reflect on that moment, I have to wonder how in the world such thoughts can clutter one's mind in such situations in a short time span. That aside, I needed to get close enough to yell orders or directions to anyone I could find who had a radio, assuming anyone with a radio was still alive or that they had a working radio, or that I could even locate them in their first place. Finally, I hoped no Marine would mistake me for a VC since I would be running at them from the rear without any helmet or friendly identifying equipment on. At the time, that didn't matter. All I took was my compass. I knew one of our company radio operators better than the others, that was Lance Corporal Len "Ski" Senkowski from Chicago. As I ran, I started looking for him and his cluster of radio antennas, and Lady Luck was with me on that account. I managed to locate Ski and got close enough to him to shout some compass directions and I told him to call in for Close Air Support (CAS). He had been talking to some support people all day but without much luck, so my intervention now included some positive directions was about to pay some dividends I hoped. While we waited for some air to come station, Ski brought me up to date on who had been hit.

He also told me that the Skipper (Captain Page) had gotten hit and looked like he was dead. Also scattered around the area were a few others that he could see from his position. With the Skipper "dead (I thought at the time)," our Executive Officer, 1st Lieutenant Barry Beck became the CO. Our company gunny, Gunnery Sergeant Joe Thurmond was then the Acting XO - what a mess I kept thinking. Unknown to me at the time was that Lt. George had also been wounded and Swannie was Platoon Commander and I was Platoon Sergeant. So, things were really messed up, and I didn't even know the full extent at the time.

Lt. Beck sudden promotion to company commander didn't last long, however, because he was relieved the next day when our new "skipper" arrived, Captain Dave Marx. Beck went back to his regular job as our Weapons Platoon Commander. Beck went on to finish his Marine Corps obligation and then he finished law school. Today he lives and practices law in Midland, Texas. I briefed Ski looked around and saw part of 2nd platoon up front hovering behind paddies. I told Ski that Sitler was dead and that some others up front seemed to be dead, but that I wasn't sure who or how many. He said he thought so, too, because he hadn't seen any movement over there for a while. Everyone around the CP looked much the same way as I did: cold, wet, muddy and scared. We were all in the same boat; badly beaten badly, and it showed.

Ski got a jet fighter on the horn, and as it turned out, it was only one jet fighter. One single A-4 Skyhawk. He swooped in from the east, made a practice run, then peeled off, climbed and returned on his final approach. He dropped a couple of bombs near the foothills to our northwest and then just as fast, peeled off and flew away, I surmised, back to his base probably in Chu Lai, and probably to a cold beer. We looked at each other and wondered if he had requested more air for us. We waited, but nothing came, so it became apparent that that one single strike was indeed our air support. Damn, in the whole fucking Marine Corps all we have is one A-4, with one or two stinking bombs and time only for one close air support run? I don't even know if Ski spoke to him after his run; I wasn't close enough to hear. So, there we were again, alone, and up to our asses in VC and unbeknownst to any of us, we still had hours to go before anyone would help us. I also imagined the VC enjoyed the "air show." I never did find out why only A-4 showed up that day. Was he busy, out of bombs, or scared shitless, or told to end the mission? I never found out. Maybe someone else called for support. Maybe he had other priority missions where people were worse off than we - although that was hard to believe. We later found out that nearly everyone in the 3rd Marine Division was trying to assist us. I looked up into that clear blue empty sky and thought, thanks buddy.

I also remember thinking, "enjoy your beer when you get back to wherever you're going." He didn't hear me though, he just kept heading south. I imagined the war stories he would tell at the Officer's Club that night while holding a cold beer. "Yep, I supported some guys up to their asses in VC down here around Que Son. I made a run or two and then got out of there. The zone was pretty hot from where I could see. Boy, those guys must have stepped in some real bad stuff down there. Yeah, Joe how about another cold one? At least I hope I did some good for those poor mud Marines." At the time naturally, I didn't know the big picture regarding the screw-ups with this operation and wouldn't for many decades. Nonetheless, when I think about it, I still anger at the whole affair and especially that A-4 pilot. It seems to me that he did his job like we were trying to do ours, but couldn't he had done more? I wonder who he was? So, years later, I still do not know all the details, but I still am mad as hell just thinking about that day when I didn't know anything. For example, didn't that A-4 have machine guns, or rockets, anything to use on the VC? We were in a bad spot and it seemed like no one cared. That single jet fighter underscored my anger. What went wrong that day? Year later, Jim Page would fill in some blanks for us. For starters, we had been landed in the wrong spot. We landed late in the day, and way after the action had already started for us to block anyone coming our way.

That "little map error" cost General Henderson his command the next day when Lieutenant General Walt arrived to access the scene. Walt promptly fired Henderson and shipped him out on the next chopper back to the ship. Marines use the nice word "relieve," but you can bet, he was fired no matter how it was sugarcoated. He should have been fired, there's no doubt about that. I know that now, but didn't at the time, none of us did. We knew that a new Brig. Gen. (Platt) had arrived, but we didn't understand the scope of the deal or why. I hope all those fine Marines did not die in vain due to a huge screw up. I also believe Marine Corps history has not treated us fairly in this case. That, too, has motivated me to write the facts and to set the record straight. Of course, mistakes happen in combat, there's no doubt about that, but I have to wonder about the judgment of our leaders at the time. After things started to cool down, we started comparing stories. We estimated later that the enemy had commenced firing heavily on the fourth or fifth chopper as they started to touch down. Their plan was to inflict damage early by catching the lead choppers as they slowed to land. Then the others would either crash, wave off or not even try to land; either way, we were easy targets in all the confusion. Their plan nearly worked. It almost seemed like they had planned the operation themselves. There we were for 10 long hours stuck up to our asses in rice paddy mud and VC.

And, it all happened just before lunch, even our 4 a.m. breakfast had already turned to shit and we were about to become a lump left in those rice paddies. It was a very bad day!

We had been badly outnumbered. I still ponder why they did not break out of those hills and kill us all, they sure had a chance. The Fox was on the run, but the Fox had no place to hide! At several point throughout the day, I remembered thinking about those famous words uttered by retired Gen. Chesty Puller (paraphrased) when he and his 1st Marines (the same 1st Marines I now served with) found themselves surrounded by tens of thousands of Chinese near a place in North Korea history calls the "Chosen Reservoir." The Chinese had just entered the war in 1950, and they had their sights on wiping out Puller and every Marine with him. I tried to put his words into context with our situation here in 1965: "...100 Marines against a thousand VC, hell, that ain't so bad. We got the bastards right where we want 'em. We can shoot at them in any direction!" At both times, the 1st Marines had been in the same shit sandwich, surrounded by thousands of the enemy who were trying to wipe us out. I defy anyone to say that history does not repeat itself. It seemed eerie then as it does today. We didn't have any control over our strength, so we just tried to do the best with what we had. A bad situation got worse as the day wore on.

From the very beginning, we faced withering 12.7mm machine gun fire that had been used on the choppers and had been used to kill Barry Sitler and several others and seriously wound Captain Page. Sometime in mid afternoon to early evening, I don't remember exactly when, things started to cool off. But, somewhere around the 5-hour mark, their 12.7mm machinegun fire gave way to mortar fire and then to sporadic sniper fire and occasional machinegun fire. During the first two or three hours is when we took most of our casualties. Our guys fell like flies trapped inside a car parked outdoors on a scorching West Texas afternoon. We couldn't see them, so we couldn't shoot them. We were like fish in the proverbial barrel. In open rice paddies, there's not much concealment and the other part of an infantryman's field of fire, cover, was out of the question.

Rice paddy dikes don't offer much of either. We sunk in the mud up to our waists as soon as we landed. We could have stayed on the dikes, but that's exactly where the enemy wanted us. So, all we could do is return fire from time to time and hope we were hitting them; that and wait for reinforcements. Even when we tried to deliver any volume of fire, our rifles jammed because they were covered with rice paddy mud. We broke them down and tried to wash them off in the rice paddy water, but that wasn't very affective. They still didn't work and jammed after one or two shots.

In those early days, we had the M-14's at the time so we didn't have much firepower to begin with. They were not light like the later M-16's, so the mud just added to the weight and jamming. There we were, lying in that stinking, rice paddy up to our elbows for ten hours not even able to shoot at those who were killing us! What a joke. We came here to kill the enemy, and they're having a field day killing us. We can't even shoot back. What if they come bursting out of that hillside, what then? What in the hell was our leaders doing and what were they thinking? Even with Utter's Echo Company (E/2/7) started pushing south toward us things got no better. Suddenly they were ambushed. The VC gunners had a new target. After some difficulty, Echo managed to reach an area from which they could provide us some support. They had a goal of reaching us by early evening but before dark. They accomplished the first part and arrived just before twilight. The other part of their plan didn't work well because as they were helping us pull our dead and wounded back some of their mortar fire fell short and they took some "friendly fire" casualties. So, after ten miserable muddy hours we started pulling back and our own fire wouldn't let us. Echo suffered a few killed and several wounded. Friendly fire is one of the saddest parts of combat. Dying for your country and its cause is one thing, but dying from your friendly fire is not so pleasant.

"Short rounds" can rain death and cause casualties just as much as the enemy can. There is an old infantry saying that, "Friendly fire isn't!"

Finally, after some effort and ten hours of combat we were able to join our battalion in the rear of those awful rice paddies. It was not a happy reunion. We hadn't won anything; we lost plenty. We were beaten badly, and it showed. Needless-to-say, we were also very pissed at the high price we had paid and had nothing to show for it. The only good saving grace was that we were a whole battalion, somewhat organized and ready to take the fight to them. We had been blooded, but now we had blood in our eyes, and we wanted revenge. We were strong in numbers if not in spirit. We had our entire battalion in the field once again, Echo, Fox, Golf, and Hotel Companies and our battalion HQ. We were joined Echo and Fox Companies from 2/7 who stayed with us for a while, and they were ready to fight, too. We had six Marine rifle companies ready to attack on order. At the end of the day, we counted our losses. Echo 2/7 and my own Fox 2/1 had suffered substantial casualties: 20 dead and 80 wounded among us. Many Marines had minor wounds that didn't require close medical attention or evacuation. They were called "walking wounded" - they stayed in the field. The more seriously wounded were evacuated to the ship for immediate treatment, or for further movement to the rear and on to the United States.

Some of our wounded were less serious, they became walking wounded and they we got the chance to stay and fight some more. The highlight of the day was as darkness fell over the battlefield, Maj. Gen. (later promoted to Lt. Gen.) Walt, the senior Marine in Vietnam arrived by Huey to survey the battlefield damage and to give us a pep talk. Before he left, he relieved Brig. Gen. Henderson. He also spoke to Lt. George just before he was lifted back to the ship for treatment. The pep talk lifted us somewhat, but it did nothing for General Henderson; his career was over. Being relieved from command for any officer, especially on the battlefield, is career ending. This single act is the same as being fired and kicked off the team without any rebuttal. It's not a pretty sight and it's no way for anyone to finish their career, especially for a Marine Corps General Officer. It was the kiss of death for him because the next step is retirement, assuming no formal charges were filed on top of the firing. Dying in a lousy rice paddy they way our Marines did that day wasn't a pretty way to leave the battle, either. I guess General Henderson got off lightly in that regard. He had set up our operational direction and he had ordered our landing. As it turned out, it was in the wrong spot, and the price we paid was not a good return on his judgment. We had come under murderous fire for over ten hours due to his poor judgment, or misjudgment; I'm not sure which.

He didn't do it on purpose, I know that, but the military chain has little patience for excuses in such matters - they act quickly in most cases like this where a unit suffers heavy casualties, and in our cases, we had nearly sixty percent casualties. Poor decisions happen in war and high prices are paid when people die, are wounded, or become missing. In turn, some leaders have to pay with their jobs, so they were fired. I don't hold anything against General Henderson, but he had to go, and General Walt did the right thing. Walt then gave command of the Task Force Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt. General Platt took over and sized up the battle situation quickly. He immediately ordered another company from Utter's battalion to move up with us. They would reinforce us as we got ready to push up the hills. His Golf Company 2/7 arrived early in the morning, about 0300 (3 am). They had moved all night cross-country to get to us. What courage! Now they like us were ready to take the fight to the VC. We now had seven infantry companies, nearly two complete **battalions. We were ready to attack. Balls to the walls we said, and off we went into the breach we will go. To meet what or when remained to be seen. Up those slimy hills, take the fight to the VC. We were told to be ready at dawn to mount up and move out. Here we go again, attack at sunrise as Marines always do. That surprise element again, I thought. But, this enemy was not surprised.**

They could see us coming because they held the high ground from the day before or probably even longer. Hell, it was probably their backyard. They had the best seat in town. The only surprise was that we were now attacking rather than withdrawing. I bet that part did surprise them. WW II Marines stormed beaches, scaled walls and got the shit blown out of them as they killed thousands of Japanese in places like Tarawa, Saipan, and Iwo Jima or fierce fighting inland like on Okinawa. It seemed we were about to do that ourselves this 11th day of December 1965. Attack at dawn they said. Damn, I the military mindset in 1965 had not changed one bit since 1945. Although we were a different generation of Marines, dawn still seemed like the best time to attack. The only difference was that like so many times before, the enemy wasn't surprised. Any surprise for us would have been to see them shag ass and not be there.

Our attack started right on schedule at the crack of dawn, but not before we had our ceremonial can of C-ration beans and franks. Many of our old rations had been were left over from the Korean War era when they had been manufactured in mass in the middle and late 1950's. I remember seeing many boxes dated in the 1950's. Here I was in 1965 eating c-rats canned while I had been in high school. Who says the military doesn't conserve resources? It didn't matter what time we started or on what diet, the VC could not help but see us coming their way.

The only difference was that we went from sitting ducks to standing ducks. The shooting gallery remained much the same as it had the day before. Only now the Fox was the hunter! We climbed for a long time, slowly ever so slowly, and for some strange reason we took little fire along the way. We were told to expect some heavy bombing before noon. Did this explain why the fire was missing? Maybe the VC knew in advance about the B-52 bombers on their way from Guam. They started their runs and it lasted for some time, and then just as sudden it stopped and they were gone. We hoped they had cleared a nice wide path up ahead. I couldn't help but wonder where they had been the day before. We continued our advance, just as slow due to the slippery, muddy slopes. Our leaders didn't want us to attack off schedule otherwise we would have ended up under our own 1,000-pound bombs raining down ahead of us. Our attack was now measured in steps and yards -- in hours, and not days. A few more Marines would surely die along the way to whatever final victory lay ahead. One could only hope it wasn't their number being called. But, final victory would have to wait ten long more days, and the revenge factor soon wore off as slugged up and over those Que Son mountains. "What in the Hell am I doing in this God-awful place?" Even more ironic was that in two more years, I'd be back in these same God-forsaken mountains hunting the same damn elusive enemy.

That time I would be serving with the 7th Marines on my second tour in this war that seemed to have no end. At that moment, however, I didn't have time to think about where I'd be in two more years. I wondered if I'd live for two more days or hours, or even whether or not I'd live for two more minutes once we made contact. I kept slugging along like everyone else, slugging and hoping to make it out in piece, or if I did wounded, I hoped it would be one of those million-dollar wound that equated to a quick and permanent trip home. A nice flesh wound, through and through and clean with no lasting damage; that would be the ticket home. It was not to be. I came out clean as a whistle during Harvest Moon. On the third or fourth day of climbing those hills I almost bought the farm.

It happened in a very bizarre way. We were trekking up the hills in a long single file through some chest high stuff that resembled grapevines. Although they were not grapevines, they reminded me of grapevines that used to hang behind my grandmother's house in Du Quoin. Funny how one thinks of comparisons like that at a time like that. I used to climb out on her back porch roof and then into a nearby cherry tree, stopping long enough to wolf down some cherries and then I'd hang down until I reached the concord grapes below them on their vines. Those grapes were delicious - fresh, juicy and plump.

I'd eat as many of them I could before she caught me and chased me away with a broom. I'd run away and hide until I thought it was safe, and then I'd sneak back for a second helping of those delicious grapes or cherries. As we passed those shrubs that day, my mind drifted back to the wonderful youthful days and those concord grapes. My daydreaming was suddenly broken when someone yelled: "Grenade!" Everyone started diving off the trail heading for cover or stopping and hitting the deck right there on the spot. There is was right in front of me rolling straight down the trail towards my feet, a hand grenade. In a split second my life, just like they say, flashed before my eyes. My first thought was to duck or run. A VC grenade, or a booby trap? It didn't matter. Without second thought, or any thought at all, I reached down, grabbed the grenade and turned to throw. Then I saw it was one of ours. It had no firing mechanism - it was missing. The grenade's body was in tact, but there was no way it could have exploded without the firing mechanism in place. What was going on here? As it turned out, it had fallen off someone's cartridge belt, dropped to the ground and rolled down the hill right towards me and the column. The firing mechanism with pin still in tact apparently was still hanging on someone's cartridge belt and they didn't even know it.

We all had good laugh mostly at me and my action just standing there with a grenade in my hand ready to throw it. That was definitely a first for me. In the early days of the war we were told to keep our hand grenades tapped for safety purposes. We weren't allowed to hang them all over the place like you see in the war movies. On that day, someone broke the rules because the one I picked up had no tape on it. His disregard of the rules almost cost friendly lives, and we never found out who the owner was. The danger passed quickly. We continued up the hill; again, I was lucky but in a very odd way. Lady luck was right there standing by side, but I had to wonder, for how long?

A few days later, Harvest Moon ended without further incident, or more enemy contact for us. We returned to our ships, packed our gear and prepared to go ashore for land combat for the rest of our tour of duty. Finally, I get back my sea legs. Operation Harvest Moon now was in the Marine Corps history books. It officially ended on December 22, 1965, two days after we were safely back on our ships.

The "Last Big Battle of 1965" was over not only for us, but for all U.S. Forces in Vietnam. But, the question remained? "How many more battles were still out there - how many more would die before the new year ended and I could go back home?" Only God knew the answer to that question and at that time in space, he didn't tell me!

Bob Neener's Version of
Operation Harvest Moon

Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines (3/3)

On 9 Dec 1965, at approximately 1300 hours LIMA Company 3rd Battalion, 3rd Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, was the lead Company, a spearhead, sent into the Que Son Valley to rescue the 5th ARVN Regiment who had been under heavy attack since daybreak. It was Tuesday, December 8th 1965, Lima Company had just been pulled from MAG 16 perimeter duty for what we thought was going to be a couple of days of R&R. We were in the rear area (Battalion HQ) somewhere on Danang Air Base. Our Company area was temporary, with no permanent structures, The Battalion was in transit from Chu Lai to Hill 55 outside of Danang. Each Platoon had its own area where we pitched our two men, pup tents. I can only remember using the pup tents here and earlier at Chu Lai, and for a very short time in both locations. Most of the time we were either on the move or just preferred to use our ponchos for shelter halves. We built some very interesting hooch's with those ponchos, and the more ponchos we had, the bigger and better the hooch. It was around 10 am. Jim Stead and I were in our tent playing Chess on one of those magnetic chess boards we got from the Red Cross.

All of a sudden, our Platoon Sergeant (whose name escapes me) informed us that we were going to have church services and everyone must attend. Ordering everyone to church service was not uncommon, every good platoon leader wanted to have a good showing for the Chaplin, who almost always out ranked the Plt leaders. We were told that the Protestants would be holding services first, then Jewish services and finally, Catholic Mass. At about 1100 am, the order came for the Protestants to "fall out for church and don't keep the Padres waiting". Well, I am Protestant, but I was also in the process of beating the jungle boots off old Jim Stead for the first time since Chu Lai, almost a month earlier, so I decided not to attend church services. Maybe 30 minutes later there was a call for all the Jewish troops to fall out for services. I was still in the process of out maneuvering Stead on the Chess Board some 30 minutes later when the Platoon Sergeant came back through our area to round up all the Catholics. I was trying to be inconspicuous, I'm a little guy and seldom had problems finding cover, but my Sgt nailed me. I even tried to show him my dog tags which clearly indicated that I was Methodist, but he didn't want any excuses, stating that "if I didn't fall out when he called for the Protestants and I didn't fall out when he called for the Jews, I therefore must be Catholic" Typical lifer reasoning! For all he knew I could have been Buddhist?

But to please my SGT, I went to Catholic Mass and I actually took Communion (that's the Corps, you do what you're told, and when you're told to do it!) no questions just action. I didn't think about this much at the time, but unless you actually are Catholic, holding church services on a Tuesday is highly suspicious, especially in a combat zone!

Wednesday morning 9 Dec 65 at 0500, we mounted up, loaded onto 6-X's (big Marine trucks) and headed south to a point where most of us had no earthly clue where we were. They never told us peons anything, a hell of a way to run a war don't you think? If I were in charge, I'd want everyone to know exactly where we were going to go and what we were supposed to do when we got there. But back in the 60's we were still governed by a WWII mentality (the less the troops know the better). It seems that we were near Tam Key, that's what all the official documents suggest, Tam Ky was the staging area later on in the Operation, but we were on the Beach, in the sand, watching the waves roll in and fighting off the Piss Ants that were crawling up our pant legs! I suspect that our staging area was somewhere a little north and east of Tam Key, near Thang Binh. We arrived at the staging area shortly after sun up and sat there all day till around 1300, when a large number of choppers came into our LZ. We were again told very little.

We were told just enough to scare the shit out of junkyard dog! We were told that all the waiting was due to the fact that B-52's had spent the morning bombing several VC regiments that were assembling in the Que Son Valley, and that we were going in to rescue fragments of an ARVN Regiment (*South Vietnamese Troops*) that were in serious trouble. For the record, a Marine Corps Regiment consists of approximately 2,100 troops in three reinforced Battalions, and our Recon had estimated that there were 3,500 plus VC's held up on a nice little defensible map grid called hill 43. We initially went in with one company, Lima Company, with approximately 180 troops. So, at 1330 hours, Lima Company, along with it's FO (Forward observer 1st Lt Jack Swallows) and his team along with a small H&S (Headquarters & Supply) contingency, mounted up on Choppers and flew west for approximately 30 minutes. We landed just south of the village of Bong Son II, near the eastern mouth of the Que Son valley. The LZ was not hot, there were no problems landing or disembarking. From the LZ, we spread out into a Company wide sweep, moving toward the highlands and Hill 43. I will state for the record that we never made contact with the ARVN unit that we were suppose to be rescuing, although the documents suggest we did. It may have been the next morning, but the ARVN's were pretty scattered on 9 Dec 65.

I was a Assaultman (MOS: 0351, 3.5 Rockets) attached to 3rd platoon. We were on the right flank of Lima Company as we were sweeping through the rice fields in the valley, I was on the extreme right flank of 3rd platoon. Shortly after we began the sweep, I noticed a couple of fellows in black pajamas, following us, about 200 yards out. As we would stop, they would stop, as we picked up the pace, they would speed up their pace. It quickly became clear to me that they were following us. I immediately informed my platoon Sgt that we were being observed, but he chose to ignore the heads up. Ten minutes later I observed several more, maybe 15 to 20, and this time I clearly saw weapons. I again reported the sighting to the Platoon Sergeant, and this time he took a look-see and promptly notified the Lieutenant. I understand the necessity for following orders, but there was a clear and present danger on our flank, but the Lieutenant chose to ignore it, and follow his orders. American lives were in danger, we had a clear target and I'll never understand why we didn't attack them. Hell, I could have taken out most of them with one well placed rocket round. I blame the Lieutenant because the SGT did use the radio, but I really don't know who the idiot was for sure. (This is the same Sgt who made me go to Catholic Mass the day before, a Korean War Veteran and maybe not the brightest bulb in the string, but a good Marine anyway.

It may very well have been our Company CO, Captain DiMartino who nixed the flanking incident. As a result of ignoring the problem on our right flank, the VC had our position in constant observation. What the brass didn't know, was that they were walking us right into an ambush. The VC on our right flank were spotting for a much larger force getting ready to hit us. Shortly before All Hell broke loose, we came upon a small hamlet at the end of this massive rice field. This hamlet was maybe 200 meters wide, so we split up. 1st Platoon was on the left flank, so they took the high ground and went around from above and to the left of the hamlet. Third Platoon took the low ground and went through the hamlet from below and to the right flank. Second Platoon stayed in the rear to act as a reserve force. (I guess at the time it didn't occur to the brass that it was strange that this little hamlet, with all of its huts in a nice row, wasn't occupied, not even the chickens came out to greet us). Most of us were uneasy as we passed through this little village, we had no real information, only what we saw and heard, or in this case what we didn't see or hear, our instincts told us something was happening or about to. What happened next was pure Military genius on the part of the enemy.

We had walked right into a "Triangle Ambush" we were surrounded and attacked from all three sides of the triangle. The group of VC who had been following us, were the ones who closed the back door completing the triangle. As 1st platoon and 3rd platoon came out and around from this hamlet, we found approximately 500 meters of rice field and Hill 43 facing us. The VC opened up with mortars and machine guns from the base of hill 43 and the tree lines to our left and right flanks. As 2nd platoon began to deploy to our aid, the VC closed the back door of the triangle and caught all of us in a cross fire. We were surrounded by machinegun fire and mortar rounds began dropping in all around us. My gun team found a position, a rice paddy dyke maybe 18 inches high and we took cover. The shit was really flying, (the USMC historian says that we were up against 200 VC from the 80th VC regiment). These were the same bad guys we faced in Operation Starlite four months earlier on August 18, 1965, and we killed a bunch of them then. I have no idea how many of them there were this time, but the shit was definitely hitting the fan everywhere! We were surrounded, our entire Company was pinned down and we were deathly close to being overrun. SSGT Cordova gave an order to charge the hill, which was by the book, when mortars are coming in, charge the mortars!

My rocket team was told to stay back with an M-60 team and lay down cover fire, so we took position behind a dyke near the M-60 team. The 2nd platoon and the 3rd platoon began to deploy into the rice field, 1st platoon was holding the rear and the mortars kept coming, interrupted only by the constant enemy automatic weapon fire from hill 43 and the surrounding tree lines. Jim Stead, Jim Knowles and I had just gotten the rocket launcher into position, that damn 3.5 rocket launcher was long and bulky, it was a target begging for incoming. I was so glad when we went to the LAWS Rocket (Light Assault Weapon System). As Jim Stead was taking aim, an incoming mortar round exploded a few feet away from us, I was hit in the right shoulder by the up blast. I felt a punch and then a very warm liquid began oozing from my wound.

"CORPSMAN, CORPSMAN UP" the Doc made his way to me quick, I was one of the first group of wounded. The Doc stopped my bleeding and then ran to help the other two wounded. Several more incoming mortar rounds exploded in our immediate vicinity so Jim Stead decided to move our position. Just then the Doc came back to me and helped me back to a bomb crater some 110 feet to the rear where they were setting up a hospital staging area and gave me a shot of morphine.

My guys were somewhere between hill 43 and where I was now. Before the morphine could do its stuff, I began freaking out, it was near dark, there was shooting and shouting everywhere, mortar and RPG rounds were going off within yards of my position and they took away my rifle, I was defenseless. By this time some Marine air had entered the fight and there were also the sounds of nearby 250-pound bombs capping off. The Corpsman worked masterfully even though they had lost one of their own to the battle. HM1 Richard "Doc" Croxen, along with PFC John Miller, had been wounded by the same mortar round that got me. John Miller made it, Doc Croxen didn't. Our Senior Corpsman in an attempt to calm me down, asked me to look after a LCPL who was badly wounded. The Doc told me that this guy probably wouldn't make it, but to do what I could to make him comfortable. In the meantime, the rescue choppers were on their way, but the VC had an ace up their sleeve for them as well. As the first Med-Evac chopper came in to rescue the more serious of our wounded, the Pilot was shot at close range while attempting to land. CPL Joe Hennebery an Irishman from Boston and a Scout Sgt attached to the FO team, were both badly burned from the burning chopper fuel. They got burned as they rescued the downed chopper crew. They were both awarded Silver Stars for their heroic actions. The Pilot, Major Donald J. Reilly died and was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions.

After major Reilly's chopper was shot down they decided to wait till well into the night before trying to evacuate the wounded, this unfortunate delay most likely contributed to the loss of some of our more serious wounded. So here I sit in a bomb crater that most likely didn't exist the day before, hell is at the doorstep and the morphine has just started to do its stuff. The nearby battle began to seem more distant and I was beginning to calm down, in retrospect, I was probably experiencing the first symptoms of what later would be called PTSD. I was sitting next to this kid who was dying, (I don't think I really understood that he was dying at first) you have a hard time acknowledging death when your in the thick of it). He was most likely very medicated with morphine and he laid there very still, until suddenly he became agitated and began waving his arms in slow motion. The Corpsman told me to calm him down best I could, so I grabbed his arm and hand and held him. He had multiple chest wounds and had probably lost a lot of blood. He began to talk in a calm, almost surreal calm voice, he called out "Mama" three times, gasped once or twice and calmly passed. I remember thinking at the time that he was the only one who was safe. It was most likely around 2300 hours when I was finally Hilo lifted out to the aid station. They were still shooting at us when the chopper lifted off.

Most of the glory of Harvest Moon goes to 2/9 and 2/7. (2/7 had a Medal of Honor winner on the last day). (Author's note: Bob refers to Harvey Barnum). But it is a fact that of the 407 total enemy killed during the entire 12 day operation, 92 of them were killed by Lima Company on the first day. Of the 45 Marine KIA's, 15 were from the first day. Of the 218 Marine WIA's, 43 were from the first day. Our Battle lasted hours, well into the early morning hours of 10 December, and for those lucky enough to make it to Hill 43 without a scratch the battle then evolved to hand-to-hand combat. General Walt relieved General Henderson of his command on the afternoon of 10 December 1965, one day after the Operation began. General Henderson was Regimental commander, his removal is a good indicator that I am correct about my theory that the brass screwed up big time.

Bob's Footnotes:

* And ever since that day, I've often wondered if, taking Catholic Communion on Tuesday had saved my life on Wednesday!

** Before I came over to Lima 3/3, I won a Bronze Star on 13 Sept 65, while I was with Golf 2/9. That was a bad day but nothing like the first day of Operation Harvest Moon!

*** The action in which I won the Bronze Star was a day patrol not more than a few miles from where Operation Harvest Moon began. The Que Son Valley was a hot spot that I would visit a 3rd time before my tour of duty was completed.

***** Jack Swallows informed me that he wasn't able to call in any artillery support that day because Battalion took control of the fire missions. This command error was most likely due to the fact that we were sent in to help the ARVN troops. Plus, they didn't want us to kill any Friendly Forces by mistake. (The "Don't shoot till shot at rule of engagement" got us again).

***** The Kid who Died in my arms that day, was LCPL Larry Dean Borschel a Radio Man from H&S Company who was attached to Lima Company's FO "Forward Observer". He may have been killed by the same mortar barrage that got me. I left his name out of this story when I first wrote it because I wanted to spare his family any new pain. I've since talked with two of his sisters and now feel that he should be named.

Bob's Final Note: "So much happened on the 9th of Dec 65 -- There is so little written."

Author's Note: Bob, I hope I've finished the story for all of us? You guys did good. -- DMF

Barnum, Utter and Miller Versions

Operation Harvest Moon

As 1965 wound down, the 1st Vietcong (VC) Regiment, which had suffered a resounding defeat at the hands of the 7th Marines during Operation "Starlite" in July-August 1965 on the Chu Lai peninsula, was back in the picture and rearing to do more harm. By late November 1965, they had attacked the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) outpost at Hiep Duc some 25 miles west of Tam Ky. By occupying this key position, they had a clear road to the Nui Loc Son Basin, also called the Que Son Valley which is located in Quang Tin province, a part of U.S. I Corps. Abundant in farms and heavily populated, this valley was considered an extremely important area situated as it was between the major South Vietnamese cities of Danang and Chu Lai. The monsoon season provided excellent cover to VC units, and later NVA units, as they attempted to occupy that vital region. On November 22, 1965, news of heavy fighting between enemy forces and the 2nd ARVN Division, 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion, and South Vietnamese Regional Forces, reached MACV HQ and General William Westmoreland. He instructed Major General (later promoted to Lt. Gen.) Lewis W. Walt, commanding general of the 3rd Marine Division, to "...conduct search and destroy operations and ...drive the VC out." Walt also was justifiably concerned about the growing communist threat in Que Son region.

General Lew Walt was a burly Marine and easily spotted on the battlefield. His first task was to confer with ARVN Maj. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi about a course of action. The pair concluded that action must be taken to repulse the VC from this rich farming area at all costs. Born out of that decision was Operation Harvest Moon/Lien Ket-18. U. S. Marine and ARVN units immediately went on the offensive to quell the enemy's drive into the Que Son Valley. On December 18, 1965, Lt. Col. Leon N. Utter's 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines (2/7), ran headlong into the 80th VC Battalion. As the Marines trudged through extremely rugged terrain, varying from flooded rice paddies to jungle-covered hills, the enemy hit the rear and flanks. Utter's main column came under heavy fire.

At the rear of the column was an attached Company, Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9), which had been assigned to support Utter for the duration of the operation. After the Hotel Company commander and radio operator were killed, the artillery forward observer, 1stLt. Harvey C. Barnum, Jr., on temporary duty from Pearl Harbor, took command. After hours of intense combat, Barnum and his Marines successfully broke contact and joined the remainder of their unit in the village of Ky Phu. For his heroic actions that day, Barnum was awarded the Medal of Honor, becoming the fourth Marine in the war to receive the highest military decoration.

At the time of his retirement from the Marine Corps in 1989, Colonel Barnum was military secretary to the commandant. He discussed his experiences during two Vietnam tours in an interview that appeared in Vietnam Magazine conducted by contributing editor Al Hemingway. Hemingway is also the author of *Our War Was Different: U. S. Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1994). Hemingway himself had seen combat earlier when he served with the 4th Marines 1969. What follows is his interview about his view of Operation Harvest Moon.

Vietnam: How did you become involved in Operation Harvest Moon?

Barnum: I was attached to Hotel Company, 2/9, and we were on the Anderson Trail, south of Danang, on patrol. I really didn't know too many people in the unit; I had been in Vietnam only 14 days. We were attached to 2/7, and relieved Fox Company, 2/7. Fox had received several casualties and some Marines suffered from immersion foot. So Hotel Company, 2/9, became part of 2/7. We participated in Harvest Moon for a couple of days; the operation was winding down. A radio message came in telling the company commander to report back to base camp immediately. We were traveling on the main north/south road when we got hit. The entire battalion column was ambushed. We were maybe four miles from Highway 1.

Vietnam: From what I understand, when the VC ambushed the battalion, they were attempting to split the group in two. Is that the way it was?

Barnum: Yes. We were heading out of the mountains in a battalion march column. My company was the rear element. Now a battalion march column is strung out quite a distance. In fact, the whole purpose is for rapid movement. The lead companies had already entered the village of Ky Ph and we were about 200 yards back from the western limits of the village.

Vietnam: Ky Phu wasn't a very big village?

Barnum: No. It wasn't very big at all. We heard shooting toward the front of the column, and we heard RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades). My company commander, Captain Paul Gormley, was just coming out into an exposed position followed by his radio operator. The enemy zeroed in on them. I'm sure they saw the radio antenna and his .45-caliber pistol and thought that they were part of the command element. And they were exactly right. The initial round hit the skipper and his radio operator. The enemy soldiers were popping up out of spider holes and seemed to be everywhere.

Vietnam: The VC was really dug in.

Barnum: Absolutely. They were good at it. So, in essence, we had a battalion strung out over 500 yards. Everyone was engaged in a firefight.

I remember, after hitting the deck and scanning the area, I heard someone holler "the skipper and radio operator had been hit." They were about 50 or 60 yards ahead of me. I saw the corpsman, Doc West, get hit two or three times trying to reach Captain Gormley. Hotel Company had just come around a hill mass and was in the open when they hit us. When I saw Doc West get wounded the third time, I just got up and ran out to get him. Then I returned, picked up Captain Gormley, and carried him back to cover. When I went back out to grab Doc West, I saw that the radio operator was dead. I then realized that I was the highest-ranking officer present. Everybody was looking at me, and I could see in their eyes they were saying, "Hey, lieutenant, what do we do now?"

Vietnam: What a position to be in.

Barnum: The first thing I did was run out to where the radio operator was lying, take the radio off his back, strap it on mine, and hurry back to our defensive position. I assumed command of the company, analyzed the situation, and started giving orders.

Vietnam: Did you also continue as the FO?

Barnum: Yes. My FO team and I started calling in artillery on the enemy's positions. The fire was real close. The enemy was right on top of us. The artillery came in right over our heads. It was touch and go. We were right on the gun target line.

The artillery fire helped reduce the odds, stunned the enemy and gave me an opportunity to regroup and settle folks down.

Vietnam: Sounds like you were in a real fix.

Barnum: We were. I radioed battalion headquarters and told them that Captain Gormley was dead and I was the FO and was assuming command. The battalion commander asked lots of questions. I guess I convinced him I knew what the situation was. He told me to make sure everyone knew I was now in command.

Vietnam: And, you had been in country only 14 days.

Barnum: Well, I was the boss, 14 days or not. Getting back to the radio, everybody was on the same net. The battalion commander, each company commander, the S-3 (operations officer), even air support. So I could listen in to all transmissions, and I soon realized everyone was in a bad way. If you were worse off than somebody else who was transmitting, you cut in and then everyone backed off and listened.

Vietnam: I would think that everyone being on the same net would lead to confusion.

Barnum: No, it worked well. I think that's the reason we were saved. We worked together as a team and overcame a numerical superior force. BGen. Jonas M. Platt, the task force commander, was in a helicopter overhead.

Being on the same net meant that I could make my decisions based on what was happening. (Author's note: Gen. Platt had taken over after Gen. Walt fired Gen. Henderson).

Vietnam: So communications wasn't your biggest problem?

Barnum: No, in fact, getting people to stop shooting and conserve ammunition was my biggest problem. We were calling in a lot of air support. I remember standing up on a knoll and firing 3.5-inch Willie Peter (white phosphorous) rockets to mark targets and for adjusting Points. We did that until we ran out of 3.5 rounds. The enemy was moving in on us on our right flank. The VC knew we were low on ammo. God bless those helo pilots. They flew for about an hour after they were out of ammo to help keep the enemy off our backs. By then it was getting dark. Battalion headquarters informed me that we had to get out on our own. They couldn't come and get us. Everyone else was in a fix as well. I finally got some choppers to come in and evacuate the dead and wounded. Then I had everyone drop their packs and any inoperable weapons in a pile. I told a couple of engineers to blow it in place. I requested the battalion commander and the rest of the unit to set up a base of fire and, in fire team rushes, we started out. It is the worst feeling in the world to charge across fire-swept ground. You're right in the open. But I told everyone, "Once we start, guys, there's no stopping."

Vietnam: How far did you have to run?

Barnum: I'd say it was approximately 200 meters. And when it came my turn, I never ran so damn fast in my life! We made it across, and once we reached the outer limits of Ky Phu we established a defensive position tied in with the rest of 2/7.

Vietnam: What did your unit do next?

Barnum: Once we reached Highway 1, Hotel Company was released from 2/7, which was going back to Chu Lai. Hotel Company and the rest of 2/9 were heading back north to Danang. We were boarding trucks on Highway 1 when we got sniped at from this village. An Ontos (multi-barreled 106mm recoilless rifle gun system) was with us, and I directed its fire at the sniper. We leveled three huts. Needless to say, the sniper fire ceased. Later on that night, a second lieutenant, who had only been in country for three or four days turned me in for using excessive force.

Vietnam: Were there any ramifications from the incident?

Barnum: Back at FLSG (Force Logistics Support Group) Bravo, when we bivouacked en route back to Danang, I was questioned by a Lieutenant Colonel about the incident. Well, I told him that I only did what needed to be done. I also informed them that everyone on that convoy had just experienced some pretty heavy combat. The sniper fire was interfering with our retrograde movement, not to mention hazardous to our health.

I soon found out that I had been put in for the Medal of Honor, so I guess that sniper incident was forgotten. I still stand by my action. We eliminated an enemy threat, and no Marines got injured.

Vietnam: How did you find out about the Medal of Honor nomination?

Barnum: A lieutenant colonel woke me up in the middle of the night at FLSG Bravo and questioned me about the battle. Not thinking that it was anything unusual, I went back to sleep. The next day I was relieved of command of Hotel Company and rejoined my artillery battery south of Danang. I went to the corpsman upon arrival in my battery position and had my feet checked because I had contracted immersion foot. My battery commander then informed me that I was being put in for the Medal of Honor.

Vietnam: That must have been a shock.

Barnum: It was. I was lucky; I wasn't even wounded. My pack was all shot up. It just wasn't my turn to go. The good Lord was watching over me.

Vietnam: When did they finally award you the medal?

Barnum: Let's see, the Battle of Ky Phu was fought on December 18, 1965, and the Medal of Honor was presented to me on February 27, 1967. That was more than a year later. Award recommendations go through channels, and that takes time.

I was the fourth Marine to be the recipient of the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War and the first living officer to receive it. Sergeant Bobby O'Malley was the first living enlisted man to get it.

Vietnam: Only a handful lived to receive their medals. What happened next? Did you remain in country?

Barnum: After Harvest Moon, I was ordered to Lima Battery, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines (4/12), which had towed and self-propelled guns. The gun line was strung out over an 11-mile area. I worked in the FDC (fire direction center) and on the guns. My battery gunny was Gunnery Sgt. Leland B. Crawford. He later went on to become sergeant major of the Marine Corps. In February 1966, my 60 days was up, and I reported back to Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor.

Vietnam: You went back for a second tour in Vietnam in 1968-69. Wasn't that unusual for a Medal of Honor recipient to be sent back to a combat zone?

Barnum: I was an aide to General Lew Walt, who, at that time, was assistant commandant of the Marine Corps. He said to me, "...if you can last a year with me, I'll send you anywhere you want to go."

Barnum: When my year was up, I informed him I wanted to go back to Vietnam. He pulled some strings and I was sent back as CO of Echo Battery, 2/12, and the battery I was with in 1965.

My battalion was in support of the 9th Marines, and Colonel Robert H. Barrow, a future commandant of the Marine Corps, was their regimental commander. My battery saw a lot of action. We built 16 fire support bases throughout northern I Corps. We also participated in Operation Dewey Canyon, supposedly the largest and most successful operation of the Vietnam War. I was very proud of my Marines. North Vietnamese Army forces tried to overrun my battery one night at Fire Support Base Cunningham. We won -- they didn't. I was later wounded at FSB Spark when a bunker entryway I was standing in was struck by rockets and mortars and collapsed.

Vietnam: When did you retire?

Barnum: In 1989, after nearly 28 years of active service. And I must say it was an interesting 28 years. It was a great way of life. End of Barnum's interview.

What follows now are the last two versions of Operation Harvest Moon. One is from Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter (Commanding Officer of 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines) and PFC (later promoted to Corporal) Tom Miller. Their joint-combined interview was taken from an article in The Marine Corps Gazette, March, 1966, on pages 25 - 30. In an introduction to their interviews, one observer noted, "A superb account of a counter-ambush action at Ky Phu a week before Christmas, 1965." This interview completes my three-part analysis of Harvest Moon.

At the end of this segment, one can compare the official Marine Corps version with the firsthand accounts of Harvey Barnum, Leon Utter, Tom Miller, and me. In Utter's and Miller's own words:

Utter: Up towards the front of the long battalion column, Company G came under sniper fire for the second time since the 0800 jump off. As the company, correctly, began to shoulder this harassment to one side, or kill it off, the Battalion Command Group, to the rear of G and somewhat bored, spread out a little. My watch had failed to survive the past 10 days of rain and muck. I had to ask the S-3, the time of day; it was 1330, December 18, 1965. It was one week to Christmas, less than 24 hours remaining on patrol, and still no solid contact for 2/7. The Battalion was now on its 10th day of Operation Harvest Moon. We recognized snipers as a nuisance and impediment to progress, for the battalion had two goals that were fast opposing one another. First, for more than a week they'd pushed the VC before them with no more than a small skirmish, and there was vengeance in their hearts for the 10 days of misery they had endured. Second, although the Task Force Commander had given permission to patrol the twenty-odd miles out from where they'd gone deep inside VC country, he could give them only three and one-half days. For he was running out of time and resources at the Task Force level.

Even so, he had readily taken to our idea that the 80th VC Battalion lay somewhere along a 20-mile East-West trail. Two and a half days on the trail had produced nothing but a dozen odd snipers and less than 24 hours remained of the allotted time. As Golf started its sniper elimination tactics, there were more than four miles of trail and one large city remaining to be swept-to say nothing of the untold rice paddies, hedge rows, and hamlets. The country opened a bit here, near the little market town of Ky Phu. That is to say, it was as open as rice paddies, hedgerows, and hamlets (with trees planted to break up the monsoon winds). At least it made for better progress than the high mountain passes and tangled vegetation that had been the Battalion's lot for the past two days. And the outfit was on the trail in "Security on the March" formation. Short a couple of its organic companies, a fact that gives any thinking battalion commander the heebie-jeebies, 2/7 was fortunate in having H-2-9 attached. The Battalion's own Company H was back at the jump-off point, Hill 110. It was waiting on good-enough weather to survey the damage of a B-52 strike and then helo lift forward with some 4.2 mortars. As for Fox Company (F/2/7), they'd been hit hard for two days and nights while working with 2/1 (Author's note: My unit) and had been replaced by Hotel 2/9 (Author's note: Harvey Barnum's unit).

And so it came about that Golf had the Advance Guard, with Fox and H&S as the Main Body, and H/2/9 as the Rear Guard. All units were light. The rains and mud had taken a very heavy toll of feet. Every daily helicopter re-supply run took out those with crippling "immersion foot" as return cargo, but most Marines managed to conceal their agony. The 106mm Recoilless Rifles had been sent back the second day of the operation as too bulky and heavy for man-packing, with the personnel remaining as the H&S security platoon, and the 81s were down to two guns to facilitate movement. Rifle companies averaged about 118 men each. Only an hour before Golf pushed into the unusually quiet town of Ky Phu, the column had been delayed for an hour and thirty-five minutes. The delay was in order to fly out 32 more foot cases. This delay was somewhat of a relief; since it got men back for needed treatment. And, frankly, it got them out of the way of those who could still walk. But it also gave the enemy time to look 2/7 over and make some room for their passage, as well as plan his next move. You just don't walk in VC country without being observed. Every stop is that much more detailed observation allowed the enemy. But the foot cases got out and the march was resumed. The lead company's flankers worked hard, out to the limit of visibility and often times as much as five or seven hundred yards. They were sweeping, probing, and stumbling in the mud and thick undergrowth.

And, finding nothing but abandoned earthworks, especially on the approaches to Ky Phu. Company G entered Ky Phu warily. Gunny, this town's just too quiet!" remarked a first enlistment from Texas. So they swept it clean and went out the eastern end where open paddies waited. And there they encountered the aforementioned sniper fire. Now an automatic weapon, easily identified as enemy, was snapping in rounds in the air. In the Battalion Command Group the S-3 transmitted the CO's instructions to Golf Company's skipper: "O.K. Bill, develop it and eliminate it. The 6 says to use your own judgment and keep your company intact. We're gonna' slide the column by you, then let you pick up the Rear Guard. Break. Foxtrot this is Diner 3. If you monitored my last to Golf push on through and take the point. Over." Back came a Boston accent: "This is Foxtrot. Roger, Out." They went east on the trail as Golf deployed to the south and started pushing what later turned out to be a VC Company. But at the moment it was still considered mere harassment. The plan was to continue the movement of the column, bring H/2/9 up into the main body. And, then with F now on the point, Golf could break off the action with the "snipers" and take up the Rear Guard. Fox moved in good order and had just bypassed the Battalion Command Group. This was at the East end of town.

Suddenly, a rattle of small arms and a half-dozen sickening "crumps" of 60mm mortars came booming up from the rear. They began to walk rounds all along the 700-yard length of open rice paddy west of town. Lord, that'll be right on H&S Company, I thought.

Miller: This is the time that Jack, several others and I were entering the west end of town. The VC cut us in two, with the people behind us turning around and heading west to rejoin H & S Co. and the people in front of us heading east with F Company. We headed east and Jack and I asked each other, "Do you think that they (the VC) are going to try to cut us in two? We both answered "Yes." I don't know if it was Jack or I said that said, "Let's check and clear the bottom of town." Utter: The point of Fox, meanwhile, had made a good 700 yards east of town. But now it was obvious that something big was being developed. Company G and the flankers were being engaged heavily on the sides of H&S. Company G had both tubes of 81s attached while on the Advance Guard. This proved fortunate since the 81s were well forward with the "Battalion CO's weapon of opportunity. We began at the southeast corner of town and went from house to dirt mounds behind the houses checking for people. In the second houses dirt mound, we found an older man about 50 and took him with us.

As we were to enter the next house we pushed him in front of us figuring that if there were any VC in it they would shoot him. He didn't want to enter any of the houses, but we booted him in anyway. When we got back to the West end of town, we ran into the bunch who were with us when the ambush began. They didn't go east or west but must have remained where we left them. There were two lieutenants, another Marine who was shot and another dead, plus a corpsman. We then went down this small trail about 30 40 yards and drew machine gun fire. I wouldn't have wanted to have these guys on my team as were clipping off tops of the 40' trees. They did manage to get a little more accurate and that's when Jack and I spotted the VC swarming just to the south of town. They were running west (probably headed towards H & S Company). There was a hell of a lot of them. So, Jack and I decided to occupy a house with a view to the south as we could see that they were trying to move the machine gun north into town. We picked up the two lieutenants and found the largest house (two stories) on the block.

Utter: They had been right up behind the point platoon when Golf got its incoming hours of gun drill paid off and all the sweat and muscle torture that had gone into the lugging of those guns for more than 20 miles saved blood. Using direct lay, and hoping for re-supply, the mortar men had 40 rounds on target or in the air in something like five minutes.

Scratch at least one VC machine gun at a range of no more than 300 meters! Crewmen ignored mortars and small arms fire from the other side, took their casualties, and poured it on. Re-supply did arrive in time and the gunners began to "walk" their rounds forward as Golf started its advance. Later after digging the base plates out of more than a foot of mud, the tubes were put in a more central position. From there, they could support could be rendered to help the other two rifle companies.

Miller: As we setup in the rear room of a house on the southwest side of the hamlet, we could see another long line of VC. They were moving northeasterly, attempting to get to the southeastern side of Ky Phu. Later, I found out that was where Golf Company was. We disrupted their flow and I guess it really pissed them off because they then sent in a recoilless rifle to take us out. Until then, we managed to hold off the machine gun crew. It was trying to get into town and to kill or wound approximately 15 to 20 in this distant line.

Utter: Getting back to the overall picture, it was obviously time to deploy the entire battalion. This was what 2/7 had been looking for - "solid contact." (Author's note: The eventual title of Utter's article).

Miller: This is about the time that Jack, two lieutenants and I were wounded! One lieutenant was blown into the next room

from the doorway, the other was less wounded by the shrapnel. I was splattered by shrapnel with pieces ricocheting off my helmet into my right eye and face. My entire backside caught shrapnel except for where my flack jacket was covering. Jack caught the brunt of the explosion sideways. It tore out a large piece of his throat and the only saving grace was that he never felt anything as it knocked him unconscious. He died a short time later as we carried him into the front room as the VC was rushing toward town from the south. We saw them entering town as we moved to the front side of the house. As we moved north the VC were coming into the village maybe 30 yards east of us, but we had nothing to stop them with.

Utter: By radio, I got Fox Company turned around. They came thundering back; through town, were met by the S-3. The S-3 directed them back to the West end of Ky Phu where they deployed on an "L" shaped line to the South and West. While on the countermarch they killed some VC (at a range of 4 yards) who had moved into town behind them. One group of three was setting up a .50 cal on a ground mount ready to enfilade H&S Company, when they were taken in stride on the dead run. We had held up their deployment so they didn't have quite enough time to finish setting up to reek havoc on Fox Company.

Miller: I believe that our action that day saved a large amount of Marines death or injury, but it cost Jack his life.

Utter: This deployment of Fox was unique to say the least. From caves and individual shelters as far out as 800 meters, and on the reverse (or outboard) side of dikes and hedgerows, the VC had lain in hiding, then moved in after the flankers passed inboard of them. When Golf became thoroughly engaged, and F had been sent forward, these VC had begun to encircle H&S. With the noise of battle as a signal, they entered Ky Phu from both North and South, On Line, and thus came to encircle H&S Company out in the paddies. This made the situation in H&S a bit touchy.

Miller: We would have been with H&S if we had not continued on when the ambush sprung. They didn't quit finish the circle as we had held them up. One never knows what would have happen had they accomplished this.

Utter: Advancing by fire and maneuver, the VC had built a ring, around H&S. Marines, firing and ducking in the two feet of mud and water, soon had their rifles fouled with the gummiest substance in the world, and began using pistols. Officers, radio operators, and the H&S security platoon of 106s all joined the fight with bucking .45's. Noting the decrease in Marine firepower as the VC encircled, the Battalion Executive Officer expressed his concern over the Battalion Tactical net. "6 this is 5. The enemy is on all sides and closing in. Our rifles aren't functioning. We're pretty well pinned down right now and it's getting hotter. Can you help us? Over." "5 this is 6."

"Hang on, George! Foxtrot has been turned around and is coming your way, but they're having to fight their way back. That'll take the pressure off you. Then I want you to come on in to town. Bring everything and everybody with you when you do." This all sounded very good on the radio, and doesn't look too bad in print, it did not ease H&S situation at the time. The XO's next transmission was more descriptive." "6 this is 5. I mean we're pinned and they are closing in! Now!" How his voice remained calm is still a mystery to me. "Can the HUEY's help us any?" He was referring to a pair of armed HU-1-E that had appeared soon after battle was joined. They had reported in via the Battalion Tactical Net, and had promptly been turned over to Hotel 2/9. They were to the rear (West) of H&S Company, was separated from the column by a line of large trees and some high ground. At this point the Artillery Liaison Officer from 3/11 informed me that he finally had radio contact with some 155s out near Highway #1. "5 this is Golf. Got some 155s. Give me some coordinates. I'll relay. You adjust. Over." This was done and about 10 rounds of 155 were delivered very, very, close to H&S but right on the VC! This worked to ease H&S Company's situation a bit while Fox Company was fighting its way back through town. Company F firing from the hip, kneeling, standing, and throwing grenades, had a maximum range of not more than 70 meters.

They were in the area previously swept by G and now reoccupied by the VC after G had passed through and F had been sent to the Advance Guard. It was a firefight in the classic sense with musketry playing the title role. The VC had initial superiority. That is to say they had it until their firing disclosed their location and Marines got into position and opened up. The VC lair was an area about 200 by 300 meters with the long axis paralleling the main trail. The Marines gained fire superiority almost as soon as they got started. Each individual Marine and his rifle proved as deadly as ever. In 10 minutes the VC firing had died down but not out-there was an occasional "hot" spasm. Some of the H&S boys had made it across the paddies to the relative safety of F's line and they, too, got a piece of the action. Standing up to see their targets, the Marines shoved M14, M60, M79, 3.5 inch and hand grenades at their enemy-all at near pointblank range and nobody missed at that range. They "talked it up" magnificently and a few fast thinkers even argued over their individual scores. Before and during this action by F - while H&S was in its worst moments. The Headquarters people had seen their share of heroes. A lieutenant laid a base of fire with his pistol while he spotted artillery rounds for the Battalion Executive Officer. He was assisted by a sergeant of the 106s. Man of the moment was the H&S CO. A veritable "bull" with teeth like Burt Lancaster.

He lost his perpetual grin for about a half-hour as he plowed back and forth across the fire swept paddy area. He shouted encouragement, pushed and pulled people, carried wounded, fired his pistol, took periodic nosedives, and made at least four round trips before the enemy fire began to slacken. Both his runners were killed. At the height of his busy day, he snatched an M-79 from one of the 106 gunners and crammed 22 successive rounds at the VC. The dejected Marine finally asked his lieutenant, "Sir, is it all right if I fire a couple of rounds from my weapon?" The H&S CO gave the weapon back and led another and final detail out of the paddies. He then reported to the Battalion Commander that all people were inside the town. This included his dead and wounded. They then went out once more to retrieve gear. He had one trouser leg completely ripped away and revealing a hock of leg that explains his stamina. Back with Fox Company, the flames from H&S had arrived on the scene and F's Marines began burning and blasting with method in their madness. As Fox continued to move to the south and west it came on line with Golf. This took pressure off H-2-9 whose story should now be told. As the Rear Guard of the battalion, this company had enjoyed a rather quiet morning walk in the rain flankers. He knew that Golf Company advance guard had already swept their areas, progressed nicely. The advance guard was taken under fire.

However, they began to look over the vacant fortifications which, earlier, Golf had reported on, and that were now in their own area. Sure enough, the lapsing one half to three-quarters of an hour had been enough for re-occupancy by the VC. Thus, for the entire battalion, the terrain and the enemy had created three separate actions: ...that of the Advance Guard; that of encirclement of H&S which Fox Company and the 155 artillery fire was now breaking up; and, at the rear of the Battalion, the action of H-2-9. When H&S had been ringed it was proper that I should have ordered Company H forward. Some frustration was only natural when I could not raise them on the radio. By the time I had the full story why I could not communicate with H, there was a 500-yard gap between them and H&S. What had occurred was that they became totally engaged to their rear and flanks to prevent themselves and H&S from being encircled and overrun by the enemy. And now begins the remarkable saga of the F.O. from Battery E, 12th Marines, who was serving with Hotel Company (Author's note: Utter refers to Barnum's unit). One of the initial rounds fired by the VC into Hotel Company (57mm RR or 60mm mortar - it's still being discussed) killed the Battalion Tactical Net Operator and mortally wounded the Company Commander. The FO, close at hand, but unscratched, crawled over to the pair, did what he could for the CO, stripped the still working PRC-25 off the operator and strapped it to himself.

He then advised me of his situation in a calm, clear manner. This reestablished communication with battalion. Busy with G action, in the process of getting F turned around; relaying artillery adjustments from Bn XO. Reporting the situation to a naturally curious higher headquarters; and realizing the necessary move for H at the moment was to close on the remainder of the battalion for their mutual benefit and for whatever VC might be driven between them, I was a busy man. Three armed HU1E's happened to check in to the battalion net at that time. With one transmission they were apprised of Company H location, situation, and turned over to the FO for his direct control. At the same time the FO was directed to retain command of the Company. He quickly restored morale, which had, naturally enough, sagged when the CO was killed, and he got his new command firing. He did this by moving around and directing small arms fire. They fired at "islands of trees" across the open rice paddies from his own elevated "island," which was a natural "bulls eye." Talking to the two HU1E's when the Battalion Commander could be silent on the' Battalion Tactical Net, he got them on target as well. Two H-34s came into the general area and they, too, came up on the Bn Tactical Net. Thinking fast, the FO sent a platoon across one paddy, popped some yellow smoke and talked the 34s down. He had his dead and wounded loaded and cleared out in a matter of five minutes.

He then got one platoon reorganized and started on the trail to join the rest of the Battalion in the town. By now, Company F's action made this possible. Still, Company H was overburdened with gear, some of which was useless and rendered inoperative by enemy fire. He asked for instructions on this and the enemy gear he'd captured. He had engineers attached and was promptly told to stack it and blow it, lighten his load, and join up. He launched into action, blew the pile of gear, and literally pushed the remainder of the company down the trail into town across the 700 yards of open ground. Needless to say, he retained the invaluable PRC-25 and command of the company. The battalion was now solidly together in, around, west and south of the town of Ky Phu. The various separate actions had now been consolidated into one major effort and no VC battalion could hope to stand against that! Golf Company having cleaned its sector, had reorganized, and arrived at the position of the Battalion Commander, stating he'd gotten his dead and wounded back to the aid station, run out of targets, was now tied in with F to the South and had a platoon free for any chores that needed doing. (You can always count on Golf for a performance like that). He was promptly directed to have that platoon re-sweep the town. It did, and this time rounded up more than 300 civilian women, children, and old men who'd come back into town when things quieted down.

Thinking the Marines were about all dead and the VC were the victors! They'd come in from the North and East, which was neutral territory.

Miller: Many of them were hiding in town during the battle.

Utter: The Task Force Commander arrived as we were mopping up. He brought one of his staff along. This staff officer said he'd never seen such a concentration of VC bodies and weapons. Not even during Operation STARLITE he said (Author's Note: Starlite had been conducted in July 1965). One of the first groups of H&S to get free of the encirclement out in the paddies west of town, the Battalion surgeon and his sailors didn't nurse their own wounds at all-they went promptly to the biggest house in town and set up an aid station on beds commandeered from every house on the main street. Casualties came from the west, went through the Aid Station and on to the east end of town (only 50 more yards) where they were promptly evacuated by helicopter, even while the battle was in progress to the west.

Miller: The Marines had ripped the doors off the homes and then used these doors to lay the wounded on.

Utter: Observing all this, the Task Force Commander queried, "OK, you've found 'em and thumped 'em good. Now what's your next move?" "Sir, I want to clean out this rat's nest.

Spend the night here (it was 1630 by now), and continue the march. But I'll need more time than the deadline of noon tomorrow. You got it. Let me know your needs and your ETA at Highway #1." And with that he was gone to provide the impetus for more logistic support. The rest was without major incident. All three companies were set into a perimeter defense of the town. The 81 tubes were up-smack in the middle of the town square. One company CP occupied the Market Place. The Battalion CP was split in case of more mortar fire (there'd been plenty of this; all very accurate during the three-hour battle). And the men settled down, speaking softly but enthusiastically of remembered things. There had been the Bn Sergeant Major, six feet and five inches tall, with gray hair but the physique of a twenty-year-old, going everywhere and making himself useful-sometimes just directing traffic up and down the main street was important. There had been the moment when Fox Company turned around with haste, every man eager to start shooting and getting shot at, had done a lot of shouting. I had paced the line once saying "Lay it on 'em, Boys. But take your orders from your NCOs." Then the roar of Company F's incomparable Gunny, had drowned out everything else with a "Knock Off the Shit, and listen to your fuckin' Squad Leaders, People!" Satisfied, I went elsewhere to make my influence felt where it was required. The Battalion S-3 had traveled a bit as well.

He'd turn up every few minutes at my side with information and a recommendation, leaving me free to control the overall action. Then he'd be gone again to another part of the line, or relieve me "on the horn" for awhile so I could get my slightly higher rankin' carcass out for a "look see" myself a very necessary item for any commander who's controlling any action. And there had been the faithful radio operators, close to their officers, often answering questions themselves based on their own knowledge of the situation, in order to save time and traffic. They managed to record enough to help fill out the after-action reports, too. All this in spite of the fact that for a period of more than two hours the following items were being accomplished on the Battalion Tactical Net alone: Bn CO direction of Fox, Golf and Hotel Company actions. Bn CO direction of H&S Company action; Conversation between the 5 and the 6; and adjustment of artillery fire, relayed from 5 to 6; Direction of armed HUIE action by H Company; and Evacuation of casualties by H Company.

Miller: I was the last of the wounded to get out that night along with several dead Marines. The helicopter had already lifted off when they asked it to return for me. They said "no way" until they heard it was a TAC party personnel. They then came back.

Utter: And at one when he was unable to raise the Battalion on the Task Force Net. The Task Force Commander entered the already burdened Battalion net, requesting a situation report and asking for a landing spot. Due to the heavy volume of enemy fire and the saturated Net, he was asked to remain airborne and to wait for a situation report (SitRep). He complied with both requests, thus showing confidence in his subordinates. All in all, it was a pretty good show, if you can label any action that costs the life of a United States Marine by that term. The aggressiveness of the individual Marine and the battalion as a whole, netted the following: 105 VC bodies counted on the spot, 2 VC wounded and captured, who upon interrogation revealed that it was, indeed, the 80th Bn of the hardcore NVA from North Vietnam that 2/7 had finally uncovered, closed with, and destroyed. Enemy gear: 2 60mm Mortars, 1 81mm Mortar, 1 .50 cal. Machine Gun (Ground Mount) (Utter's Note: This is the one that they were trying to move into town while we were in the rear room), 2 .30 cal. machine Guns 1919A4, 6 BARs, 4 French Sub Machine Guns, 2 U.S. Carbines, 5 M1 Rifles, 1 Thompson Sub Machine Gun, 1 Chinese Communist Sub Machine Gun, 1 Chinese Communist Carbine, 2 57mm Rocket Launchers, 2 PRC-10A radios. And a host of other small arms, grenades, cloth, rice, spare parts, mounts, helmets, medical supplies, etc.

As usual, the VC policed the area to the West where H-2-9 had fought their little separate action and won. Who can say what they and the two armed HU1E's killed and destroyed? Surely, the VC wounded who got away into the thick undergrowth must have equaled their dead. It's safe to say that 2/7 spent three days looking for the 80th Battalion. We found over half (if not all) of it in one location near the little town of Ky Phu [and] 2/7 systematically destroyed same, almost totally in infantry action, but certainly with the timely assistance of 155s and armed helicopters. Many lessons were learned. Go back, reader, and look 'em over. You'll find the following: "During movement to contact, keep moving. Do not deploy for every type of harassment, the enemy wants you to do just that. Any halt during a movement to contact gives the enemy time to observe. While in a route column, at least a section of 81s should be with the Advance Guard. In this situation, minimum range and direct play pay dividends. When you hit something worthwhile, deploy quickly and get that Marine firepower on line! Supporting arms are often the only answer. Previously swept areas, well known to the VC, can be reoccupied in a matter of minutes. Marine firepower is everything it is cracked up to be when it is brought to bear on target. Every officer and key NCO must have a map and remain oriented on the ground and the situation at all times, particularly in these days of the 1:50,000 (scale map)."

"Every radio net must be used and not just the Battalion Tactical Net. Circuit discipline is a must. The PRC-25 is reliable. Helicopter pilots know they can often come in within 200 meters of a fire fight and do so. The problem lies in the system that requires so much advance notice for their availability. The Commander must devote his attention to logistics as well as tactics. Two CPs, for the Battalion under shelling, are a must. The Battalion Commander does influence the action if he appears where needed. Records, though difficult to keep when the going is rough, help complete the picture afterwards. A subordinate who enjoys the confidence of his seniors will perform better if he knows about it. Infantry is the arm that closes and destroys, but it needs supporting arms- and those must be within range. There were other things that, fortunately, were done right. As soon as contact was determined to be solid, emergency re-supply of ammunition and medical gear was ordered. No one bothered to check with the rifle companies. Noise of battle alone told the S-4 that M-14 rounds, M-60 belts, grenades, 81mm Mortar, M-79s and smoke grenades would be needed. All the Battalion Commander had to do was tell him to "Get at it." After the heat was gone, one young Marine asked, "Colonel, why do we waste our good medical gear on those wounded VC, since the only good VC is a dead one?"

"Son," I corrected the lad's thinking, "the only thing better than a dead VC is a captured one who's alive and talking, and these birds talk. Do we keep 'em for humanity's sake? Maybe, but more for their intelligence value." Now comes the hard question. "What was the cost of 2/7?"

Well, years from now, when the monographs are done, they'll show we did quite well by the standards of this war. Personally, I feel you can't equate Marine lives with a VC "kill ratio. Casualties were relatively light," is all that can be said at this point."

Miller: There were about 25 Marines killed that day and 50 wounded.

Utter: As for the wounded, some returned to duty the next day. Some never will. They're still trickling back from the Medical Battalion as this is written. I hope, someday, someone will capture a survivor who can give us the final rundown on the VC toll for the battle of Ky Phu, 18 December 1965. Estimates of 600 800 VC killed and same amount wounded.

(Author's Note: This is the end of Utter's and Miller's accounts and to the best of my knowledge, no one ever has confirmed what Utter wondered). On December 19, 1965, the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, whose proud motto is "Ready for Anything, Counting on Nothing," made it to Highway #1, five hours later than the original schedule.

After Ky Phu, they had swept 4 1/2 more miles of road and another town. They then boarded trucks for Chu Lai. It had been a good patrol and had resulted, truly, in "Solid Contact for 2/7." Tom Miller wrote and told me not long ago and told me that Colonel Leon Utter had passed away in January 2001. Tom and I stay in contact from time-to-time. May God bless Leon Utter's soul and may he rest in peace!

Two-Seven did their duty just as we tried to do ours. Those who died paid the ultimate price. I hope I have captured the heart of their story in my story - it belongs to us all.

Tying All the Pieces Together

That's how Operation Harvest Moon was conducted and how it ended. It's an abrupt ending to a war story reconstructed from 20/20 hindsight and firsthand accounts long forgotten until now.

It is my story, Colonel Harvey Barnum's story, Colonel Leon Utter's story, and Corporal Tom Miller's story. Strange even after all our collective Marine Corps years, none of us ever had the chance to serve together or to ever meet. The only time and place we did meet was on the battlefield during Operation Harvest Moon and we didn't even know it then, either. Lying in between all these pages is our version of history that occurred long ago in a single bloody battle in the space of time that changed so many lives forever. Is it the whole story? No, by no means, it is not the end. No story is ever complete and this like many others still has many sides. This story just happens to have three sides that in the end merge into my one summary. I have tried to weave our firsthand accounts, which we remember so well with the historical facts and recollections of others. Some imagines are clouded, and that is to be expected; others are crystal clear and that is due to the nature of war over time coupled with old men and their memories which fade and become clouded in their search for answers about themselves and events so long ago. In the end, however, some things never change.

That is what I have tried to capture and put down on paper in this true story as best I could. History, as I said before, is now free to judge what I leave behind. History will judge this work just as God will judge all of us who played a part of that history as we line up for our last roll call.

Colonel Harvey Barnum's story is a very compelling because it epitomizes his heroism on one single day where he wins the Medal of Honor; and he doesn't even receive a flesh wound. How remarkable. His story occurred 10 days after the operation had already started and during the time my unit had been fighting for nearly 20 days. Piecing together his story and mine after such a long period of time was not easy, but it makes things much clearer today. I had to find and put together small pieces of a larger puzzle that sometimes never got pieced together at all. Men who fight in war sometimes can never piece together events which impacted them in their youthful days lost in combat over long period of time. Some keep great notes or have better memories than I; like Marty Martinez and his green notebook.

I was lucky because during this project, I was able to reestablish contact with many my old friends with whom I had served during that year of combat. Along the way, I made some new friends from that era that I never knew for 30 years. Tying in Leon Utter's and Tom Miller's perspective made the project that much more enjoyable.

Quite frankly, over the years I had almost forgotten about the supporting units adjacent to us from 2/7, 3/3, and 2/9 who also endured those awful 10 days of hell with us. After all these years, the bigger more complete picture is done. I like to think that the final page to the battle history calls "The Last Big Battle of 1965" is now complete because we have a clearer picture of a very complex set of circumstances about a very complex operation that over a 10-day battle included the firing of a Marine Corps general officer in the heat of battle and heroism second to none.

Operation HARVEST MOON officially ended on December 20, 1965, a mere five days before Christmas 1965. I still had a very long time to go before my tour of duty would be over in Vietnam. I still think about that terrible Christmas for so many families of those who fell in battle. They were sons, brothers, fathers, friends and neighbors. One final footnote to this history lesson is left for me to relate. After we arrived ashore and dug in on Hill 41 (Southwest of Danang) my unit had the honor of having a hot Christmas dinner (actually cans of rolled Turkey K-rations) with Charlton Heston. He came to our position early on December 22 or 23, 1965 (I don't remember the exact day) to share time with us. I often wonder if he remembers that dinner meal because I'm sure he dined with others over the course of his and other stars' visit. I remember it as if it happened yesterday.

The menu still sticks in my mind, too. One thing happened about a month after Heston left. We had a young Lance Corporal, James Taurisano from Everett, Massachusetts in our company. He was killed on January 20, 1966 after being seriously wounded by a VC "command detonated" land mine which had been tied in a tree and went off when his platoon was returning to base camp from a patrol. At least half a dozen others were wounded in the blast. Jimmy, wounded the worst, died a short time later. It was during Heston's visit that Jim told us that his mother had known Heston back when she worked for a network studio in New York City and had met Heston. He said he had asked Heston if he would call his mother when he got back to California and tell her he was all right and that they had Christmas dinner together. I often wonder about that story and whether or not Heston had a chance to do that, or whether he ever found out that Jim had been killed? I like to think that he did remember. Through the miracle of the Internet, I had a chance to corresponded with one of Jimmy's old high school friends who is now a retired police officer in Everett, Massachusetts. It is stories like this one that gives me hope about mankind and our lingering desire to survive and to go on after suffering great distresses like war.

Colonel Leon N. Utter's account and Corporal Tom Miller's recollections are priceless and compelling in their own way because they helped fill in many blanks.

Many units lent a hand during this operation and are not mentioned in as much detail as the three main players. I did not mention them on purpose. Even though I left out information about some support units, I hope that no one is slighted because of these omissions. Although it was intentional, it was not with malice or because they were unworthy of mention in the book. I mean no disrespect to any unit, American or Vietnamese, Marine, Sailor, Soldier, or any other person, living or dead. This was my story as best as I could tell it from a failing memory and notes and historical records. I believe this story completes a picture that history has been bypassed and left in array far too long. I promised those I've had contact with over the years and during the editing of this book that I would do my very best to put the best spin I could on the story - our story. I think I have - I hope I have. This story needed to be told, and I hope I've told it as accurately as possible. If I'm the only one who ends up with a copy of this book on my shelf, I will still feel a sense of pride in achieving my established goal of making sure that Operation HARVEST MOON gets a well-deserved place in Marine Corps history. It is a part of history, the glorious history of the 1st Marine Division, and in particular for those Marines who served with 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, and more precious to the memories of those who served with me in Fox and Golf Companies during my year of combat.

This story is about them and their sacrifice. This book leaves a record for others to remember them by, and it's dedicated to their families, and it's about me and my struggle in leaving a family legacy for my children and their children.

I hope it helps them keep cherished memories. I know that I can never forget them and although time can play tricks with our memories it does in no way lessen my love and feeling for my comrades. This book becomes a record for them just like the Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC has for so many others. Working on this project has made me a stronger person in many ways. It gives me a stronger conviction about our freedoms, our democracy, our government, our military and our way of life. I hope others take that same feeling with them as they remember me. Writing this story, this book in fact like any other book, has not been an easy task. There are very few members of the human race who can wear the label of writer, let alone actually becoming a good or great writer like William Manchester for example. Only a select few possess that unique God-given talent and skill which enables them to produce things that will outlast us all. There are many great talents that have lived through time such as Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Beethoven, Bach, Shakespeare, Michener, Wouk, and many others, or those with great talent to entertain us like Bob Hope, Jerry Lewis, Gregory Peck or Alan Ladd.

They all possess a certain type of greatness in a way that touches us all. At first, I had a hard time starting this book, although I had wanted to write it a very long time. It took my wife's prodding to get me to finish this project, and I'm eternally grateful for her persistence. There were times I sat down to write or type and drew complete blanks. Some times I just sat there and stared at the blank pages. I searched for a beginning point for months, then out of nowhere, I recalled the words of my former high school journalism teacher and long time friend who was also a Marine officer during the Korean War, Mr. Joe Thornton. When I was in high school and got a writer's mental block, Mr. Thornton would say, "...just start writing, you can always go back and edit later." Those words are true today as they were when he spoke them more than 40 years ago. In a small part, they too have guided me along the road to completing this project.

Finally, it still pains me to talk about the circumstances of my adoption and the long search for my biological father, a journey took 45 years. That search and decision to start is was also not easy, but I felt compelled to weave that part of my life into my Marine Corps life to portray the person I was and the person I now am. While that chapter of my life is still unfolding, I continue to hold my breath hoping that I have not done an injustice to anyone; family, friend, living or dead.

History is still out on that aspect of my life. I have done my best and so did my friends. May they all rest in peace. They gave it all, and we're all better off for having known them. I pray at night and ask God to protect them as they continue his work at the Pearly Gates that Marines are famous for standing tall nearby.

The last three sections of this story speak for themselves. I ask readers to pause and think of every name you see, and reflect on the words of those spoken to me over the course of finishing this book with their help. I ask you to enjoy and appreciate your life as they and I have. Life is too precious to give up. We veterans take pride in saying, "Freedom is not free." It truly is not -- we must never forget those who died for our freedoms!

CHAPTER EIGHT

After Operation Harvest Moon - Operation New York

What happened to Fox Company after Harvest Moon is an interesting Marine Corps historical note. Our battalion was the first fully loaded combat unit to move up north to the City of Phu Bai, an area only a few miles from the ancient capital of Hue City, and not much further to the DMZ between North and South Vietnam. The only other Americans that far north until that time were U.S. Army Military Intelligence (MI) Radio Intercept Operators at Phu Bai. Phu Bai was an old dirt airfield run by a joint force of Army and Air Force personnel whose main unit was north past Hue City near another airfield at Dong Ha. There was also an U.S. Army Special Forces compound in Hue City. Until we arrived, there had been no major U.S. combat units that far north. The Army personnel at Phu Bai were an odd bunch to say the least. They were intelligence soldiers, which meant they were pretty smart, but it also meant they were not combat soldiers. They lived the good life at Phu Bai. They had a very secure compound with tons of anti-personnel mines completely surrounding their air-conditioned trailers and believe it or not, a tennis court, and a small, but well-stocked PX (post exchange). This in the middle of our upcoming operations set the scene for bizarre moods between them and us. Their setup was designed precisely for the next Coppola movie.

Some of our guys made friends with a few of them and then they made good use of the PX. They were able to buy some fresh cigarettes, candy and soft drinks. These were things we had long ago given up after we left the cozy Navy ships. Comparatively speaking, they lived great while we lived like dogs amongst the sand fleas and graveyards which made up the entire Phu Bai perimeter. They ate very well - not C-rations like we continued to eat almost the entire year. Once a week, we were served "K" rations which meant we got plenty of rolled turkey, powdered mashed potatoes, dried milk, powdered eggs and dehydrated bacon. At least we thought it was bacon; but, it was much better than "C's."

After Harvest Moon, Fox's numbers dropped dramatically, yet we were still expected to patrol in a huge area many kilometers all around Phu Bai with our small patrols. Our numbers were low but our morale remained high considering our dire circumstances. We had some enemy contact, but not much. It was if they VC and NVA (now firmly in the fighting with the VC) had hightailed it when they heard we were in town. Not only did we lose quite a few during Harvest Moon, but we lost quite a few in the month shortly before we moved to Phu Bai. Before moving to Phu Bai and shortly after coming ashore, we took up positions on several hills south of Danang, which in those early days was not much of an Airbase, either.

Fox Company occupied Hill 10; the one on which we had Christmas dinner with Charleton Heston. Our numbers would continue to dwindle as time progressed there and after we were firmly moved into the Phu Bai area. I jump ahead to early February 1966. Our average company strength was less than 100.

Some units were so small that they were offered a chance to joint a new concept in operations just starting to be implemented in the northern areas of operation. The new concept was called Combined Action Company (CAC). These CACs were comprised of small units of Marines who lived and worked in the local villages. The Marines were allowed to "go native" which also meant they got laid occasionally and had to eat Vietnamese food. One very good account of this movement is provided by Al Hemingway of Vietnam Magazine, who also wrote a book on the topic: *Our War Was Different*, a collection of Marine veteran interviews. The Marines he interviewed each had served with a CAP (Combined Action Platoons) that were the basic part of the CAC (Combined Action Company). Their stories reflect a variety of experiences. *Our War Was Different* provides a useful sense of the change the CAP underwent over time as the Marines struggled to make it work. Hemingway asserted that the CAPs were an ignored advanced warning to the TET Offensive of 1968. He also noted that CAP intelligence concerning the impending TET Offensive was ignored.

He wrote that the Popular Forces (PF) (Author's Note: We affectionately called them "Poor Fuckers") would have never been able to defend villages without help from the Marines. He went on to content that long-term pacification never was achieved because the government of Vietnam was corrupt and alienated its people thus losing popular support. Despite these constraints, the CAPs were a sound concept from a strictly military standpoint. Hemingway concluded his assessment of the CAP's by saying, "CAP type units could indeed be used in low-intensity conflicts today, if the proper conditions were met." I note that apparently, those "conditions" were not met in the Vietnam war. Fox Company was redesigned as a CAC for a period of time after Operation New York concluded in early March 1966 when our numbers went further down. This is how that event unfolded.

As I said, Fox's strength continued to dwindle right up to the end of February 1966. By mid-February, I had been transferred to Golf Company (1stLt. Charles C. Krulak, commanding). Fox had beefed up when some Marines from Fox 2/7 became Marines of Fox 2/1 with the stroke of an admin officer's pen. My move to Golf was not unusual in those days due to manpower shortages. I was a senior Sergeant so took over a platoon in Golf because they were short Sergeants. Operation New York was one of those famous quickly-named operations.

They were famous for being put together in a short period of time, and usually when events went sour just as fast. New York for no exception. Following this operation, many names came off the active duty rolls to be chiseled on the wall at Arlington years later.

At any given time, there was always some major ARVN and PF units operating around us in the Phu Bai area, and since we were relatively new to that northern area, we were still learning the terrain, so the ARVN units worked closely with us to help us get to know the area and lay of the land. We were the only U.S. combat unit that far north of Danang and that close to the DMZ. We had had to rely heavily on ARVN and PF intelligence for the poop of the day. The PF units were a raggedy bunch, not well armed or equipped, a lot like hometown militia, but they died and bled like anyone else. They tried hard, and we liked them in our own silly fashion. One afternoon, reports started coming in that an ARVN unit and a bunch of PF's had engaged a large NVA unit east of Phu Bai, we put on alert, which meant to "stand by" (I hated that word stand by) that we might have to go help them or block for them. All day we prepared and waited and waited and prepared all over again right until early that evening when it looked like we'd have to wait and go the next day. We started settling down for the night. Reports kept flying in all night.

I had actually gone to sleep when around 2200 hours (10 p.m.) I was shaken out of my cot and told "we're mounting out." Mounting out, I said, oh, shit, it's midnight. Midnight or not, we saddled up and moved to the LZ (a huge empty sandy area where 'choppers could land, this area would later become a major hard surface airfield for operations into North Vietnam). We loaded up and had little idea of what lie ahead. I remember that we didn't get much of a briefing. We were told to expect more after we arrived at the scene early the next morning. We loaded CH-46 choppers and took off - it really was nearly midnight, February 27, 1966. We flew for about 20 to 30 minutes, started circling for what seemed like a very long time, and then we started to descend into the landing zones (LZ). This landing was a Marine Corps classic, and a Marine Corps first we later learned - landing an infantry battalion at night into a combat area by helicopter. The landing was uneventful, although a bit scary. Two CH-46's - Sea Stallions (the new, twin-rotor birds that replaced the old single engine H-34's) hovered overhead with their huge landing lights shining down below on the rice paddies as the rest of the 'choppers sat down and dropped us off. That part was scary. Just imagine, if there's any NVA here, we're dead ducks with all this illumination. All they had to do is start shooting at the bottom of the light and follow it up to the waiting birds.

There they were bound to get lucky and hit one or two and that equated to some 25 dead Marines. But, alas, it did not happen. Things went very smoothly, not to the surprise of everyone. The NVA must have seen us, got scared and ran away I kept thinking. We found out later that we hadn't landed very close to where the fighting was; this meant we had to march there and attack or block at daybreak. Here we go again - attack at dawn. In an ironic way, our first night assault went off without a hitch, except for missing some sleep! We assembled as fast as we could before the last bird flew away taking the last of the light. It was pitch black and I mean pitch black. You couldn't even see your hand in front of your face it was so dark. We couldn't see shit -- man was it dark! All we could do was spread out, keep close as possible, set night watches, and try to grab some sleep as best we could. Daylight was not far away. At first light, we wolfed down some c-rations, dry brushed our teeth, pissed, and started saddling up. Then came our new orders: "Sweep forward and help the ARVN and PF units as needed. They would do the heavy lifting, we would support and block. End of orders." Well, that sounded simple enough. We would block and shoot VC and NVA as they were pushed toward us. Hey, no sweat, now maybe we could get revenge for Harvest Moon. It sounded easy enough, but I also knew these things sometimes turn sour quickly.

Anyway, I thought, the fighting would be on our terms and not on theirs this time. Wouldn't you know it, Murphy dropped by and decided to screw up things only as Murphy can. He dropped off one of his laws and totally whacked us! Murphy as everyone knows always has plenty to say about changing events. Things like, "if it can go wrong, it will go wrong." Damn, you Murphy, I hated remembering you at a time like that. We had moved about a thousand meters or so without any resistance and without hearing any gunfire. Maybe the ARVN and PF units were still asleep, or maybe the NVA and VC slipped out over night. But, at the same time, I kept thinking, where in the hell are the ARVN and PF units anyway? Maybe the NVA and VC didn't slip out at night. Who needed so much help in the first place?" What's really going on here? We kept spread out and kept moving forward. We were on a line and from left to right stopped and was facing a huge tree line just on the edge of some fairly dried out rice paddies out in front of us about 300 to 500 yards away. From left to right we were lined up -- on my far left flank was Echo Company, then Hotel Company, and then us Golf, and anchored on our right flank was my old Company, Fox. We had four rifle companies with over about 400 Marines all lined up neat ready to block and kick some VC ass. Still nothing, not a damn thing. Where were they? Here we were with no air support, no artillery support, no nothing, just our basic infantry stuff.

We were stopped and enjoying a cigarette break when a single shot rang out up ahead. Everyone hit the deck. Then we looked around at each other with the same question on everyone's mind: what was that shot for, our eyes asked each other. What did it mean, if it meant anything at all. Was it a misfire, an accidental discharge, a signal? No one said anything, we just wondered collectively. Slowly we raised up and had just started to move forward when the whole damn place opened up in a hail of bullets. Well, now know where the enemy is!

Some of us hit the deck and started firing straight ahead, others started running for cover, many others just fell dead. It looked like another fucking mess in the making. Marines all around were running and falling, some dead, some wounded, others taking up firing positions. No one was counting, but the numbers of those not moving seemed to be growing fast. I raced forward only a few meters, and Marines were falling all around me. I stopped, hit the ground again and continued to fire straight ahead not knowing if my fire was effective or not. The enemy fire was intense and from all accounts, very effective. I saw our choices go from slim to none in a flash. In retrospect, we had several options: stop, get down and hope for the best; get down, lay there and probably get killed; continue charging onward and die while taking some with us; or, run like hell towards the enemy hoping not to die.

And, if we made it, still take as many of them with us before they took us with them. None of those choices were good ones, but there was no time for debate. All these thoughts went through my head in about one minute. Any choice, either way, life and death looked like the only choices following any course of action we chose. Thanks goodness, I didn't have to make a choice - it was made for us. Lying there for only a few minutes seemed like a lifetime, and then I heard Lieutenant Terry Moulton (New York City) start shouting over on my left side.

Moulton leaped up on a paddy dike, pulled out his pistol and K-bar and started screaming something at the time I wasn't quite sure what. Then his words rang clear. "Fuck this shit, let's go. Charge!" My first thought was "Moulten, you asshole, what the Hell are you doing?" But, it didn't matter what I thought, or what his words were, it worked. We all seemed to be motivated about our predicament at the same time. We leaped up and started charging and screaming at the top of our lungs as we headed straight for the tree lines into the withering fire. Something dramatically happened at the exact moment we started to rush the tree line, the stopped completely for a brief moment in time. It was if shock hit the enemy all at once and they panicked right there in their trenches as they saw us screaming and charging straight at them. I know they were stunned because I was stunned myself.

I continued running and shooting as fast I could while dodging straight ahead. I wanted to take as many of them with me as possible before they got me, because surely if I lay there, I was going to die and I knew today was my day to check out. I glanced over and saw one of our platoon sergeants, a huge Hawaiian named Sergeant Napoleon (we all naturally called him Pineapple). As soon as Moulton yelled, Pineapple also jumped up, pulled his pistol, pointed to the tree line, and started screaming the most blood-curling things I ever heard, but mostly in Hawaiian, because I didn't understand a damn word of what he was shouting, but I'm sure it was a "Hawaiian blue streak or something plenty nasty." Maybe that's why the enemy stopped firing for a brief moment. But, that didn't last long. No sooner had he shouted at the NVA than they fired at him and a bullet slit his right index finger. That was huge mistake, now he was one really pissed. He started shouting and swearing and pointing all the while he looked around for part of his finger tip. I don't think he found it, but he kept screaming anyway and at the same time started his charge toward the tree line again and then the rest of us joined in without a second thought. It was wild, complete madness and aggressive.

There were many stories about that day and about the way we attacked that tree line under such heavy fire. I heard about one story right after I returned from the hospital.

Apparently there had been an Army "O-1 Birdog" aircraft overhead with an Army Major working as air controller, even though things were so close he couldn't call in air support. I guess he tried several times to get air on board, but couldn't. He was reported to have said he had never seen anything like that in his entire life. Hundreds of screaming Marines racing across a rice paddy with fixed bayonets rushing a tree line filled with machine guns and NVA. It said it was right out of a war movie. The Marines, he said, were "Magnificent, simply magnificent." I think he was right about that that day. We did do a good job, but it cost us dearly.

In retrospect, I don't know how long that charge actually lasted, but it seemed like forever. Any amount of time in close combat seems like an eternity in slow motion at times. At one point, we got very close to the tree line and could see the enemy dashing back and forth, raising up to shoot at us then ducking back down before raising up again like those pop up targets you see at a carnival. Some of our Marines jumped in the NVA trenches ahead of the rest of us and started hand-to-hand combat. They grabbed the NVA by the head, neck, or throat and commenced to beat them to death with anything they had in their hands. Some sued their bayonets; others choked them to death or beat them with their rifle butts.

It was something right out of WW II - something we had never experienced till that time. We were getting revenge for the beatings months ago and especially during our bloodbath on Harvest Moon.

At one point, I managed to crawl up behind a Buddhist grave where I could take up a good firing position. I continued picking off as many as I could. Those graves are hard-packed mounds of dirt and sand, were anywhere from 2-3 feet in diameter to slightly bigger. It provided a good firing position, but not much cover and almost no concealment, but I didn't care; it fit my need just fine at the time. Suddenly I saw a NVA soldier jump up right in front me about 25 yards away and throw what looked like two or three hand grenades straight toward me. Just as he threw them, he started to duck back down, but he never made it. Staff Sergeant Reed from 1st Platoon mowed him down with a Thompson machinegun he had managed to "borrow" from a Tank crewmember (the Thompson was something the infantry didn't normally carry). Reed got him, but he was little late - the NVA soldier got several of us. He accomplished his mission just before he went off to wherever NVA soldiers go off to. His hand grenades got me and several others nearby. One grenade landed between the legs of one of the Corpsman who was on my left, and I don't even remember his name. He was hurt bad, and so was I.

I took several pieces of shrapnel in my left thigh, left arm, left shoulder, forehead, and left eye. Odd enough at the time with all the excitement and blast and noise from those hand grenades, I didn't even know I was hit until as I was helping patch up the Doc, I noticed blood on my thigh. I wiped it off, and as I did, I felt the pain in my leg. Then I felt the other wounds as well, and then I realized that the blood on me was my own and not the Doc's as I originally thought. Funny how fear works in moments like that. I was seriously wounded and didn't even know it for a few minutes. After seeing the wounds, I began to feel them. There wasn't a lot of pain, but it hurt nonetheless. I think I must have looked worse than I really was with the blood running down my face and arm and hand. Then I saw my arm I felt that pain but not before. Then it started to look bad with all the blood even to me. I started to worry because I didn't know how bad I really was. I didn't know how many other places I had been hit. I started to feel helpless. Then I thought, it doesn't matter, I'm alive and that meant a great deal at the time. I got my "million-dollar wound and I'm going home, I thought!" The question remained, how in the hell do I get out of here and go home to enjoy my rebirth. That little matter would take some time because we still up to our asses in NVA. The worst fighting continued to our right for some time between Fox Company and the NVA.

Their side turned out to be the center of the main NVA force. Fox like so many other time, ended up in lots of trouble and suffered lots of casualties. That day, Fox lost 14 killed, and WIA died the next day, LCpl Bill Foran from Decatur, Illinois. Fox also had the most wounded. In fact, Fox ended up with about 75% casualties. Many of the wounded in Golf were serious wounds like the Doc and me; others less serious. I could walk even with my multiple wounds -- they were bad, but not life-threatening.

Echo Company had one killed. Golf had no one killed and I still can't figure that out with all the shit that was flying that day. Hotel Company had one non-combat related death. Their First Sergeant died of a heart attack in the heat of the battle. A couple of hours into the fighting things actually slowed down. I didn't know if it was because we killed them all or if they managed to run away to the rear, or were they regrouping and rearming to counter attack? As it turned out, we had killed most of them, well over 200 it was later confirmed (no estimates, real dead bodies). We had beat the shit out of two brand new NVA battalions.

They had not even seen combat until that day and we managed to kill most of them. Two full NVA battalion-sized units hit us, and with only our small arms, machine guns, knives, and bare hands we killed over 200 of them.

But, as I said, we paid a heavy price. Fox Company was wiped out, virtually off the active duty rolls. Fox really hadn't been at full strength since Operation Harvest Moon and now this operation finished them off. All that was left was to convert them into one of those small CAC units a few days later.

During the lull, Lt. Moulton ordered me from the battlefield as the first wave of Medevac helicopters started arriving. I told him no, I was staying and that I wasn't as bad as I looked. I didn't refuse to go because I was a hero or anything like that. I wanted to stay and help clean up and kick a few more NVA asses myself. Although it sounded both foolish and hateful, I wanted revenge for Harvest Moon just like everyone else. Not only that, but I saw a couple of the choppers take fire as they approached and I damn sure didn't want to die in a fiery crash while getting lifted from the battle field, so I said no, I'm staying because the ground at that point seemed safer than being in the air. Moulton insisted and he told me to help with the wounded and get "out of there, now." I picked up the Doc and my gear and started crawling back to where one of the birds was about to sit down. It landed safely and we piled on and moved to the rear as others were trying to get on. We lifted off and as the pilot was pulling the nose up and starting to turn toward what I guessed was Phu Bai, when we took fire.

The pilot was hit, but no one else. Oddly enough, I had a chance to meet him in a bar one night in Okinawa while I was waiting to fly home, (his name was 1stLt. Brown). He got hit in the upper thigh with the bullet lodging in his groin, and at the same time it nicked a small piece off his penis. I asked him how he was doing and he said, "Hey all my parts are working and I'm out here 'test firing' my gun" he said with a great big smile while holding a girl on each arm.

As soon as I heard the rounds hitting our 'chopper, I became more pissed at Lt. Moulton for making me get on the bird. I thought for sure I was going to burn up in the 'chopper, but alas, it did not crash and did not burn. In fact, after a few short bursts from the ground, Lt. Brown got control and got us back to the rear. We landed safely at the Phu Bai BAS (Battalion Aid Station). Those of us not seriously wounded were whisked away to a tent in the rear to await examination and patching up. I was lying there next to my old fire team leader, Cpl. Dave Goodwin who had remained with Fox and was now a squad leader. Dave had been hit by shrapnel too, but appeared to be okay. We both chatted like two old hens at a tea party about who had been KIA or who had been WIA. As we talked, medics started bringing the dead in and carrying them right by us to a temporary morgue in a rear tent. From there, I had the chance to see the real damage.

Our men looked real bad. There was a lot who had been hit by the NVA heavy machine guns. Some of them were almost unrecognizable except for their dog tags, tattoos and other distinguishing marks, or by some personal pieces of equipment they owned. As it turned out, I was more seriously wounded than I originally thought or felt, so the doctor tagged me for further evacuation to Danang. Dave was tagged as a walking wounded, which meant he would get bed rest and RTD (return to duty in a few days). Before I left, Dave and I managed to walk around the other tents to check on our guys to see who else was wounded, dead or in between life and death. A few hours later I was lifted by 'chopper to the Field Hospital in Danang, and from there, I and many others WIA that day from all over the place were lifted offshore to the Navy hospital ship, the USS REPOSE.

Some of the more seriously wounded were directly evacuated to the United States, Japan, or to the PI. Some stayed there in the hospital at Danang in the various wards. I don't know why I went offshore, but it was a good break and gave me time to enjoy a couple of weeks out of Vietnam. After a couple of days, we lifted anchor and headed for the Philippines. I stayed on the REPOSE for 45 days before I returned to Golf Company in early April 1966. My return to the unit was a happy occasion because I had been promoted to Staff Sergeant on April 1st.

I remained in Golf Company until my tour was to end that next September. That meant I still had five more months in combat to look forward to. There was going to be plenty of time for more operations and plenty of combat, I was sure of that. As the year progressed, we would suffer more dead and more wounded as we moved toward the biggest operation of the war, code-name Operation Hastings, which would take place in the DMZ separating North and South Vietnam in July 1966. What led us to that encounter would travel all across the northern section of the country extending from Phu Bai to the ancient capital city of Hue. Hue was not well known in 1966, but by TET 1968, the whole world would know Hue City. One of those operations which took place along way to the DMZ was Operation Jay in June 1966. We would suffer many more killed and wounded during those Spring and Summer offenses of 1966. Leading up to Jay, we would participate in several unnamed skirmishes around Phu Bai, and we lost eight more Marines killed in March 1966. During Operation Jay, we would lose still more. However, the worst single day for losses occurred not during any operation, but on Memorial Day, May 29, 1966. This story is worth remembering for it offers a lesson in tactics that should never be forgotten. Golf Company was still commanded by Lt. Charles Krulak. We were tasked to continue patrolling the villages north of Phu Bai and just south of Hue City.

Operation Jay took place at a location that history calls "The Street Without Joy" which is a series of small villages around the Hue City. There was an interlude between Operation New York (February 28, 1966) and Operation Jay (June 25, 1966), so we were told to conduct small unit patrols and "sweep" the villages to keep our edge sharp and to fill the time between the two major operations. One of those "sweeps" was ending for my platoon on Memorial Day 1966. We had just finished a couple days of patrolling in a village east of the battalion temporary CP located along Highway One. This highway would lead right into the most-northern provinces which further led into the DMZ and right on into North Vietnam. We were all packed and were ready to pull out of the village and trade places with another platoon from Golf Company (Platoon Sergeant, SSgt. John Gaines, who was a good friend of mine). I had been in radio contact with Gaines over the company radio net all morning. We exchanged information about the village and what was going on back at the battalion CP. I told John what we had done and what we had seen and had not seen (namely no NVA). Then I told him to be careful moving in from the direction he was moving in from because our look out's had seen some movement that point and our position earlier in the morning. I told him I didn't know what to make of it, but to be damn careful and alert. Gaines said okay, and then he thanked me for the info and said he would tell his Lieutenant.

We left the village and started up the dusty road leading back to the CP perimeter which was some 2,000 yards ahead of us. Again, we spotted a group of NVA moving across what looked like the path Gaines' platoon would be coming down that led into the village. I got back on the radio and called for artillery and mortar fire on them. It was effective because after we reached the spot where our rounds had hit, we found numerous body parts and NVA combat gear. We thought we had spoiled their plans and I passed that information on to Gaines. I told him we had hit them but that I didn't know if it was the front of them or the rear and I reminded him one more time to be very alert. I told him where we had seen them and the direction they were heading, but didn't know much beyond that. He acknowledged my advice and said, "Roger, I'll tell the actual (his lieutenant), thanks, out." His radio went silent. We continued on our route back to the CP. We had no sooner returned to the perimeter and started dropping our gear, than a call for help came across the battalion radio net from Gaines' platoon. Almost at once, we could hear mortar and machine fire coming from the village. Echo Company, who also had been moving back to the CP was ordered to assist Gaines and his platoon in the village. One platoon was led by Staff Sergeant (later promoted to Gunnery Sergeant) Jim MacKenna. Off they charged into the village from the southwest side as Gaines was on the northeast side.

I don't know exactly what happened in between the two platoons, but it was a damn mess. While all this was going on, my platoon was ordered to also saddle up and get ready to move into the area and provide help. We ended up going in after things settled down, some two hours later. Later that day the damage assessments came rolling in. It was awful news. Echo Company had seven killed, including Jim MacKenna. They also had half a dozen WIA. John Gaines was alive but he had lost 13 in his platoon. Included in his count were many left over from the original Fox company crew I had served with. One loss was especially hard. Lance Corporal Billy Joe Holt (Cameron, Texas) was KIA. Holt was probably the best machine gunner in Fox company who had been trained by Frank Pruitt. Also killed were Dave Brandon (Lake Oswego, Oregon), Gordy Briggs (Seattle, Washington), Jim Briles (who had been in country only a month from Portland, Oregon), Tom Britton (Great Neck, NY), and R. B. Marchbanks (Moriarty, New Mexico). The other seven who were killed were so new and had just joined Golf from other units and I didn't know them well enough to even know their names. This loss just about cleaned the rolls of the original Fox company. I had a chance to talk with John Gaines later. He told me he relayed the info to his lieutenant about my warning, but that the lieutenant didn't care or didn't believe our report. John said the Lt. always did things his own way.

The lieutenant paid a heavy price for his arrogance. He was also shot two or three times in his buttocks, but he lived. As best as we could piece together what happened was this. A larger group of NVA had slipped into the village from another direction and were unseen by anyone. They were not the same ones I had called fire on earlier. They managed to set up a very elaborate "horseshoe shaped" ambush in and around the village and along the trail that Gaines was entering on. When Gaines and his platoon got in the center of the ambush site, they opened up and the shit hit the fan. There was no escape. For the NVA it was a turkey shoot. Then as Echo company entered from the rear of the horseshoe (unbeknown to them) they too entered the trap and were cut to ribbons. Not only was the day bad for the number of KIA and WIA and that is was on memorial day, but a sweep of the area turned up only one dead NVA soldier. There were plenty of NVA machine gun cartridges and different firing positions all around - which indicated that they had a large and strong force. Most of them slipped out just as easily as they slipped in during the mass confusion. The NVA won a big victory that day. They lost only one soldier and we lost 20. The lesson here was simple: Young arrogant Lieutenants didn't listen to their seasoned sergeants and they paid a heavy price for their stupidity.

In the whole mess, one hero stands out, Lance Corporal Paul McGee. McGee was also a left over from Fox Company. He was a classic Marine, great in the field and in tactics but a real shirt bird in garrison. Everyone loved him in spite of his shortcomings because he was just plain likeable. Paul was shot three times that day and each time the NVA shot him, he got madder and fought more himself, especially after he saw Billy Holt get killed. McGee and Holt were the best of friends and Gaines said that McGee went nearly berserk when he saw Billy Joe get killed. In fact, McGee was wounded pulling Holt back from where he had fallen. No one could confirm for sure, but indications are that McGee alone killed a dozen NVA by himself while being shot in the leg, chest and thigh. The NVA were notorious for not leaving any of their dead on the battlefield if they could help it. I figure that day they employed their best plan and was one which included removing or hiding all their dead. McGee was awarded a Silver Star for his action. I wish I had seen his acts so I could have written him up for something higher. I'm sure he deserves one for the stories about his bravery. But, as I said before, the Marine Corps was very stingy on their awards in the early days of the war. That stinginess would stay with us for years. We all knew it, but accepted that fact of life nonetheless.

CHAPTER NINE

The DMZ and Operation Hastings: July 1966

By way of introduction to the gradual buildup during the Vietnam War, we should not forget that in 1964 and during his election campaign, President Lyndon B. Johnson reaffirmed his conviction that, "American boys should not do the fighting or dying in battles that Asian boys should be doing." By June 1966, 285,000 American troops were on combat duty in South Vietnam, and another 200,000 would be pouring in by the end of the year. It seemed like old LBJ could not keep his pledge. More American boys poured into Vietnam to fight for and with Asian boys and many of each died. By July 1966, I had been away from home nearly one year, but I still had over two months left in country as the expression was thrown about. I was filling a Lieutenant's job by the time we moved into the DMZ. I had been in a dozen combat operations and numerous unnamed fights. Back home, the draft call was rapidly approaching 45,000 men per month. It was the largest quota since the Korean War. There seemed to be no end in sight, and by us moving into the DMZ, I felt the war was about to expand more, perhaps right into Hanoi. All through 1966 and 1967, Americans would read newspaper accounts about all kinds of American military operations. These battles would not be the dramatic, set pieces of battles that Americans were familiar with from World War II and Korea.

Vietnam was about to eventually become a great big new battlefield that engulfed an entire country with its dense jungle and rugged hills near the DMZ to its wetlands and impenetrable forests north of Saigon, to the myriad waterways and rice fields of the Mekong Delta. In those diverse and hostile environments, General William Westmoreland was calculating that his "search and destroy tactics" could work. The application of that strategy was demonstrated in part by his efforts in Operation Hastings near the DMZ, as I said commenced officially on May 17, 1966. How did this all develop and what was the other side thinking about when they moved into the DMZ. Here is how history remembers those events leading up to Operation Hastings and the full blown combat we would encounter in July 1966? It all started out rather mundane.

After a three-hour truck ride and a night march from the North Vietnamese coastal town of Vinh Linh, 200 NVA soldiers waded across a shallow section of the Ben Hai river which was the demarcation line (DMZ) dividing North from South Vietnam. Once across, the soldiers followed a narrow jungle trail through the lower half of the six-mile-wide DMZ. Their mission was not to fight but to reconnoiter four districts. Those four districts were in central and eastern Quang Tri Province. These advance troops knew something big was in the works. They were right.

An invasion of Quang Tri was planned for late May. Some 10,000 men from the NVA's 324-B Division would get their feet wet in combat just south of the DMZ. They had one simple mission, "annihilate the ARVN 1st Division assigned to defend the province." The 324-B NVA division was commanded by General Nguyen Vang. It was a relatively new unit, untested in battle. It had been formed a year earlier, brought up to strength with draftees, and trained for combat. Despite the division's past inexperience, General Vang was confident. He was confident his men would acquit themselves well against the South Vietnamese or, if need be, against any Americans. Even after recent setbacks in South Vietnam, NVA morale was high. A song on Radio Hanoi summed up the NVA soldier's mood:

*"Yankee, I swear to you
With words sharp as knives
Here in Vietnam, it is either you or me
And I am already here, so you must go!"*

The political and military crisis affecting Quang Tri and other northern provinces of South Vietnam in the spring of 1966 made them ripe for NVA takeover. Since March 1966, the hostilities between Buddhists and the government had paralyzed the military and weakened the defense of I Corps. Non-communist areas of Quang Tri and Thua Thien had been held by dissident ARVN units in sympathy with Buddhist factions.

The North Vietnamese proceeded with customary caution, organizing a complicated logistic effort. Lacking anything comparable to U. S. air mobility to re-supply troops already in the field the NVA had to establish advance logistical bases with food and armaments for incoming troops. The NVA relied on their VC allies in Quang Tri to collect and store rice for them. General Vang was poised to cross the Ben Hat River in the last week of May 1966, but, he soon discovered that his VC supply unit had not done its job. Reconnaissance units reported that rice depots were few in numbers and poorly stocked. As a result Division 324-B's mission was delayed while several of its battalions shuffled back and forth to North Vietnam for rice. While 324-B stood stalled in the DMZ, the American commanders monitored its activity and speculated about its intentions. The unprecedented infiltration of the DMZ by a large fresh NVA division created a stir at MACV headquarters in Saigon. The specter of an invasion, Korean-style, across the DMZ had preoccupied American and South Vietnamese commanders since 1954. To General Westmoreland in the spring of 1966, such aggression appeared imminent. In February 1966, Westmoreland had told President Johnson and Premier Ky that if he were NVA General Vo Nguyen Giap, "He would strike into Quang Tri *to seek a quick victory.*" In the ensuing months, MACV at its war rooms in Saigon, had compiled data on NVA activity near the DMZ.

Those reports indicated that an invasion was in the offing. By May 1966, Vietnamese agents were tracking 324-B's movements through the DMZ. Aerial Observers (AO's) spotted troops and trucks in the eastern sector of the zone, and infrared aerial photo-graphs revealed nighttime fires in the jungle and probable encampments. A lucky break provided further evidence when an NVA soldier surrendered to an ARVN outpost and disclosed preparations for 324-B's invasion. Still Westmoreland was unwilling to mobilize his forces and commit them to immediate counterattack. He would later remark, "I had to have more intelligence on what was going on up North, and there was no better way to get at it than by sending in reconnaissance elements in force."

The Marine Corps AO (area of operations) included all of Quang Tri province so Marine commanders shared MACV's concern about the NVA build-up in the northern area. However, they disagreed with MACV that the build-up constituted preparation for an all-out invasion of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Some Marine officers suggested that an invasion was unlikely because of the insurmountable logistics and supply problems facing the NVA. Still other Marine commanders speculated that the 324-B was bait. They thought the NVA unit was used to lure the Marines' limited forces away from their successful clear and hold pacification efforts.

These operations had been conducted near Danang and to bog them down indefinitely in a static defense of the DMZ would benefit the NVA just right. While acknowledging Marine progress in pacification, Westmoreland was impatient with their stubborn devotion to it. To spur them to action, Westmoreland ordered General Lew Walt, on July 1, 1966, to conduct the reconnaissance needed to ascertain the purpose and scope of NVA infiltration into Quang Tri. A few minutes before nightfall on that very date, Marine Lieutenant Terry Terrebone and about a dozen Recon Marines, faces blackened with grease, carefully checked their gear and weapons as they stood on the airstrip at Dong Ha. They boarded two CH-46 helicopters and headed in a north-easterly direction. Their destination: two miles south of the DMZ at a junction of two known infiltration trails. Their mission: locate the 324-B Division. As later reported by Robert Shapely in the New Yorker, Terrebone was not optimistic about contacting 324-B in the thickly wooded foothills below the DMZ. Terrebone said, "We intended to stay forty-eight hours and find out what we could." He and his men were in for a nasty surprise. They had been on the ground only twenty minutes or so when fifty NVA soldiers approached them from over a ridge. The NVA quickly moved to surround the Marines. Scrambling back to the landing zone, Terrebone called for helicopter gun ships and waited to be picked up while the NVA encircled the LZ only fifty yards away.

Terrebone went on to relate his story. "They were holding their fire, which showed good discipline. Ten minutes later, two A-4 Skyhawks and another helicopter gun-ship arrived. They sprayed the area with heavy fire and received automatic weapons fire in return. Two CH-46's were right behind them, and they came down and lifted us off." The reconnaissance patrol checked out several other sites over the next two weeks. Besides spotting three hundred fifty NVA regulars, they also sighted fortifications. Those included fresh mortar pits, new trench lines, and plenty of foxholes. General Walt concluded, "General Giap and Ho Chi Minh had decided to slug it out with us."

Westmoreland was now convinced that the better part of 324-B Division had moved across the DMZ. He swiftly ordered Walt to ready as many as seven Marine infantry battalions (around eight thousand men) to stop the 324-B in their tracks. The Marines were to be reinforced by five ARVN infantry and airborne battalions (about three thousand men), and backed by artillery and aircraft. Now covered by the long-range guns of the U. S. 7th Fleet, Marine units fanned out in mid-July toward the DMZ. Operation Hastings, the largest Marine operation up to that time, was underway in and near the DMZ. The conditions of that battlefield could not have been less favorable. Mountains made up roughly half of Quang Tri. Those mountains dropped off eastward into foothills.

Those in turn were separated by a thin stretch of paddy land and sandy beaches. One particular hill was nicknamed by the Marines, was the "Rock Pile" (named after the operation had commenced). It had sheer cliffs straight up and down. It dominated the relatively flat terrain just north of the Cam Lo River. An almost impenetrable jungle blankets Quang Tri's razor-backed ridges with thick brush topped by a double canopy of deciduous trees over 130 feet high. So thick was the canopy that according to one observer, "bombs explode harmlessly" on top of it. Brigadier General Lowell English, a combat veteran of World War II and Korea, commanded the operation. His battle plan was simple: repulse NVA penetration by cutting their access to two key infiltration trails converging some four miles below the DMZ.

English deemed control of the "Rock Pile" which overlooked the entire operational area to be a particularly important objective. Aggressiveness was the crux of English's plan to take "the enemy by surprise on his key trails and behind his own lines and to smash and destroy, and do it before he had a chance to regain his balance and his momentum." That the Marines were coming after them, however would be no secret to the North Vietnamese. For three days before, B-52s had pounded the trails, hillsides and ravines near the DMZ to "soften up" NVA entrenchment's.

Meanwhile, on a broad plain west of Dong Ha, the staging area for the operation, huge four-engine planes disgorged a million pounds of supplies and equipment. As the planes skimmed the runways, rose-colored dust clouds billowed into the sky, a portent surely not missed by the North Vietnamese men of the 324-B. D-Day was scheduled for July 15, 1966, and it began at first light (always at first light - here we go again) when a squadron of CH-46 helicopters, resembling mammoth grasshoppers, lifted off from Dong Ha with members of the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines (3/4). This battalion was one of many main battle battalions in the 3rd Marine Division. Their parent unit was the 4th Marine Regiment, nicknamed the "Magnificent Bastards." This unit had not been back in the Continental United States during some 30 years of continuous overseas service. Their operational zone was to be in the Song Ngan Valley, within rifle range of the DMZ. The first wave of helicopters set down in the river valley without incident. Sniper fire ended hope for a quiet landing as the second wave swooped toward the LZ. The third wave met disaster. In the LZ, choked by jungle, two helicopters collided and crashed. A third, trying to avoid them, rammed into a tree, killing two Marines and injuring seven. Snipers downed one more. LtCol. Sumner Vale, the CO of 3/4 remembers the grisly sight of several panicked Marines being slashed to death "by helicopter blades as they leaped out of their helicopters."

The Song Ngan Valley earned that day an infamous place in Marine lore as "Helicopter Valley." It was an ominous beginning. Vale's battalion initiated a sweep through the valley, while 2/4 landed at the other end about three miles to the northeast, and while 3/4 was to serve as a blocking force on a suspected infiltration route. Lt. Col. Arnold Bench commanded 2/4. They moved southwest to take Hill 208 overlooking 3/4's position. The almost impassable jungle combined with oppressive heat slowed 2/4's progress to a crawl. By mid-afternoon it had covered barely two miles. Captain J. W. Hilgers, a company commander, vividly recalled the difficulty of negotiating the terrain particularly the thick vegetation: "Though we knew our location, we could not see where we were going, trusting only to our compasses. The heat with no breeze and unlimited humidity was devastating." Delays erased whatever tactical surprise General English had counted on since the Marine battalions, now isolated behind NVA positions, were quickly thrown on the defensive. At four in the afternoon, after unsuccessfully trying to cross the Song Ngan, Vale radioed he "was under heavy fire." By 7:30 that evening, 3/4 was surrounded, awaiting the inevitable NVA night attack. It did not have to wait long. Shortly after 8:00 p.m. a NVA company tried to overrun Kilo Company's position, igniting a wild three-hour firefight.

"It was so dark," said Captain Robert Modrzejewski (Kilo's commander) "that we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces, so we threw out trip flares and called for a flare plane overhead. We could hear and smell and occasionally see the NVA after that. When the firing stopped, we heard them dragging the bodies of their dead away. In the morning at the first light we found twenty five-bodies. On the basis of the dragging we had heard, we figured we got another thirty of them, which we listed as probably killed." The battalion's problems were not over.

The next evening, still unable to ford the river, the Marines dug in while the NVA picked up where they had left off, lobbing mortars at their perimeter. At this point, 2/4 changed direction of its advance and went to assist 3/4. When it finally reached Vale's unit, 2/4 also became pinned down by the intense mortar attacks. The Marines returned fire, directing ear-shattering air and artillery strikes to within a few hundred yards. They had to do this near their own positions because the NVA were on top of them. They killed a hundred enemy at close range with pistols and bayonets. After two more days of incessant bombardment, the two battalions got orders to pull out. In the afternoon of July 18, 1966, Vale and Bench moved their units to the eastern end of the valley. Captain Modrzejewski's battle-weary Kilo Company stayed behind to destroy the crippled helicopters at the LZ.

Instead of pursuing the main body, the NVA massed to attack Kilo. Around 2:30 that afternoon, several hundred NVA infantry charged. They were blowing bugles and whistles and waving flags. Kilo Company stubbornly held its ground. The 1st Platoon, cut off in the confusion, bore the full brunt of the assault. First Platoon Sergeant John J. McGinty and his rifle squads threw everything they had at the NVA force but it was not enough: "We started getting mortar fire, followed by automatic weapons fire from all sides.... "[Charlie] moved in with small arms right behind the mortars.... We just couldn't kill them fast enough." The NVA to overrunning the company that Modrzejewski called air strikes virtually on top of the Marines' position. One Marine forward air controller, less than fifty feet from the enemy, had to plunge into a nearby stream to escape being burned by a napalm strike. The shower of bombs and napalm sent the enemy scurrying for cover. In three hours of close combat, the bloodiest of the entire operation, the beleaguered Kilo Company suffered over fifty casualties, with some Marines wounded five or six different times and places. When reinforcements from Lima Company (3/4) arrived to cover withdrawal, Modrzejewski's men "formed a column of walking wounded ... and then proceeded upstream. His wounded were evacuated that night." For their actions, Captain Modrzejewski and Staff Sergeant McGinty each received the Medal of Honor.

(Author's Note: John McGinty also later received a direct commission to Second Lieutenant). The two battalions, 2/4 and 3/4, had not seen their last of Helicopter Valley, however. General English, after evacuating the wounded, immediately sent these battalions back to the valley from the south to join the 1st Battalion of the 1st Marines (1/1) commanded by Colonel Van Bell, in blocking NVA infiltration. All the battalions saw action in a deadly game of cat and mouse. One Marine summed up NVA tactics: "a probe followed by an attack with mortars, automatic weapons and small arms, then disengagement's and flight." What happened on Hill 362 is a classic example. On July 17, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Bronars's 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines (3/5) had begun to patrol south of Helicopter Valley. A week into the patrol, Bronars ordered Captain Samuel Glaize and his India Company (I/3/5) to establish a radio relay station atop Hill 362 located some three miles below the DMZ. After hacking its way to the crest with two-foot-long machetes, Glaize's 2nd Platoon descended the other side of the hill to scout defensive position. It had not gone far when it met a hail of mortar and machine gun fire. "They (the NVA) had everything zeroed in on the trail," First Sergeant Bill Chapman recalled. Other platoons rushed to aid the 2nd but were ambushed themselves. Soon the entire company was trapped near the crest.

They were pinned down on the hill by a steady mortar barrage. "We could only dig small trenches," said Second Lieutenant Robert Williams. "We put a wounded man in with a man who could fight. Every third man was wounded, but they still tried to man the weapons." It was a harrowing night for India Company. NVA soldiers probed to within fifteen to twenty feet of the Marine perimeter. Corporal Mack Whieley remembers, "The Commies were so close we could hear them breathing heavily and hear them talking." For Private First Class Michael Bednar, it was pure hell. Struck by a bullet, Bednar fell near another wounded Marine just as some NVA soldiers emerged from a clump of trees. Both Marines played dead, but the NVA wanted to make sure. After the soldiers plunged a bayonet into the Marine beside Bednar and he groaned, they shot him through the head. Three times the soldiers jabbed Bednar with bayonets but he refused to cry out. Leaving him for dead, the soldiers snatched Bednar's cigarettes and watch and moved on to other wounded Marines. According to another wounded Marine survivor, Corporal Raymond Powell, "it was a damn massacre." The next day, Marine artillery struck at NVA emplacements. Helicopters whirred in to remove the wounded, including Private Bednar, who had managed to crawl back to his lines "with his guts hanging out." Glaize's unit suffered a casualty rate of 45 percent. They had eighteen dead and sixty-five wounded.

As for the force of NVA the New York Times reported that it "vanished into the countryside [casualties unknown]." As enemy contacts gradually tapered off, General English terminated Operation Hastings at noon on August 3, 1966. In his after action report to General Westmoreland, General Walt was effusive in his praise. He wrote, "As a result of the battle, the 324th NVA Division suffered a crushing defeat: and enemy designs for capture of Quang Tri Province were thwarted. It was a significant victory for the United States and represents a tribute to the courage, skill and resourcefulness of the personnel and units involved." General Westmoreland was no less pleased; he was convinced that the timely execution of Hastings had spoiled NVA strategy and foiled an invasion. The Marines exacted a stiff price from the NVA's 324-B Division, however. The NVA lost over 882 killed, 17 captured, the seizure of 200 weapons, 300 pounds of documents and over 300,000 rounds of ammunition. The soldiers of 324-B, described by General Walt as "well-equipped, well-trained, and aggressive to the point of fanaticism," and showed themselves to be a formidable foe. In all, 126 Marines were killed and 448 wounded. After Operation Hastings ended, my Battalion was again on the move. We were returning to an area south of Danang. We were to operate around Hills 10, 37, 41, and 55 (Regimental HQ). I would stay with Golf Company until I was due to rotate out in September 1966.

My rotation was speeded up a few days as I was wounded a second time on August 23, 1966. My full year plus was up and it was good to be going home. Our battalion had seen plenty of action and got into lots of shit from September 1965 through September 1966. Operation Hastings topped off one exciting and hair-raising year of combat duty I would never forget - about a dozen "named" operations and twice that many that were not named. Two events stand out as significant following Operation Hastings - my last big battle as it turned out. One is the aftermath of Kilo 3/4's gallant stand against an overwhelming NVA force. I knew John McGinty while we were in the Phu Bai area although we were not close. Each of our units operated for months around Hue City and Phu Bai, and then in the DMZ during Hastings. He was commissioned before I was shortly after the operation was over. I know he remained on active duty and retired, but I don't know when or where, or whatever became of him. I wish him the best of luck in whatever he is doing. He damn sure did a good job in July 1966!

One other event worth telling also happened while we were operating in the DMZ during a lull in the early days of the operation. I didn't know the significant of this story at the time it occurred. I didn't measure the importance of it until about a year after I returned to California.

At that time I read an article about our guest in either TIME or NEWSWEEK magazine sometime in late 1967. Golf Company as I said was commanded by 1stLt. Charlie Krulak, son of LtGen. Victor Krulak, commander of all Marines in the Pacific. We had set up our company base of operations near a place that later would be called the "Rock Pile." But, in the early days of operations it was only a pile of rocks and not named the "rock pile" until after Hastings concluded. Later, in the 1968 TET offensive, it would become famous along side Khe Sahn and the Marines stand at those two places. But, in July 1967, it was not famous. We had been running patrols trying to find the NVA and their supply routes into the South. One morning Krulak briefed us that a "VIP" was coming to visit us. I think we were chosen because Krulak was our commander and his dad was General Krulak. A VIP was good press for us, and a little politicking for Krulak couldn't hurt either, I surmised. My platoon was chosen to entertain the VIP, due to arrive later that morning. Early in the morning, and right on schedule, a chopper flew in. We were told he was going to join us on a short patrol to see the DMZ area for himself - to write a story or take some pictures, we thought. My platoon was selected with Krulak leading the patrol himself. It was to be a short patrol around the company perimeter and no action was anticipated.

I didn't meet the guest up close because he stayed with Krulak and the command group. Also he didn't come around shaking hands or anything like that, but I did get a good glimpse of him later in the day before he left. I never forgot what he looked like because his appearance was unforgettable. He was rather short and wore odd looking khakis (nothing like ours). He wore a pistol that was holstered over his heart. It looked like a .38 caliber pistol and not the military kind. He wore no helmet or any hat of any kind, but he did wear an unbuttoned flak jacket. The most distinguishing thing about him was that he wore a black patch over his left eye.

He went on a short patrol with us, came back and sat down with Krulak, had some lunch, stood up, shook a few hands, got on his 'chopper and flew away. He had been with us only a couple of hours. No one ever said who he was or what his name was. It was no big deal at the time, so I gave it no second thought, until sometime in 1967 when I saw his face on the cover of either TIME or NEWSWEEK magazine, then it all came back to me. The man I had seen and who had run a patrol with us that day was none other than Moshe Dayan, the Prime Minister of Israel. There was no mistake about it. It was him, black patch and all. When he visited us in 1966, he was not yet well known to the world. Perhaps he was well-known in Israel, but not to us out there in the field in Vietnam.

I guess he wanted to see some combat units up close since we were the only war in town. He apparently liked what he saw and he surely learned his lessons well because he went on to lead the Israelis in their stunning 6-day war in 1967. It would be nice to think that what he saw with us impressed him and that in turn helped him win in 1967. Probably not the case, but I'm honored to have been a small part of his visit anyway. My only regret is at the time I wish I'd had a camera at the time so I could have a record of his visit. Operation Hastings was the most-organized operation I ever saw during my year in Vietnam. History has been good to the memory of that battle and researchers can read up on it. Here is one official view of that battle from "Vietnam Studies - The War in the Northern Provinces: 1966-1968" written by Lieutenant General Willard Pearson, United States Army, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1975. It can be found in the Library of Congress Catalog Number: 75-23360, First Printing. Of course, it is also for sale through the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402

"OPERATION: Hastings Extract: The major clash between the allies and the invading North Vietnamese occurred in July 1966. For several weeks before this time, Marine reconnaissance teams had been sighting groups of North Vietnamese near the village of Cam Lo in the east central part of Quang Tri Province."

"By early July, reconnaissance teams in the Cam Lo area were almost invariably finding themselves in contact with large enemy units. Interrogation of prisoners and analyses of captured enemy documents confirmed that no fewer than 5,000 regulars of the 324B Division of the North Vietnamese Army were in South Vietnam. They were preparing to overrun Quang Tri Province. To counter the coming attack General Walt, Commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, had available only one reinforced Marine division, the Third, a Vietnamese Army division, the First, and some smaller Vietnamese Marine units. General Walt's other Marine division, the First, was fully occupied with security and pacification operations in southern I Corps. On July 11, the Marine and South Vietnamese commanders met in Hue to plan an operation to counter the enemy threat. The direct result was Operation HASTINGS, the largest operation of the war to date, and one involving more than 8,000 Marines, 3,000 South Vietnamese, and perhaps as many as 12,500 enemy troops. The operation, under the command of Brigadier General Lowell E. English, United States Marine Corps, began at 0800 on July 15 when the Marines executed a heli-borne assault to secure landing sites to the rear of the North Vietnamese positions. The first lift enjoyed a relatively uneventful landing, but contact became heavy as subsequent lifts touched down."

"Using these contacts and intelligence acquired by reconnaissance, commanders were able to position forces in areas where they could achieve excellent results. Many enemy positions were overrun and large quantities of equipment, clothing, and other supplies were captured. The enemy initially chose to stand and fight but soon revised his thinking and attempted to evade the Marine and Vietnamese Army forces. The Marines uncovered several recently abandoned company-size bivouac areas with everything intact except the weapons, indicating that a large unit was probably trying to evade the task force. A regimental- or division-size command post was discovered with supplies for 500 men in the Dong Ha Mountains. It was surmised that Operation Hastings had pre-empted a major enemy attack. U.S. forces, together with the Vietnamese, had joined the battle with sufficient knowledge about the enemy to hold the initiative from the first day. By the end of July, the 324B Division was withdrawing across the demilitarized zone to North Vietnam. Certain elements of the division had suffered severely, but the division- itself remained intact. The North Vietnamese had been forced into action before they had completed their deployment, but they retained their unity and control. Other North Vietnamese units, which had not been involved in the battle, remained poised in remote mountain retreats."

Most were just across the border."

(Author's note: I just love the "official versions of war," and that too drove me to write this book. Those reports are canned, trite and impersonal. The note about the NVA units would see more action is an example -- of course they would see more action and so would we -- that was 100% guaranteed)!

CHAPTER TEN

One Tour Over - One More to Go

By the summer of 1967, I was in the middle of a yearlong Korean language course at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California. I had returned home in September 1966, and after a short stint at Camp Pendleton with the 27th Marines, training troops for their deployment to Vietnam, I was chosen to go to DLI and study Korea in mid-1967. The 27th Marines were part of the newly re-activated 5th Marine Division at Camp Pendleton (I was with Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 27th Marines) serving as a platoon commander because we were short officers. This division had not seen action since WWII. Their entry back on active duty underscored a need for four full active duty Marine Corps Divisions (1st, 2nd, 3rd and now the 5th). Then-Captain Krulak was kind enough to write a very good recommendation for me to receive a direct commission under the Marine Corps "Exceptional Leadership Program." My commission was approved in the summer of 1968, but I had to wait until October 1968 to pin on my shiny new gold bars. I graduated from DLI in early October 1968 and was home on leave waiting on orders along with my commission. The bulk of Marine officers are former enlisted Marines, so this program fit their model well and was tailored after one developed during WWII. Approximately 6,000 senior NCO's or Warrant Officer received direct commission.

They were made either 2nd Lieutenant (for the SNCO's) or 1st Lieutenant (for Warrant Officers) between 1966 and 1970. Most commissions were based upon prior service in Vietnam. I pinned on my new gold bars on October 28, 1968, which happened to be my mother's birthday; she was very delighted. This happy event came just in time for me to also get new orders. I knew I would get orders back to Vietnam and I was right. My orders said "report no later than December 1, 1968."

I left my family in Monterey and took a bus to Camp Pendleton. I reported into a replacement battalion at the overseas replacement center. The first morning there, I got my "computer printout card" which showed assignments. I looked at my card and it read: "Duty with 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Danang, South Vietnam." Shit, I can't believe it, I thought, I'm getting a job with the Air Wing. No more infantry! Maybe I'll be a ground security officer, or something like that guarding airplanes or hangers. At least I won't be in the mud chasing NVA or VC all over the damn place. I felt very good. But, alas, that jerk Murphy popped by again. My jubilation didn't last long. It seems old Murphy had other plans for me.

I was called in to see the processing officer; only his name was Jack Lamb, not Murphy! The processing officer turned out to be an old one-eyed Captain named Jack Lamb, an ex-enlisted Marine like me.

He took my computer card, glanced at me, looked at my service record extract, started thumbing through it mumbling something I couldn't hear, but his one good eye should have told me something was up because it twinkled with joy as he read my record. He told me to stand by outside his office while he made a phone call to the processing center in Hawaii. Funny, as I looked at him and listened, I thought about Prime Minister Moshe Dyan with his one patched eye from 1966. There sure are plenty of one-eyed jacks in my life, I thought. I imagined that Jack Lamb must have become an administrative officer after he lost his eye in the infantry, or something like that, but I never found out. He called me back into his office. He stood up and looked me in the face and said, "Lieutenant, the Marine Corps just commissioned you as a brand new infantry officer, and they damn sure didn't intend you to be no God damn air dale. You're going back to the infantry and you're going to lead Marines." He took one of those famous Marine Corps black grease pencils, crossed out "1st Marine Aircraft Wing" and wrote in "1st Marine Division." Shit! I was going back home! I was going back for seconds, and I was going back to the infantry.

Thanks a whole bunch, Lamb, you asshole, I couldn't help thinking. How dare you act like God at a time like this with my career, you moron. Ironically, I had flashbacks about my first tour of duty and now this asshole was going me back.

He was giving the VC and NVA another chance to kill my sorry ass, and maybe this time they'll finish the job, thanks to Jack "the jerk" Lamb. So, thanks Lamb for putting me back in the cross hairs of those slimy bastards who are still probably dug in the same stinking hills just waiting to get one more crack at me. And, to think that this crusty old one-eyed SOB is about to be the sealer of my fate. Now with my shiny new gold bars, the NVA will have an easier target. It may have not mattered to that one-eyed prick Lamb or to the NVA, but it damn sure mattered to me. I made a pledge right then to come back home with my both my head and ass in tact in spite of Lamb and his damn grease pencil. Oh, well, why was I complaining? My first tour paid off and now as a poor boy from a small town in rural Southern Illinois with virtually no college and I had just become a brand new Marine Corps Second Lieutenant. I should have been honored, happy, even grateful. I guess I was in a morbid sort of way, so, off I went back to Vietnam instead of Canada. In the final analysis, I owe a lot to Charlie Krulak for recognizing my skills and recommending me to become a Marine officer. I guess he knew what he was doing and knew how to judge leadership because later the Marine Corps rewarded him with his fourth star. He became Commandant of the Marine Corps, thus the Corps recognized his superb leadership. Krulak went on to retire in 1999 after some 35 years of service.

We ever served again together after 1966 when we both left Vietnam, but I did follow his career until I retired. We both just went separate ways over the years which is common for military people. Ironically, I did have a chance to meet him when he paid an official visit to Fort Drum, New York in 1998. Fort Drum is the home of the Army's 10th Mountain Division, and Krulak was the first CMC to visit that Army post. I was living in Watertown, which is nearby Fort Drum, so I made it a point to get a ticket for the event at the post club to hear him speak. I wanted to meet him again if possible. He came to Fort Drum to speak about opening up relations with the 10th Mountain Division for Marine Reserve units. Fort Drum has excellent training facilities, including the only cold weather post in the United States outside of Alaska, and plenty of wide-open firing ranges. There was a fine dinner and reception scheduled for him at the "Commons Club" on post. I arrived early and looked for a nice spot to wait and greet him. I was standing near the front door when I saw him arrive all decked out in his Marine Corps dress blue uniform and four stars gleaming in the sunset. It was huge event and I looked forward to possibly meeting with him for "Hi, how are you type of handshake." He circled around the room shaking hands and smiling and the camera crews stayed close - a Marine four-star at Fort Drum was a big deal. The press was eating it up.

I managed to jockey around the room myself and get into a position where we would come face to face right in front of the door he had to pass through into the main dining room. At this point, we were about to meet for the first time in over 30 years. He continued to move around the room with folks in tow as well as a few local VIP's which included our member of Congress, Rep. John M. McHugh and the Editor-Publisher of the very influential local newspaper, the Watertown Daily Times, Mr. John B. Johnson. As it turned out, Johnson and Krulak had attended a private prep school in their younger days and were chatting about that as they approached where I was standing. I waited for the right moment and then reached out my hand and introduced myself. "Welcome General Krulak, I'm Dan Francis, glad to see you again after all these years." At first he looked startled, then a wide grin passed his face. I said, "Do you remember me?" He broke into a big grin, grabbed my hand and shoulder and said "Dan, what the hell are you doing here." I told him I had worked for the Army in Syracuse, but lived in nearby Watertown, and that I had been working for the Army as a civilian since 1984. He asked me, "How's the Army doing on their recruiting mission?" I told him not as good as the Corps, and we both laughed. He then asked me why I didn't have a job with the Marine Corps. I told him none were open after I retired, so I chose the Army. We both laughed again.

Then he reached up and touched my Purple Heart lapel pin on my suit coat and said, "That looks nice." I asked him if he recalled I had gotten it (my second award) with him in Golf Company in September 1966. He said yes he remembered, and that he hoped I was okay. We were still chatting and making small talk when the Congressman and Johnson moved in to break us up and keep him moving around the crowd. This would not have been too unusual had a small element of history not been at work involving me and Congressman McHugh and John Johnson. In 1992, I opposed McHugh for an open congressional seat, but I lost the primary election, but again opposed him in 1994 as the only candidate, of course I lost then, too. No member of my party had represented Northern New York since the late 1850's, so my effort was in vain. Also, in 1994 plenty of good Democrats lost seats in the aftermath of that GOP's famous (or infamous, depending on your view) "Contract with America" gimmick that gave Newt Gingrich power and control of Congress after some 50 years. Thus the district McHugh represents is solid Republican and has been since the Civil War.

The people standing nearby knew who I was and certainly knew who Krulak was and they knew who McHugh and Johnson were. What they didn't expect was that Krulak and I were old friends left over from Vietnam. I think that riled them a bit because they believed I only wanted to grab a few headlines.

From a political PR point of view, the GOP bosses wanted to keep me out of the limelight with such a VIP as Krulak. But, as it happens so often, they did not fully grasp nor understand the connection between Krulak and me, just two old warhorses meeting after some 30 years. He gave a great speech about his second tour in Vietnam and as usual, he put a very personal touch on the evening with his story. I felt proud to have seen him go from green-horned Lieutenant to seasoned four star General. He got a fourth star and that led to the Commandant's office. His father certainly deserved a fourth star, but somehow never got it; some say the "Brute" was not political enough. I don't believe that for one minute. He was a brilliant Marine Corps officer and it rubbed off on all his sons.

As I reflect back on those operations we conducted in Vietnam or heard the media refer to them as "search and destroy missions," I remember thinking, what a lousy way to run a war. The biggest problem was the Pentagon's micro-management of each and every single event. As it turned out, practically every unit movement had to be approved in Washington. Approved by those with their "bunker/hunkered down" mentality like it was a chess game and we were the pieces to be moved there, stopped here and the like. Secretary McNamara should have stayed with Ford and that automobile maker. Maybe he could have improved the first Edsel. It's for damn sure he couldn't design combat operations.

Even today, I hate micro-managers. They are not effective managers in most cases, and most certainly not directing infantry units during combat when the person calling the shots is 12,000 miles away! At the time, of course, we did our duty; we didn't question silly theories. We followed orders like good soldiers are paid to do. A lot has changed since then. Today's soldiers are not simply well-trained robots who answer to what I call "the Lieutenant William Calley syndrome: "Follow orders no matter the outcome." After Calley's court martial and the fiasco surrounding that My Lai massacre, blind obedience would no longer suffice. It could no longer be acceptable to say, "I was just following orders, sir!" It would be far more complex in the next war. However, it would take years later to find the depth of the absurdity of those types of decisions that McNamara and Johnson provoked. Under McNamara, stupid and deadly decisions were the order of the day. The Pentagon dished them out and expected us to obey them without question, and we did. To this day, I still wonder about that style of leadership. Now that I know, I'm surprised we didn't lose the war sooner! I took this silliness a step further and wondered, "Who picks combat operation names?" For example, who and why did they pick the name Harvest Moon? I set out to find out why. I hoped it wouldn't turn out to have been McNamara! I knew that the term harvest moon refers to gathering in the crops around Halloween.

In some countries like Korea for example, a country I'm very familiar with, their harvest moon is celebrated through "Chusok" (Korean word that means "Thanksgiving"). This is similar in many other countries. First, I started an Internet search and typed in the word "Harvest Moon" at the old standby "Yahoo!" search page. The first entry caught my eye, it said: "The USS Harvest Moon, Homepage, page 1 of 2: Civil War Flagship of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron 1864-1865." Interesting, I thought, and I read further.

"On March 1, 1865 the Union Steamer *Harvest Moon*, Flagship of Admiral John A. Dahlgren, struck a confederate torpedo and sank in Winyah Bay 5 miles SSE of the city of Georgetown, South Carolina. To this day, the *Harvest Moon* rests where she went down. She is buried under the sands of Winyah Bay. Her smokestack is still proudly visible. The *Harvest Moon* had taken Admiral Dahlgren to Georgetown to inspect Battery White, recently abandoned by the Rebels. Prior to her departure, a torpedo was assembled by Confederate Captain Thomas Daggett and placed in the channel. The *Harvest Moon* was struck it as she steamed away from Georgetown. The resulting explosion tore out the bottom of the ship and the *Harvest Moon* sank within minutes taking the life of the Wardroom Steward John Hazard."

Well, shit. It all made perfect sense (in a cynical sort of way).

There we were in Operation Harvest Moon in 1965, stuck up to our collective asses in mud in Vietnam possibly named after a Union Civil War Flagship that is still stuck in the mud in Winyah Bay, SC after getting torpedoed by the Confederates in 1865. I know that wasn't really how the operation got its name, it makes a good story anyway. Who knows, it may be true. There I was at one time, stuck in the mud in Vietnam in 1965, and that Flagship was stuck in the mud with its smokestack sticking up in the air after being shot to pieces and sunk by a torpedo! It has been said that history does or does not, depending on one's point of view, repeat itself.

Old one-eyed Captain Jack Lamb changed my orders sending me back to Vietnam in a combat unit because he thought I was going to a nice cozy aviation job in Danang with the Airwing. With the click of his old trusty grease pen, Lamb managed to get me sent right back to those God-awful stinking Que Son Mountains I first visited during Operation Harvest Moon. Talk about bad luck - hell, if it weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck, I have always said in jest. This my second tour of duty would be with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and the real irony is that after three years of heavy fighting in those same lousy VC and NVA infested mountain range, I was going back into the same lousy place. I wondered, how can our government say we were winning the war!

I also wondered how my old unit had been doing since I left in 1966, thinking I could end up back with them, so decided to do some research to see what they had been up to since I left them back in September 1966. In a Vietnam Magazine story: "The NVA and VC thought they controlled the Que Son Valley. The Marines had other ideas," written by Eric Hammel wherein I found this account about my old outfit, 2/1:

"In late February 1967, at least two regiments of the first-rate 2nd North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Division infested the strategically vital Que Son Valley. Located astride the boundary between Quang Nam and Quang Tin provinces in the southern portion of South Vietnam's I Corps Military Region. The populous, rice-rich Que Son Valley was seen as one of the keys to controlling South Vietnam's five northern provinces. Thus, coincidental with the 2nd NVA Division's arrival, which had hitherto operated mainly in the coastal areas of southern I Corps, was tasked with permanently bolstering the out numbered and ineffectual Government of Vietnam (GVN) forces. The ultimate objective was to bring U. S. units into the Que Son Valley on a permanent basis. It was planned to have them eject all communist forces from a locale that provided I Corps region and other areas of South Vietnam with both an abundant rice harvest and supply of conscripts."

"The battles that were shaping up in the Que Son Valley were less a matter of real estate than control of a fertile food-producing region that also happened to be a major population center. In war, there are few prizes strategically more compelling than those kinds. One reinforced U.S. Marine Company, Foxtrot Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. (Author's note: My old unit) had been permanently assigned in mid-January 1967 to man outposts atop Que Son Valley. The most dominant overlook was Nui Loc Son (Loc Son Mountain). The Communist forces operating in the valley did not initially take much notice of the Marine outpost, and the small Marine force confined its activities to observation, close in patrolling and a number of light-action projects. However, as the two fresh NVA regiments gained political and physical dominance over more and more of the valley and its people, a clash between them and the Marines became inevitable. On April 15, 1967, the company commander advised his regimental commander that communist units appeared to be preparing for an all-out assault on Nui Loc Son. On April 19, 1967, Col. Emil Radics, commander, 1st Marine Regiment presented Maj.Gen. Herman Nickerson, the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, a plan for Operation *Union*. This was to be a multi-battalion "assault and sweep" aimed at clearing NVA units from the vicinity of the Que Son mountains. Nickerson approved the operation the next day."

"The Marine infantry were ordered to jump off the following morning, April 21, 1967. In a typical Marine response of that period, Foxtrot Company left its position atop Nui Loc Son and swept toward the nearest NVA-held village, a complex of several hamlets called Binh Son. The NVA began harassing Foxtrot Company around 7 a.m. and at 9:30 they attacked in force. The NVA managed to pin Foxtrot Company in a tree line near Binh Son. But, in so doing, they also fixed themselves to that particular location. So far, events were unfolding according to the plan. At 11 a.m. Foxtrot Company attacked Binh Son behind a sustained air and artillery bombardment. Shortly after that most of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, joined the fight by way of a "hot" helicopter assault. Quickly, the fresh Marine battalion fought through to the "bait" company. Later in the afternoon at 4:10, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, landed east of the battlefield to block. During the afternoon, U.S. Army 175mm self-propelled artillery and Marine 105mm howitzers moved into separate firebases nearby. And, a fresh infantry battalion (1st Battalion, 1st Marines) landed atop Nui Loc Son that evening. On the morning of April 22, 1967, the NVA forces were driven out of the Binh Son area and forced to withdraw in a northerly direction. From then until May 14, when Operation *Union* ended, a revolving cast of U.S. and ARVN Rangers hotly pursued the NVA force."

"They fought a series of bitter battles that were extremely costly to both sides." End of the story about Operation Union and my old unit.

Well, it seemed that old 2/1 was still hard pressed to be put down by the enemy. They remained one of the Marine Corps' super units, and the Que Sons were as hot as ever! Welcome back, Lieutenant Francis, the NVA await you! I survived that second tour of duty with only one minor wound that did not require any hospitalization. When that second tour ended in December 1969, I had served in combat just a few days short of 25 months. I hoped I'd never have to go back, and my hopes came true; I did not have to serve again. The war ended in our loss in 1975. What a waste of nearly 54,000 young lives!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Remembering the Happy Valley

Researching information for this book with the focus on the many operations, especially Harvest Moon, was not easy as I said before because there wasn't much detailed historical information available. Conversely, researching information about the ships that carried me overseas and then into combat was easy and actually enjoyable. For example, I wanted to know more about the USS Valley Forge (the Happy Valley) - it was my first task. This ship has a very interesting part of Naval history.

Valley Forge was built with money raised by the citizens of Philadelphia in a special war bond drive. The citizens saw her keel laid down on September 7, 1944 at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. She was launched on November 18, 1944. Valley Forge was sponsored by Mrs. A. A. Vandegrift, wife of the former Commandant of the Marine Corps, General A. A. Vandegrift. She was commissioned on November 3, 1946, with Capt. John W. Harris the first to take command. The ship got underway on January 24, 1947 for her shakedown training (to get the bugs out) that took her via the Navy Base in Norfolk, Virginia and then to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. From Cuba, she sailed back the Panama Canal Zone. Valley Forge saw duty with Air Group 11 and Task Force 38. She then served in Pearl Harbor where she left for a cruise in Australia.

After a visit to Sydney while conducting exercises with the Royal Australian Navy, she steamed to Hong Kong. During a voyage from that British crown colony to Tsingtao, China, she and her Task Force got new orders to return home for Atlantic duty. With escort destroyers in tow, she continued her round-the-world trip. She made calls on the way back to Manila, Singapore, Trincomalee, Ceylon, and Rastanura, Saudi Arabia. She again deployed to the Far East on May 1, 1950, and while anchored in Hong Kong harbor on June 25, 1950, received electrifying news that North Korean forces had begun streaming across the 38th parallel into South Korea. Departing Hong Kong the next day, Valley Forge steamed north to Subic Bay (PI) where she was provisioned (food and gas) and set course for duty in Korea. Her Air Groups dropped some 3,700 tons of bombs on North Korean troops before she again left, this time for San Diego (June 25, 1953). After a West Coast overhaul, Valley Forge again went to the Atlantic Fleet after she was reclassified. She now was an antisubmarine warfare support carrier with the designation of CVS-45; the "S" standing for antisubmarine. She remained engaged in operations with TG Alpha through the early fall of 1959. From there, she entered the New York Naval Shipyard for repairs. A few months later, she returned to sea in January 1960, this time bound for maneuvers in the Caribbean.

During ensuing operations, she served as the launching platform for Operation "Skyhook" which was the widely publicized scientific experiment involved the launching of three of the largest balloons ever fabricated. These balloons carried devices that measured and recorded primary cosmic ray emissions at an altitude of between 18 and 22 miles above the earth's surface. Following a short deployment in the Eastern Mediterranean, during which she called at ports in Spain, Italy, and France, Valley Forge again returned to Norfolk. She operated there until fall of 1961. Shortly thereafter, she participated in Project "Mercury" operations (her helicopters retrieved a space capsule which had been launched from Cape Canaveral). Entering the Norfolk Naval Shipyard in March 1961 for overhaul and modification, this time as an amphibious assault ship. This time, she was reclassified as LPH-8 on July 1, 1961, and soon after, began refresher training in the Caribbean. Returning home late in the year, Valley Forge sailed from Norfolk in January 1962, bound for San Diego to begin duty again in the Pacific Fleet. At the end of three months of training off the West Coast, she steamed westward for duty in the Far East with 7th Fleet as the flag ship of the Commander, Ready Amphibious Task Group and 7th Fleet. She had orders to close the coast of Indochina with further orders to put ashore her embarked Marine battalion.

In Laos, communist forces had renewed their assault on the Royal Laotian Government, and they had requested President Kennedy land troops to avert a feared, full-scale communist invasion of the country. Valley Forge airlifted her Marines into the country on May 17th, and when the crisis abated a few weeks later, she carried them out in July. For the remainder of 1962, Valley Forge operated in the Far East before returning to the West Coast to spend the first half of 1963 in amphibious exercises off the coast of California and in the Hawaiian Islands. She entered Long Beach Naval Shipyard on July 1, 1963 for rehabilitation and modernization. Part of her rehab included the installation of improved electronics and facilities to transport and land troops and helicopters. Putting to sea again on in January 1964, and newly modernized, she rejoined the fleet following training when she departed Long Beach for the Western Pacific. On August 2, 1964, NVA torpedo boats attacked the USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin. Valley Forge ended up spending 57 days at sea off the Vietnamese coast in full readiness to land her Marines should the occasion demand.

(Author's note: This date of August 2, 1964, is generally used by most historians as the official start of the war in Vietnam - shortly thereafter the United States began its massive troop build up).

Returning to the United States via Subic Bay, Okinawa, and Midway Island, she entered Long Beach harbor in November 1964. Valley Forge made two round-trip voyages to Okinawa carrying Marines and aircraft before commencing yet another cruise in the Western Pacific. This time she was in the South China Sea in the fall of 1965. With a Marine landing force embarked and flying the flag of Commander, Amphibious Squadron 3, Valley Forge conducted intensive training exercises in the Philippines while preparing for service again in Vietnam. In mid-November 1965, Valley Forge stood by in reserve during Operation Blue Marlin and then airlifted Marines for combat in a series of operational raids called Dagger Thrust and then later, Operation Harvest Moon. (Author's note: The author was aboard the Valley Forge at this time with his unit until December 10, 1965). In February 1966, she re-embarked her Marines and sailed for Subic Bay. Following a round trip to Danang, the carrier steamed back to the West Coast for another overhaul. After more training along the California coast, Valley Forge again deployed back to Vietnam waters. While there, she took part in operations off Danang before returning to the United States at the end of 1966. After undergoing a major overhaul and training, Valley Forge again returned to the Far East in November 1967. She returned to the U. S. in August 1968, but following five months of training and overhaul again returned to the Far East.

This departure would be her last, and as she pulled out of Long Beach on January 30, 1969. The entire crew knew her days were numbered as an active duty ship. After leave and upkeep, she offloaded ammunition and equipment at Seal Beach and San Diego. She then returned to Long Beach on October 31, 1969 to prepare for decommissioning. This process continued through the New Year, and on January 16, 1970, Valley Forge was placed out of commission. She was turned over to the Inactive Ship Maintenance Facility in San Diego. Her name was struck from the Navy list that same day. It had been nearly 26 years since she first set sail back in November 1944. After some attempts to raise funds for using the ship as a museum failed, Valley Forge was sold on October 29, 1971. The Nicolai Joffre Corporation of Beverly Hills, California bought her for scrap. Valley Forge was awarded eight battle stars for Korean War service, and nine for Vietnam service, as well as three Navy Unit Commendations.

(Author's source: DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN NAVAL FIGHTING SHIPS, Vol. VII (1981), pp. 440-444).

Even today there are a few old Valley Forge clubs. We should not forget old ships and old shipmates -- long live the "Happy Valley..." I have included some pictures of the USS Valley Force at the end of the book.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Each One A Caesar

All of the Marines from Fox Company (2/1) who died on the 10th of December 1965 during Operation: Harvest Moon are identified on the Vietnam Wall in Washington DC on "Panel 4E, Rows 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12." They all died together and now they all rest together in peace. For them, the ultimate price of freedom has been paid in full. Judging the war, and not them, is left for others and history to carry forth for whatever reasons seem fit. For them, we allow sustained peace.

Others from Fox company who died during our battalion's thirteen months overseas and one year in Vietnam are identified on "Panel 4E, Rows 62 and 81, and Panel 5E, Rows 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93, and on Panel 6E, Row 53, 54, 55, and 61." Most of these men were all killed on the same day I was first wounded, February 28, 1966 during Operation *New York*.

Others killed as my year in Vietnam progressed are listed on "Panel 7E, Rows 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122, and 124." Most of these brave Marines died on May 29, 1966 as described in Chapter Eight. The next to last group of Marines who were killed from 2/1 that I served with are identified on "Panel 8E, Rows 90, 91, 94, 95, 97, and 99." These fine men all died in battle on June 25 - 26, 1966.

That operation took place south of Hue City, just before we moved into the DMZ on Operation Hastings in July 1966. It was called Operation Jay. During this particular operation, my newly-assigned platoon sergeant was Staff Sergeant Robert Cleary (promoted to Gunnery Sergeant that same month). Cleary went on to become Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps. During this operation, he won a Silver Star. He did a great job, and I'm proud to have been a witness to his acts that helped win him that medal. I think Bob returned to his beloved Boston soon after he retired. During the heat of the battle many of us were pinned down under withering fire that was coming from a tree line that 2/4 was pushing the NVA up against toward our direction. Cleary did what few men could never do under such fire. He crawled to the wounded, put them on his back and then crawled with them to the rear for treatment under fire. He did this several times and was witnessed by many of us, and he managed it without suffering any wounds him self. His award should have been higher. But as was well known, the Marine Corps, was very stingy with its awards program in the early days of the war, for what reason, I still haven't figured out. To make matters worse, some of us heard that people in the rear "with the gear" as we used to say, were winning Bronze Stars for making sure K-rations arrived on time. So many fine Marines died and did lots of brave things only to win the Purple Heart.

It hardly seemed fair then or now! On the same day Cleary was acting out his brave action, so was Lt. Krulak and Sgt. Richard Strange. Both also won Silver Stars. Krulak won his for directing close air support so close that he had to call it right on top of his own position during the early hours of darkness, and it saved many lives. Sgt. Strange's story is contained in the section at the end of the book called "reflections" by his former friend, Butch Gatlin.

I almost bought the farm myself that day. Our advance up to a huge tree line started out routine as they all seemed to do at first. We got off our 'choppers, assemble in squads and platoons some distance from an area we were going to set up and begin our advance to the place we would block for 2/4 who was pushing the NVA from the North. This day was no different than the one that started during Operation New York back in February. Our orders were simple, "...provide blocking force for 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines (2/4) who was pushing the NVA south out of the City of Hue, the ancient capital of Vietnam near a place history came to know as the "Street without Joy." That sounded easy enough, but, old Murphy had others plans. We started moving forward toward the tree line to set up our blocking force. As we advanced we could hear gunfire up ahead. Slowly it's volume and intensity increased. Then it started getting close.

Had we landed us in the wrong spot again? Shit, at that moment, it didn't matter, we were there and they were there. Suddenly and with some distance still to go before we could get good cover, we started receiving fire around us, hitting the dikes in front and whizzing bullets over our heads. Initially like all good Marines, we hit the deck and started looking around. Then we all realized at once it seemed, we were in the open and still had a good distance to go for the tree line and any chance of cover. I thought, here we go again. Most of us knew what had to be done, and without waiting on orders, we jumped up and started hightailing toward the trees. We only took a few more rounds, and then a sudden lull, and then the whole world seemed to open up as we got closer. What happened was that the fleeing NVA were trapped in between 2/4 and us. They saw us, held up, held their fire, gave us a chance to get up and then opened up on us as we started charging their way. But, 2/4 never let up their fire, so we had both NVA and friendly fire falling on us and soon both found their targets - we started losing men. The NVA started to rake us pretty good all across our front with heavy rifle and machine gun fire - back and forth, left to right and then right to left. It was very effective, but we kept up our advancement until we finally reached the tree line.

What made matters worse, the word came down to watch your fire, that 2/4 was not far away. No shit, I thought! At the time it all seemed crazy. Hold your fire, watch your fire, be careful where you fire and the like. Our leaders feared that we would confuse 2/4 and their push with the NVA or that 2/4 would confuse our fire with the NVA and we'd end up shooting each other. Things would really get hot as two Marine battalions plowed into each other not knowing where each other was. For the NVA, it was great - they could shoot at both us and we couldn't shoot back at them. Damn, friendly fire and NVA fire - great. Some of the rounds we were receiving probably were from 2/4 but the sound of AK-47's told me different - AK-47 rifles have a very distinct sickening ring to them - nothing like a M-16. The message was cleared up quickly - return fire but be careful. The NVA saw what we were about to do, so they held up and started taking their time firing and choosing their targets. Their fire started taking its toll. It looked like another mess was brewing, and initially, it was a mess - a lot of confusion and lots of firing from what seemed like every conceivable direction and position. The NVA were trapped and fighting for their lives, 2/4 was pushing like a bunch of madmen and all we could do was be selective and be careful. We had five killed very quickly in Golf Company. Hotel Company on our left flank also had five killed. One was killed in H&S Company.

My platoon now in the lead for Golf Company managed to get to the tree line first. We had the main road on our left which anchored us to Hotel Company who was on the other side of the road. We could all see each other clearly and that helped in all the confusion. There were open fields to our far right and plenty of huts and trees in front of us that turned out later to be a rather big NVA stronghold. Krulak set the company CP (radios and mortars) to our rear among some Buddhist graves. They were better off than we were being in the rear and fairly well covered. One of those wounded early from Hotel Company was my old friend and former squad member and my M-79 grenadier from Fox Company, LCpl. Edwin Labotto. He got shot through the upper shoulder with an exit out his back. He was in very bad shape, but he pulled through. I saw him a few years later back in the states while at Camp Pendleton. I went to a movie one night on post and he was an MP on duty at the theatre. It was great seeing him. He said he was now married and was going for 20 years. I bet he made it, too. As the battle raged, we became more pinned down not only from the NVA trying to escape, but from the bullets flying in from 2/4 as they continued to advance all across our front. A sniper fired a shot here, a grenade was tossed there; it remained constant for several hours. When I had the chance, I started to survey the dry rice fields to our right.

What I saw, I didn't like. What I didn't know but suspected, was that that flank was an easy route around us. Eventually, 2/4 either slowed down or got bogged down, or started to dig in because we were told that the friendly fire was being lifted and that we had permission to fire at will, but be careful when picking targets. We stayed low, picked off a few NVA whenever we saw them and the battle sea-sawed back and forth for a few more hours. We tossed hand grenades all across our front while Krulak gave us overhead mortar and M-79 fire from time to time keep the snipers off guard because they were now in the trees shooting down on us and wounding just about anyone who moved. Then something more terrible happened. At some point, we saw two CH-46's land up front near Hotel Company - they had come in to pick up casualties from 2/4. Some of our wounded managed to get over near the first chopper by crossing Hotel's lines to our left front. One 'chopper loaded with wounded started to lift off when NVA hit it hard with both gun fire and an RPG (self-propelled rocket). The plane burst into flames and started to crash with Marines who thought they were being lifted to safety falling out the back as it passed treetop level. That was an awful sight to see - we could see everything happening, but were helpless to do anything. The 'chopper was melting right before our eyes. I'd never seen a chopper burn like that nor did I think they burned that fast.

I don't know how many died in that crash from 2/4, but I'm sure most of the wounded now became KIA. Before that was over, another 'chopper a short distance away also went down just like the first. We had two terrible crashes in about 20 minutes. Things didn't start to cool down until close to darkness. By that time, many of us had managed to regroup, get more ammo, take care of our dead and wounded and try to shore up the exposed right flank. That was the place I most worried about because of the fleeing NVA we kept seeing from time to time. During the early evening darkness, Krulak passed the word that F-4's (Phantoms) were on the way with some "snake and nap" (bombs and napalm) and we'd have to dig in because they would be dropping right over us. They would be making their run from left to right in between us and 2/4 - right across our two fronts on top of the NVA - or at least that was the plan. And, damn it, wouldn't you know it - Murphy came by again. "If it can go wrong, it damn sure will go wrong." The Phantoms arrived right on schedule because we could hear them, but as they started their napalm run, it became clear they were coming from behind us, not from our left as we thought and not across our front. Bingo, they roared right at the CP and were lined up on my platoon's back toward and not across the NVA's front. They were coming in low and hot and we could now see them.

Their napalm bombs tumbled off their racks, but started falling right toward Krulak and his CP, not toward the NVA. The bombs hit the ground just short of their position, burst into an Hell-hot ball of fire and then if by magic, rolled right over the top of them right into the tree line as if it had been planned, which I don't think it was. Free and clear and not one of our guys was hurt. It looked like a pool player making the cue ball jump over the seven ball and knock in the eight ball. Even with this fuck up, those F-4's helped save our asses because the NVA didn't do anything the rest of the night. Either they were cooked or managed to flee. They dropped way short and from the wrong heading, nearly wiped Krulak and the CP, but ended up saving the day. Damn that was close. I know the guys in the CP got their whiskers singed! Krulak for his bravery that night won his Silver Star. He damn sure earned it. The last group of Marines that I served with who were in 2/1 and who were killed in action are recorded from the period of late August 1966 right through September 6, 1966, which is the date I left VN after my second wound. These fine men are forever remembered and are listed on "Panel 9e, Row 74, and 107, Panel 10E, Rows 23, 29, and 32." One of the very last killed during my final days of my tour on the day I was wounded was my relief, Staff Sergeant Ken Glaze from Hutchinson, Kansas. Ken had been assigned to Golf Company only a few days before I was to rotate home.

I'm not sure how long he had been in VN on that tour, or whether he even had been reassigned to us while in another, because quite frankly I didn't have a chance to know him very well before he was killed. I do know it was his second tour. He and two others from our company were killed by a series of landmines. The other two were PFC Phil Grego from Council Bluffs, Iowa, and PFC Cliff Walter from Erie, PA. We were damn lucky more weren't killed that day. Here is what happened. We had a patrol returning to our lines early in the morning. They were only a few hundred yards out in front sweeping through an old cemetery area - in fact, they were so close some guys shouted at them to hurry in and get some chow. Then, kapow! A huge explosion right where they were. Ken Glaze was the first to grab a couple of Marines and dash out to the site. I followed Glaze out in hot pursuit with two of our Docs. Mine explosions of any kind are nasty and booby traps are, too. As Marines, we were always trained that with one landmine, you can be 100% sure of finding or expecting to set off a second one (or maybe more). That day was no exception to that engineer Golden Rule. I had no sooner arrived on the scene and saw Ken bending over patching up the wounded. It appeared that no one was dead, but at we had at least three seriously wounded. I don't know who or why, but one of the wounded stood up and started to move out and away from the others.

I yelled at him, "Don't move, don't move, get down!" I had no sooner gotten those words out then, Kaboom a huge blast of heat, metal, flames and shrapnel cut into all of us. He had triggered a second mine. The air was black with smoke and powder and screams, and it smelled awful. Pieces of metal tore into me as well as pieces of the Marine who had stepped on the mine. It had been a dreaded "Bouncing Betty." What made these mines so deadly was that they were American-made. The VC would watch our Engineers bury them, then they would steal them and rig them for us to step or on they would 'command' detonate them while hiding somewhere. They were nicknamed Bouncing Betty because when ignited, they would jump up in the air about 2-3 feet from where they were buried just before exploding at about thigh waist level. They were very effective - and dead covered a wide radius. Our people forgot the Engineer rule that day and we paid a heavy price. A few minutes after I arrived and the Docs started patching up the wounded, and a few seconds before the second mine went off, our Company Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt Wilson) arrived with a few other Marines who came out to assist and watch. I yelled at Wilson and told him and the others to get back and stay back and that we had the situation under control. I shouted at them to stay back because some of them were getting too close for my comfort.

Wilson overruled me and acted like an ass, I suppose because he was a Gunny and I was only a newly promoted Staff Sergeant, or whatever. It didn't matter. Maybe he just wanted to throw around his rank. "Kabloom..." the second mine, and then just as suddenly, someone got up to move again, and kapow! A third mine went off! Ken Glaze and one of the two who had triggered the mine were killed instantly. One of the previously wounded (I think it may have been Grego) was killed as he lay there getting patched up from his first wound. I was hit and so were several others including one of the Docs. I had been hit in the forehead, right shoulder and left thigh. I was very lucky. None of my wounds were life-threatening, although the forehead bled a lot and hurt the most and looked the worst. I had been lucky because I had been crouching down helping a wounded Marine when the "betty" went off, so I made a much smaller target than those were standing like Ken Glaze and the others. They got mowed down - death came quickly for them, they didn't feel a thing, they didn't suffer. One minute they were standing there and the next they were torn to shreds. We probed around for more mines and not finding any, we started to clean up the area and move the dead and wounded back to the perimeter as 'choppers started in for the wounded. Even today it's very hard for me to tell anyone how angry and pissed off I was at Gunny Wilson because to a certain extent I still blame him for the unwarranted deaths.

I was face to face with him later at the CP explaining to Krulak what had happened and he kept trying to clean up the story to fit his own agenda. Once or twice, I came close to grabbing him by the throat and beating the shit out of him over what had happened. I was pissed that he would pull rank on me, even when I was right. He was wrong and it cost us dearly. He kept trying to show that he was in control and that the others fucked up. In fact, Wilson was dead wrong; it was he who fouled up but he wouldn't admit it. He was not obligated to explain to Krulak and others what had happened, and he kept leaving out the part where I told him and the others to stay back. Although I was only a Staff Sergeant and Wilson a Gunnery Sergeant (one rank higher), I held a higher position than he - I was a platoon commander (an officer's position). Wilson didn't give a shit, he just threw his weight around like some jerk and it cost us dearly. I could not allow him to spread his bullshit, so I became very angry and went after him. I actually had to be pulled off him before I went completely berserk and did him bodily harm. Wilson just stood there looking stupid and sheepish. I still feel anger after all these years when I think about the arrogance he displayed for rank over common sense and safety. This was my second wounded, and I had only a week left in country, so Krulak ordered me to the rear BAS (Battalion Aid Station) to get patched up.

Then he said, "You say there and get ready and go home next week, your tour is over." I think he did it for Wilson's sake more than for mine. I could have gotten patched up and stayed in the field another week or so, it didn't matter, but Krulak didn't want me near Wilson, that much was clear. This final chapter in the war for me happened on August 23, 1966. I went home on September 6th. My tour of duty finally ended after nearly 13 months of combat.

In these the early days of the war, veterans flew out of the Danang Air Base on commercial airplanes. They took us directly to Okinawa to be fattened up and fitted for new uniforms and fresh haircuts, and of course back to all those holes in the fences that led to the 'ville! At this stage of my life even a Court Marital didn't even seem bad after Vietnam, so maybe now I'd get laid and make up for the past year living as a Monk? I had lost a lot of weight and was more interested in regaining that than any Japanese girl in the Okinawa. I had left San Diego a year earlier weighing about 170-175; now I weighed about 150. And, I was as brown as a berry. After a week in Okinawa getting back into shape looking like Marines, we loaded onto the "Freedom birds" as they were called and headed home. That was a glorious day, but not as glorious as leaving Vietnam a week earlier.

I remember as we flew out of Danang on our way to Okinawa that most of us looked out the window and flipped the finger below, and shouted, "Fuck you, Vietnam!" This was our take on that Armed Forces radio station guy who used to say "Goooooooooooood Morning, Vietnam" early every morning and piss off everyone. Later they made a movie about him that starred Robin Williams. In a small part, it was our revenge on him by allowing us to get the last word. For many of us, it would be the last time we'd ever see Vietnam, for others like me, we'd be back! At the moment tough, I wasn't sure which group I belonged to. Some Marines went to temporary assignments and then on home after receiving discharges. Others got new assignments. Others waited because the Marine Corps didn't know what to do with them. Some wondered whether they'd see that Hellhole again. I was in this category, and since I was a careerist at the time and still had a couple of years left on my hitch, I new I'd be back for seconds. Boy, did I hate being right. I should've gone to Canada when I had the chance! I was reassigned to the newly reactivated 5th Marine Division at Camp Pendleton to train Marines to go to Vietnam -- some for 2nd or 3rd tours of duty.

Reflections about one's combat experiences can sometimes fools old memories and play mind games and even in a lull, one's mind has a tendency to drift from memory to memory and event to event.

As a youngster growing up in rural Southern Illinois, I attended church regularly -- my mother made me. Most of the time I actually enjoyed going because our social life was pretty drab and church outings were our social contact. She always made me go on Sunday morning, sometimes on Wednesday nights at special prayer sessions. Other times the church told us to come out and worship or face hell if we didn't, so we had to go then, too. These were usually times when an old-time Christian revival would come to town, set up shop, and then commence to whip everyone up into a frenzy pledging to save their souls. They were very effective, especially on the weaker minded souls in our community. They were not like the tearful, eardrum shattering, neatly groomed TV evangelists we see today. Oh, no, they were more like the character Burt Lancaster portrayed in the movie "Elmer Gantry." To teens like me in those days, it sure made a strong impression. My mother insisted that their message of hellfire and brimstone stick and she would talk about it for week afterwards. The best part of those events I liked was the old time music and soul style singing and of course the tons of food served afterwards. As I grew older, I failed to practice my faith even while on active duty but, in Vietnam, I changed dramatically as many do in trying times when we need all the help we can muster from God. I have always believed in God and Jesus, and still do to this day.

Like most human beings with our weaknesses, I too have strayed off the beaten path from time to time. Later in life, I became a Catholic because my wife was Catholic and she convinced me to take lessons to see if I wanted to convert -- I did and I liked it and converted. I've never regretted that decision. Many men fail to uphold their religion while in the military by saying, "I don't have time." Many just won't find the time to worship. I don't think many such as I intentionally abandoned our religious beliefs, we just found it more convenient to use the Marine Corps as an excuse for not practicing our faith regularly. When the chips were down, however it was different. I remember right after Harvest Moon that plenty of us found time to practice our faith without hesitation or coaxing. Out in the field, we didn't have churches or convenient structures so we had to hold services wherever the padre or minister could find cover. On the ships, it was easier because they all had nice clean chapels where all faiths shared the space whether it was for the traditional Christians, Catholics, or Jews, or for any other lost soul looking for a place to worship. The chapels were always open. After several operations, it seemed to me that our Chapels had a lot more visitors than before the operations. People like me who had strayed a bit started to reflect on their lives and started turning inward again.

I surmise it was and has been a natural occurrence like that for combat troops for ages. As for me, I did see the so-called light again, just as I had as a young man back home from time to time, and I assure you I have seen it many times since. It has not been a blinding light in the middle of the night that shakes one out of their senses or presents a burning bush or anything like that. It has been a good old-time soul searching one-on-one with God. My faith may not fit the 'modern' mold, but to me it is strong. I am reminded of how William Manchester explained his younger days growing up in another America that he knew but felt some of us may not remember to make the comparison. Manchester said he remembers that the America he grew up in helped him and many others like him to fight and win World War II. This view may sound familiar to some of those who served during WW II.

"To fight World War II you had to have been tempered and strengthened in the 1930's Depression by a struggle for survival - in 1940 two out of every five draftees had been rejected, most of them victims of malnutrition. You had to know that your whole generation, unlike the Vietnam generation, was in this together, that no strings were being pulled for anybody. The four Roosevelt brothers were in uniform, and the sons of both Harry Hopkins, FDR's closest adviser, and Leverett Saltonstall, one of the most powerful Republicans in the Senate.

They served in the Marine Corps as enlisted men and were killed in action. It was a bond woven of many strands. You had to remember your father's stories about the Argonne, and saying your prayers, and Memorial Day, and Scouting, and what Barbara Frietchie said to Stonewall Jackson. And you had to have heard Lionel Barrymore as Scrooge and to have seen Gary Cooper as Sergeant York. And seen how your mother bought day-old bread and cut sheets lengthwise and re-sewed them to equalize wear while your father sold the family car, both forfeiting what would be considered essentials today so that you could enter college. You also needed nationalism, the absolute conviction that the United States was the envy of all other nations, a country which had never done anything infamous, in which nothing was insuperable, whose ingenuity could solve anything by inventing something. You felt sure that all lands, given our democracy and our know-how, could shine as radiantly as we did. Esteem was personal, too; you assumed that if you came through this ordeal, you would age with dignity, respected as well as adored by your children. Wickedness was attributed to flaws in individual characters, not to society's shortcomings. To accept unemployment compensation, had it existed, would have been considered humiliating. So would committing a senile aunt to a state mental hospital. Instead, she was kept in the back bedroom, still a member of the family. Debt was ignoble."

"Courage was a virtue. Mothers were beloved, fathers obeyed. Marriage was a sacrament. Divorce was disgraceful. Pregnancy meant expulsion from school or dismissal from a job. The boys responsible for the crimes of impregnation had to marry the girls. Couples did not keep house before they were married and there could be no wedding until the girl's father had approved. You assumed that gentlemen always stood and removed their hats when a woman entered a room. The suggestion that some of them might resent being called "ladies" would have confounded you. You needed a precise relationship between the sexes. No one questioned the duty of boys to cross the seas and fight while girls wrote them cheerful letters from home. Girls you knew were still pure because they had let you touch them here but not there, explaining that they were saving themselves for marriage. All these and "God Bless America," and Christmas or Hanukkah and the certitude that victory in the war would assure their continuance into perpetuity. All this led you into battle. It sustained you as you fought, and comforted you if you fell, and, if it came to that, justified your death to all who loved you as you had loved them. Later the rules would change. But we didn't know that then. We didn't know."

As I inserted these words of Manchester's into this book, they brought tears to my eyes because they sounded just like something my dad would have said to me.

Manchester's reflections brought back fond memories of my life as a young boy in Illinois. They also brought back dark memories about Vietnam and about war in general. And, they reminded me of my own darkness that lies in my heart and soul. Now, as I now grow older and put things into perspective events back then do seem clearer. The age difference between Manchester and me is more than twenty years, but his values are the same as those I now hold with my fellow Marines, and that part, that link amazes me. Manchester's generation was the greatest generation of all just as Tom Brokaw has written about those who fought, died and helped win WW II to make the world free for democracy. My experiences were similar and those of us who served in Vietnam, should be just as proud. The only difference is that we've never been given credit for our duty in Vietnam because it was a war no one liked -- there was no cause, and now decades later, we all know the truth, it was a lost cause. It's very hard to admit it, but the anti-war crowd had it right all along, and the United States lost that war. I served in Vietnam and lived through the tough political times of the 1960' and 1970's while in uniform. It was not easy. I hope and pray that our children and grandchildren never have to relive that kind of era of anti-military sentiment. Kids today feel out of touch with vets like me left over from Vietnam. They never knew men like my dad or William Manchester or Bob Dole.

Relaying that long lost message and keeping it alive also is not an easy task. That is another reason I wrote this book. I want to help put thing into perspective. One of the more interesting notes left for history helps to summarize many of my political beliefs. These are the words JFK wrote as a dinner speech for the Texas Democratic Party in Austin that was scheduled for November 23, 1963. Of course, he never gave that speech and it now known as "The Undelivered Speech." As we move into this new Century, Kennedy's words ring as clear today as they did in November 1963, especially for the Democratic Party. Yes, they are political, and yes, they mirror many of the words that William Manchester left us regarding a long lost America (in his day), and yes, they mirror many of my own feelings about the political environment we live in today. Kennedy wrote: "For this country is moving and it must not stop. It cannot stop. For this is a time for courage and a time for challenge. Neither conformity nor complacency will do. Neither the fanatics nor the faint-hearted are needed. And our duty as a party is not to our party alone, but to the Nation, and, indeed, to all mankind. Our duty is not merely the preservation of political power but the preservation of peace and freedom. So, let us not be petty when our cause is so great. Let us not quarrel amongst ourselves when our Nation's future is at stake.

Let us stand together with renewed confidence in our cause -- united in our heritage of the past and our hopes for the future, determined that this land we love shall lead all mankind into new frontiers of peace and abundance."

EPILOGUE: THE HONOR ROLL

Lest We Forget

These names appear forever on the Vietnam Wall of Honor in Washington, DC. The first names are those who were killed during Operation Harvest Moon on December 10, 1965. The rest were killed in action during the remaining part of my year on combat:

PFC Robert L. Craft, Salt Lake City, UT, age: 18

PFC Mike Crannan, Canoga Park, CA, age: 18

PFC Ron Cummings, Stockton, CA, age: 18

SGT Bob Hickman, Wheeling, WV, age: 36

PFC Joe Moreno, Austin, TX, age: 18

CPL Les Puzyrewski, Chicago, IL, age: 19

LCpl Barry J. Sitler, Compton, CA, age: 20

Cpl Lloyd Vannatter, Ettrick, VA, age: 25

LCpl Denny Manning, St. Clair Shores, MI, age: 19

Cpl Jim Brock, Cleveland, OH, age: 23

LCpl Acie Hall, Lake City, TN, age: 22

PFC John Wilson, St. Paul, MN, age: 21

PFC Larry Tennill, Slater, MO, age: 18

Cpl Jimmy Taurisano, Everett, MA, age: 19

PFC Roger Bulifant, Belleville, MI, age: 18

Cpl Henry "Casey" Casebolt, St. Joseph, MO, age: 24

(Awarded the Navy Cross for gallantry; Op New York)

PFC Warren Lee Christensen, Hooper, UT, age: 19

Francis/Last Ride Home/324

PFC Bill Fuchs, Milwaukee, WI, age: 20
Cpl Charley Johnson, Batavia, IL, age: 21
PFC Jim Laird, Davenport, IA, age: 21
LCpl Larry MacDonald, Detroit, MI, age: 21
SSgt Ed McCarthy, Chicago, IL, age: 37
LCpl Andy McGuire, Chicago, IL, age: 23
PFC Jim McLemore, Knoxville, TN, age: 23
LCpl Mark Morgan, San Bruno, CA, age: 19
PFC Miguel E. Naranjo, Pueblo, CO, age: 18
PFC Richard Nugent, Westwood, NJ, age: 19
LCpl Art Pederson, Minneapolis, MN, age: 19
PFC Darrell Ray, Olympia, WA, age: 18
PFC Jose Torres, Sinton, TX, age: 21
LCpl Bill Foran, Decatur, IL, age: 20
PFC Bob Knutson, Norfolk, VA, age: 21
HM3 Harlan Riehl, Spring Valley, MN, age, unknown
PFC Bob Van Reypen, Rochester, NY, age: unknown
PFC Elwin Wise, Valleyford, WA, age: unknown
PFC Stan Yurgaitis, Harvey, IL, age: unknown
PFC David Brandon, Lake Oswego, OR, age: 19
PFC Gordy Briggs, Seattle, WA, age: 19
PFC Jim Briles, Portland, OR, age: 20
PFC Tom Britton, Great Neck, NY, age: 19
LCpl Bob Corkill, San Benito, TX, age: 19

LCpl Billy Joe Holt, Cameron, TX, age: 21
PFC David Johnston, Tucson, AZ, age: 19
13 PFC R. B. Marchbanks, Jr., Moriarty, NM, age: 23
14 PFC Ron Ralich, Lorain, OH, age: 19
15 PVT Roy Richard, Lafayette, LA, age: 19
16 SGT Walt Stevens, San Diego, CA, age: 25
17 PFC Ed Sexton, New Buffalo, MI, age: 23
Cpl Ken Wickel, West Lawn, PA, age: 21
18 PFC Ron Herbstritt, Bradford, PA, age: unknown
19 HN Cecil E. Daw, Anacoco, LA, age: unknown
20 PFC Santos Sanchez, Selma, CA, age: unknown
21 Sgt Richard Strange, Richmond, VA, age: 23
22 Cpl Jim Coleman, Jacksonville, FL, age: 21
23 Cpl Mickey Grable, Centralia, IL, age: unknown
24 PFC Gerry Eppley, Newark, OH, age: unknown
LCpl Carl Tucker, Jacksonville, FL, age: unknown
25 1st Lt. Edward Hap, East Chicago, IL, age 24
PFC Phillip Grego, Council Bluffs, IA, age not listed
59 PFC Cliff Walter, Erie, PA, age not listed
SSgt Ken Glaze, Hutchinson, KS, age: 33

AFTER WORD

Where Are They Today?

What would a good story be about without letting you know where some of the key players are today?

Lieutenant Charles George is now a retired Colonel. He teaches school and lives in Twenty-nine Palms, California.

Carl Kirksey, former Weapons Platoon LCPL, is medically retired. He lives with his wife, Jackie, in Arlington, Texas.

Captain Jim Page, now a retired Lieutenant Colonel lives in Lady Lake, Florida. He last commanded 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines.

Paul Magnum lives and works in Northern California.

Elbert "Butch" Gatlin lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Lieutenant Colonel Bob Hanifin died several years ago in California according to information from Jim Page.

Lieutenant Barry Beck finished his tour in the Marine Corps, and he went to law school. He has been an attorney for 30 years. He now lives with his family where he practices law in Midland, Texas.

Lieutenant Charles Krulak is now a retired General and the former Commandant of the Marine Corps.

Navy Corpsman Bob "Doc" Greeding who treated most of our wounded during Harvest Moon lives in Southern California.

Mike McNeeley who worked in supply and then served with Sgt. Frank Pruitt in Fox's machine gun section now lives in North Carolina.

Lieutenant Terry Moulton who led the charge during Operation *New York* lives and works in New York City as an airline consultant.

Former Corporal Tom Miller, who lost an eye with 2/7 paints and lives in New Jersey.

Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter, passed away in January 2001 according to word from Tom Miller.

Captain Dave Marx works at the Federal Mint in New Mexico.

REFLECTIONS: MEMORIES FROM OLD FRIENDS

In Their Own Words

The following is a series of Email "correspondence" from old friends - many who are mentioned in this story. They contacted me during the editing of this book. I appreciate their input and recollections. Some things I had forgotten; others I didn't recall with clarity. Thanks to all of them for their help in filling in some blanks. In some regards, this is the most entertaining part of the book!

From: Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Jim Page, Fox Company CO (Lady Lake Florida): Dan: Just got back yesterday from a 6 week vacation. Colonel Hannifin passed on 5 - 9 years ago. More later. Semper Fi, Jim Page

From: Former Marine Corporal Elbert L. "Butch" Gatlin (Chattanooga, Tennessee): I was with Golf Company 2/1 in Vietnam 1966-67. There was a Francis that served with me there. Would that be you? Semper Fi, E. L. "Butch" Gatlin

Dan: Going back to my basic thoughts while serving as a "Grunt" Marine with "Golf" Company 2/1 in Vietnam. I am reminded of daily thoughts that went through my mind. Waking of a morning in Battalion rear, I would see the dirt floor beneath my feet while sitting up on my folding cot with only an air mattress. That and of course, one Marine issue blanket for comfort. For these luxuries and comfort, I was thankful.

Shaving and grooming was done using a mirror hanging on one of the tent post with cold water. Daily work details always waited for us when in the rear. You were only excused from work details if you had been on an ambush or patrol during the night or if you were going on a patrol during this day. Work details in the hot sun were considered skating duty, because seldom did anyone get shot while working in Battalion rear. There were three meals a day at the field mess hall in Battalion rear. Though sometimes you wondered just what it was that you were eating. Yeah and we had showers there too. In the showers, they had wooden pallets so we didn't have to stand in the mud. Showers were a luxury. There was a big diesel pump that was started about 4:00 in the evening to pump water into the shower. No spray nozzle on the shower though. Just a faucet you turned on. And the water was cold. After being in the heat all day and having that cold water hit you was really a shock to your system. But at least you felt clean when finished. During the monsoon season, it rained most of the time and mud was part of everyday life. One morning we woke in our tent in Battalion rear to find about 2' of water in the tent. Some of the men were still sleeping, just floating around on their air mattress. That was not one of the better days. Our ammo bunker in Battalion rear caught fire once.

In it were small arm rounds, .50 cal. rounds, flares, grenades, 60 mm mortar rounds, and C-4 explosives, Claymore mines, and detonation cord. Talk about fireworks. It was like Fourth of July fireworks for about two days. We just let it blow itself up. Wouldn't have done no good to fight that fire. Of course, the first day of the fire 5-ton trucks from Regimental Headquarters drove up with more ammo. That meant a new bunker had to be built and a work detail to unload the tons of fresh ammo. But the fireworks were nice at night. Many was the time on these work details or on patrol I would hum the words to "Mr. Lonely" or "Green, Green Grass of Home" under my breath. We even had a PX in Battalion rear. It was an 18-wheel trailer and had wooden steps going in the back doors. Not much in there though. Shaving gear, tooth paste, a few radios and cameras, after shave and cologne (valuable if you had a date that night). Some candy and snacks, and of course cigarettes. A carton of American cigarettes cost \$1.00. But they finally went up on them to a dollar and a dime. American service men in Vietnam got reduced rates for being in a combat zone (yeah like that is really going to make it worth it). We even had a club and movies in this rear area. Club would open at 6:00 in the evening. Enlisted men could only get beer. Sometimes these were rationed to just two per man. Depended on whether the re-supply ship got into port on time or not that month. Yeah, we had cold cokes too.

Many of the men would blow off steam at the club. Liquor was only for Officers and Staff. The walls at the club were completely covered with Playboy Centerfolds. Miss May '66 was my favorite. At dark, they would show a movie beside the club. Two sheets of plywood painted white for a screen and a plywood stage was there too. The stage was for any USO tours that graced us with entertainment. Once during the movie we had several small arms rounds fired at us. When the shooting was over, we went back to watching the movie. Often several Marines would lay on their backs on the stage and look up at the movie. This particular night after the shooting and movie was over, there was one Marine laying there. He didn't get up. He had been shot in one ear and out the other during the shooting. The name of the movie that night was "A shot in the Dark." Even during our time off from this war (so to speak) we lost Buddies. One time my Company was really stressed out. We had just come in from duty in that heavily mined area. We lost many men there. So to boost our morale Battalion Commander gave us three days in country R&R at "China Beach" in Danang. This was before the glamour of the TV series. No hospital there at this time. Just an old abandoned French barracks and combination mess hall and club there. Was on the beach and we went swimming. Unfortunately the second day we were summoned back to Battalion Rear.

A concentration of NVA and Viet Cong in our Battalions sector brought a swift end to our relaxation at "China Beach". We boarded 5-ton trucks and proceeded back to Battalion. Then we were sent on an Operation to rid the countryside of these NVA and Viet Cong. Talk about being mad. The men of "G" 2/1 had a score to settle with their enemy for interrupting our R&R. Music was always welcomed by the men. Some had their "Soul Music" while others had their "Country" or "Rock" (60's back then). We had a man named Sheridan that would pick a guitar and sing for us. Sometimes the "Tex-Mex" with us would get the guitar and play Latino. "Golf" was made up of about 1/3rd "Tex-Mex," 1/3rd "Black," and the other 1/3rd was a mix of "White" and "Native Americans." But in our eyes we were all just "Green Marines." Drugs were no problem in our unit as you hear in other branches. It was understood by our men that should there be a firefight and men killed or wounded and we had a man under the influence of drugs, then he would be killed by us. So with death as a deterrent, drugs were no problem in our unit. We had fights though. And bloody ones at that. Fighting was at times a pastime. Bloody noses, black eyes, and a few broken bones happened often. As the frustration of the war built up, men often became hostile. Hostility was often the only outlet to regaining ones composure. Had a few of these fights myself. I was never the aggressor though.

I blew off the steam of frustration by burning down the outhouse or scaring someone to near death with a snake. Sometimes I just happen to be handy for a frustrated Marine to take it out on. I always held my own though and was never whipped. One fight with a Marine named Roberts I had to cut short. I had already whipped him but he was not ready to quit just yet. So he grabbed his M-14 rifle, chambered a round and said: "I'm going to shoot you." I looked at him about 6 feet in front of me and said, "Alright, I give up, you win." At this time the fight was over. I set down and started to write a letter home to let my Family know that everything was all right and I was safe. When I went out of the hootch all the men were talking about how I whipped Roberts all over the place. Didn't want to push my luck when I gave up. A big Marine would take several of us to wear him down. And once Cpl. Acevedo from New York grabbed Sgt. Bonners from behind and stuck a locked and cocked 45 auto to his head are told all of us he was killing Bonners. Like to have never talked Ace into giving up that pistol. But he did finally and Sgt. Bonners lived on to harass me until I left Vietnam. This is basically everyday life in Battalion rear. This was the best of times. Friends, Butch

Dan: Also the day that Grego and Walter (Author's Note: PFC Philip H. Grego, Council Bluffs, Iowa, and PFC Clifton M. Walter, Erie, PA) died.

Gunny Wilson and you got it when you ran out to help them. Dan, the Corpsman we had thought I had malaria and told me to get someone to take my place on that patrol. I ask Walters if he would go and he said yes. In return to pay Walters back for taking my place I agreed to go so he could get some much-needed rest. Didn't know if you were aware of this. Butch

Dan: On Operation *Jay* when we brought the bodies back on the second day, I was with the detail that brought the 2nd Platoon Corpsman. (Author's note: This was Navy Corpsman Cecil E. Daw, Anacoco, Louisiana). I was at Phu Bai on the tank patrol that got hit by mortars. Walters was in my Fire Team. Have shed many tears for him and the others. Butch

Dan: Out in the Valley at Phu Bai when I joined Golf (about the 2nd or 3rd week of May, 1966) Hotel Company went out on patrol riding on top of tanks one day. They had engineers with them to check any roads for mines that they crossed and requested 4 men from Golf to go with them to stand security for the engineers while they swept the roads. I was one of those four from Golf. Everything went well until they headed back that afternoon and a tank threw a track. Had to stop the column (about 10 tanks) while the track was repaired. When the track was finished we mounted up on the tanks again and the tanks started their engines. Being with the Engineers, we were on the lead tank.

Before the tanks started to move the NVA started dropping mortars on us. The first round went passed the tank we were on and exploded about 50 meters the other side of us. Tank crews started closing hatches and we dismounted and started to run, getting clear of the tanks. The second round that came in hit the tank that I had been on. It exploded on the side of the turret at about the exact spot where my chest was only moments before. Hotel Company was forming up in Platoons while running. The 4 of us from Golf ran off and left Hotel Company. We ran all the way back to Golf's perimeter. That was me first exposure to hostile fire. The 1st day of Operation Jay (June 25, 1966, was my 20th birthday) 2nd Platoon was pinned down out in the rice paddy in front of us. (Authors Note: This was my platoon and our Platoon Sergeant was SSgt. Bob Cleary, later he become Sgt.Maj. of the Marine Corps, retired someplace around Boston, Massachusetts). They were unable to get back to the graveyard where we were (and the nearest cover) because of incoming. You remember late that evening (just before dark) a squad volunteered from 1st Platoon to assault the tree line. We wanted to distract them long enough so that what was left of 2nd Platoon could move back to join the rest of the Company? Well that was my squad. We were at the edge of the graveyard loaded down with extra ammo and set to go. The CO told us that we would not make it back, but we would be fully rewarded.

So, with a prayer on my lips I was ready. Just at the last minute they called it off saying they had a better idea. What was left of 2nd Platoon would have to make their way back the Company in the cover of darkness. You remember the Phantom (F-4) that accidentally dropped 4 napalm on us that day. And that night helicopters dropped ammo from the air on us and we had to dodge the crates as they fell. There was a Marine Choctaw helicopter that 1st evening that was medi-evacating out Marines that got shot down and exploded. I think they said it had 11 wounded Marines aboard and the crew. They all died. Later my Friend, Butch

Dan: Have you had any contact with Walter's family? I have for years wished that I could talk with them. If you ever wish to call then feel free. Should you ever be in the area (Chattanooga) then by all means visit with me. We are at the foot of Lookout Mountain. Later my Friend, Butch

Dan: My Family and I are Cherokee. Our Tribe has a web site for members. I often write up these stories and send to the Tribe so they don't take their freedom for granted. They really like the stories and commend me when we meet. I have been asked by some to speak at schools about Vietnam. I am also the Vice Chief of our Tribes Warriors Society and a member of the Marine Corps League. I would be honored to have my memories of our Buddies in your book. Later my Friend, Butch

Dan: The day before Operation Jay (June 24, 1966) Sgt. Strange got a letter from home. It was from his wife and told him about their child just being born. There were pictures of his wife and their newborn child too. He was running all over the company area smiling and telling that he was a Father. Showing everyone the pictures. Everyone was patting him on the back and happy for him. At that moment, he was the happiest man in Vietnam. Then the next day he was killed. I left Vietnam not knowing if he ever got a letter off to his wife about the child before his death or not. That thought haunted me for 34 years until last year. Last year (1999) I went to the Website for the Wall and left a message beneath his name. His best Friend from school found it and put me in touch with his Sister, Mary. After explaining about the letter to Mary and how I had been haunted by it, she told me that yes he did send a letter to his wife before he died. He must have sent it the night before he died. Mary said that she has the letter now. It was such a relief for me. Also, the first day of Operation Jay was exactly 90 years to the day of the Little Bighorn battle. Which BTW, is when the 7th Calvary went down. And, my 20th birthday, June 25th, 1966.

Buddies, Butch

(Author's note: Butch provided this extract about Sgt. Strange from his hometown newspaper):

"In the 4th Marine Corps District NEWSLETTER, dated February 1967, the Richmond Pays Tribute to Silver Star Winner: "Mrs. F. Strange, widow of Sergeant Richard L Strange, was presented the Silver Star Medal posthumously awarded to her husband, who was killed in action in Vietnam June 25, 1966. The decoration was presented by Major Samuel H Helms, Inspector-Instructor, 1st/8th 105mm Howitzer Batteries, USMCR, Richmond, Va. before a formation of about 200 reservists. Sgt. Strange was serving as a Platoon Guide with Company Golf, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Division the time of his death.

The medal was awarded to Sgt. Strange for exhibiting "... extraordinary heroism" while his company was engaging a hard core North Vietnamese Battalion. The citation accompanying the medal told of the immediate action he took to regain fire superiority when he and his platoon were pinned down in a rice paddy by heavy enemy fire. Sergeant Strange courageously moved among his men, pointing our suspected hostile targets and shouting encouragement to his comrades. Twice he braved heavy fire to rescue wounded men. He successfully evacuated one man but was mortally wounded while carrying a second wounded man to safety.

By his outstanding courage, valiant fighting spirit and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of heavy odds, Sergeant Strange contributed directly to the successful repulse of the hostile assault and thereby upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service."

Sgt. Strange, who was killed three days before his 25th birthday, enlisted at Richmond, August 29, 1963." End of newspaper article..

Hello Dan: Hope everything is well with you this week. Do you remember Sgt. Kenneth Thornton (Author's note: Yes, I remember him well. A very sharp, good-looking Marine, I served with him only a couple of months before I rotated out in September 1966. He was from Shelby, Ohio). I believe he was already with Golf Company when I joined them in May 1966. Here is his story. We were still at the same Battalion area in Quang Nam Province Southwest of Danang. On Nov. 15th, 1966 our Platoon (1st Platoon) left the Battalion rear that morning going on routine patrol. It was raining and continued to rain all morning. Later in the patrol, we approached two grass houses. The front wall of one was opened up for ventilation. SSgt. Daclison ordered my fire team to secure the houses and take a position at the opened house. Van Lopik, Garza, and Hannah were in my Fire Team. After securing the houses, we took cover from the rain under the wall of the first house.

Cpl. Goodblot and his M-60 crew also sought cover from the rain there with us. From my vantage point there was a jungle tree line about 20 or so meters in front of us. And about 100 meters to the left of the two houses was a set of railroad tracks. You remember how the Vietnamese would build the tracks on a bed that was about 6 to 10 feet above ground. That kept the tracks from being under water during monsoon? That's the way these were. In this house there were two grown women and about 4 children. The children were just small with the youngest being just a few months old. One woman (the youngest) appeared to be the Mother of the children with the older woman probably being her Mother. There were no men to be found. Sgt. Thornton noticed all of us under the front wall of this house and immediately came over and started giving orders. He was pointing in the direction of the tracks, for the M-60 crew to set up on the tracks. The dirt floor of this house was about a foot and a half above the ground around the house. So with Sgt. Thornton in charge now, I sat down on the dirt floor facing the jungle tree line and lit a cigarette. Sgt. Thornton was still giving orders and pointing. I looked down about this time at my feet and noticed streaks cutting along the surface of the dirt coming toward me, throwing dirt in my face. Then I heard the sound of two full automatic rifles about 25 meters in front of us in the jungle firing.

Instinctively I rolled to my right side and started crawling through the house to take cover on the backside of the dirt floor. About this time the firing stopped. Going back into the house I noticed Sgt. Thornton was hit as was Van Lopik.

With the Corpsman up we found that Sgt. Thornton was hit in the right side of his neck. The bullet going through and out the back. And he was shot through the right lung. Van Lopik had taken a round into one of the M-14 magazines on his belt. The impact knocked him sideways causing him to twist his right knee. You've heard of water on the knee? Well the Corpsman said that Van Lopik had blood on the knee. It was bright red underneath the skin from about mid thigh to just below his calf. Sgt. Thornton was much worse. He ask how bad he was hit and the Corpsman and I told him it wasn't that bad. Right then he wanted up. The Corpsman told me to hold Sgt. Thornton to the floor and not let him up. The Corpsman took a piece of plastic bag to cover the hole in Sgt. Thornton's chest. Air was gushing out of his chest spewing blood. With this under control and me holding him to the floor, Sgt. Thornton said then I'm hit bad ain't I. Again we told him it wasn't that bad. Hearing that he demanded to be let up. Again we told him no that he wasn't getting up. Same thing again with Sgt. Thornton saying he was hit bad then. Corpsman bandaged the wound to Sgt. Thornton's neck. About this time Sgt. Thornton started choking and spitting up blood.

The Corpsman opened up Sgt. Thornton's airway by inserting a breathing tube. Sgt. Thornton at this time was unconscious but he was breathing. While all this was going on the M-60 machinegun crew opened up at the railroad tracks.

Just after the shooting two NVA in uniform tried to cross the tracks about 100 meters in front of the M-60 crew. Cpl. Goodblot and his crew opened up and killed both of them. At this time Sgt. Thornton's heart stopped. The Corpsman was monitoring his pulse. Our Corpsman was a big man and drew back and hit Sgt. Thornton in the chest over his heart with his fist. Still no heartbeat. Again the Corpsman hit Sgt. Thornton. But no heartbeat. Sgt. Thornton had gone into shock and was now dead. It was shock that killed him. I was still holding Sgt. Thornton. The Corpsman ask for my canteen so he could wash the blood from his hands. I carried two canteens, one at each hip. Reaching for my left canteen I noticed it was gone. The hook and a piece of the web were still attached to my ammo belt. We found the canteen on the other side of the room. During the shooting it was shot clean off my ammo belt. When the shooting started I was sitting with Sgt. Thornton standing right next to me. Van Lopik was standing at my right. Fate had saved me again. We tried but were unable to get a medivac chopper out to our position. Sgt. Thornton's body was wrapped in a poncho and two bamboo poles inserted to carry him back to Battalion.

A makeshift stretcher was made to transport Van Lopik out. We had noticed the women and children amongst us until just before the shooting started. When the shooting was over the women and kids came out of a bomb shelter hidden under the floor. These women and children were the families of the two NVA soldiers. And the women and children knew what was coming down. Upon our departure a 155 artillery barrage leveled the two houses. Friends, Butch

Greetings, Dan: Marines in Vietnam would set up a defensive perimeter in the form of a circle. At night they would send out Listening Posts to listen and observe enemy movement. That was their only objective. These LP's were under orders not to fire or return fire on an enemy. LP's were usually made up of either 2 or 4 Marines depending on how concentrated the area was with VC or NVA. Several LP's would be sent out from the perimeter in different directions in order to guard all sides. These LP's normally went out about 500 meters from the perimeter to a predetermined position on the map. With them they carried a field radio to report back any activity observed. I was sent out often on these LP's. In one hot area known to have a large concentration of NVA I was given orders to go on an LP that night. There would be four of us on the LP. From our side of the perimeter there was a grassy (about like broom sage) area about 100 meters across that went away from the perimeter.

It was flanked on each side by trees. On the map it was predetermined that we would proceed on this grassy area to a point about 500 meters from the perimeter. We had to wait until dark in order to conceal our movement. I would be the one to lead the LP into position.

Now with darkness on us we left the security of the perimeter. The stars were out that night and just enough moonlight to see the terrain features. We walked past some Vietnamese graves. They were mounded up about three feet above the ground. I was ever watchful for any movement and to the best of my ability for booby traps. Now we were nearing the position that we would occupy until just before daylight. LP's would return to the perimeter under cover of darkness just before morning light. We were now in our position. The four of us set down in the grass and I told the man with the radio to call in and tell the Company we were in position. He got on the "hook" and had just got the words out that we were in position. Just then, four fully automatic rifles in front of our position opened up on us. Here we were sitting in nothing but grass about waist deep getting shot at from about 50 meters away. Still we didn't return fire. The man on the radio informed the perimeter that we were taking small arms fire from four auto rifles. The answer was "Wait one." Still we didn't return fire. Bullets were popping all around us.

They pop like a firecracker when they go by. Then the word came from the perimeter not to return fire but to double time (RUN) back to the perimeter that 155mm artillery was going to be walked up on us. Now not only do we have four NVA trying to shoot us but Marine artillery is going to be on our heels as we run back to the perimeter.

"Walking the artillery" as they call it will land the first round where we are (or were) sitting. The next and subsequent rounds will each be 25 meters closer to the perimeter. Once a fire mission is called to artillery it only takes 3 minutes or less to get a round on target. So, there was no time to waste. In walking the rounds like this, keeps the enemy from running behind you and shooting you in the back. I was to take the lead going back. Now the four of us were running as hard as we could for the safety of the perimeter. I now heard the first artillery round streaking through the night sky. It hit right where we had been sitting. Next round would be closer. About this time I ran slap dab into one of the Vietnamese graves and fell. The other three Marines just past me up not wanting any part of the artillery. I sprang back to my feet and fell in behind the third Marine. Those artillery rounds were staying right on our heels. You would be surprised at how fast four Marines can cover 500 meters with artillery chasing them. I no longer heard the sound of small arms fire.

Could be that the first or second artillery round got them as they pursued us. Now we were approaching the perimeter and would be challenged by Marines on the perimeter for the password. Marines on the perimeter now shouted "Halt!" "What's the password?" Without slowing down we shouted the password at them and ran right past them on into the perimeter. We gave the "CO" details of what had happened.

He told us to return to our foxholes at the edge of the perimeter while he decided what to do. I was hopeful that after our harrowing experience that we would remain inside the perimeter for the rest of the night. WRONG! Here come the "CO" telling us that it should be quite out there now and for us to return to the exact position we were ambushed at. Having the discipline that is instilled in all Marines we saddled up and went back to the place we had just been ambushed at. I was in the lead. There were many craters from the artillery in the area as we made our way back out there. But like the "CO" said it was quite and remained quite the rest of the night for us. There was no sign of the four NVA that ambushed us just moments before.

Friends, Butch

Dan: As Marines in Vietnam we saw first hand the damage inflicted on the countryside and the Vietnamese People. Being "Grunt" Marines we had a soft spot in our hearts for the little children.

For they were innocent victims of this war. We often gifted the children with candy, chewing gum, and would share our C-Rations with them. The likes of which most of the children had never experienced. In return these little children would look at us with their eyes bright and a smile saying "You #1 Marine, you #1!" In this under developed country these children's diet consisted mainly of nothing more than rice cooked on an open fire in the dirt floor of their home.

Sometimes the pot of rice would be graced with a bean pod or a pod of pepper. If they were lucky a small fish or two about 1 to 2 inches long would be cooked with the rice. Other than that it was just plain rice. You might remember the big bridge that crossed the river on Hwy 1 just south of Danang where I tried to put the outhouse in orbit. Well about 1/4 of a mile past this bridge there was a smaller bridge crossing a creek. The road that crossed this creek went to our Regimental Headquarters. There were villages on both sides of the river with many children around. In the evenings after school and chores the little children would gather at this smaller bridge. They would swim in the water and try to catch bare handed little fish. If they were lucky in getting a fish or two they took them home for their Mothers to cook. Most of these children went home empty handed. At this smaller bridge we had a squad of Marines that protected it day and night.

The Platoon of Marines at the big bridge would rotate squads from the Platoon to duty at the small bridge. This was to keep the NVA and VC from blowing it. There was a sandbag bunker at each end of the bridge to fight from. There was extra ammo at both ends of the bridge. Most of which was dried into the mud. And I had doubts if any of this mud-covered ammo was serviceable should our lives depend on it. I had previously requested fresh ammo for this bridge. I had told SSgt. Daclison my request.

But at this time we still didn't have the fresh ammo that we needed for this bridge. One evening while standing on this small bridge watching the children swim in pursuit of the little fish, I had an idea. The water beneath the bridge was about 8 or 10 feet deep. My idea was to take care of two birds with one stone (grenade) so to speak. Going to each end of the bridge, I gathered several of the grenades encrusted in the mud. With grenades in hand I returned to the middle of the bridge and instructed the children to get out of the water. Lai Dai! Lai Dai! I shouted at them (meaning "Get away!"). When the little children were at a safe distance I looked down the road to make sure no one was around, like Sgt. Bonners. I did see a Marine 5-ton truck approaching the bridge on its way to Regiment. Could only see the driver in the cab. Appeared that he was alone. Taking a final look to make sure the children were clear I started pulling the pins on the grenades.

I dropped them into the depths of the water. These grenades would go all the way to the bottom of the creek before exploding. The resulting explosion 8-seconds later was just a big WHOOM! that would roll up on the surface of the water in the form of a big circle with many rings. These water rings would dissipate at the waters edge. Just as I pulled the pin on the last grenade the truck was pulling onto the bridge. I tossed the grenade into the water just as Sgt. Bonners jumped from the running board.

This wasn't good. Bonners hit the ground screaming in my face. About this time WHOOM! went the last grenade. Bonners told me that I was definitely being wrote up on "Office Hours." This is the lightest of the Court Martial punishments. I sure didn't need a court martial on my record. I took one last look over the side of the bridge and motioned for the children to gather the fish our grenades had stunned. The children's eyes were all lit up and they were all smiles saying "You #1 Marine! You #1!" The children would have fish with their evening meal today. Now for the 1/4 mile march back to the CP bunker at the big bridge. Sgt. Bonners screaming and yelling at me every step of the way. Why this man already had me court-martialed before we even got there. I didn't say a word in my defense. I just stayed in step with him and listened to his ranting and raving all the way.

Arriving at the big bridge Sgt. Bonners escorted me straight to the CP bunker. There in front of SSgt. Daclison, Sgt. Bonners started telling about me wasting the grenades at the smaller bridge. Stating strongly that he wanted me to be punished with office hours. After hearing Sgt. Bonners side of it, SSgt. Daclison told him he could go and that he would take care of it from here. With "Big Mouth Bonners" gone SSgt. Daclison looked at me and asked, "why I blew those grenades?" I reminded him of my previous request for fresh ammo at the smaller bridge.

Telling him that we never got the new ammo and I didn't want to risk the lives of my Fireteam with ammo dried in the mud. SSgt. Daclison looked at me and then smiled saying we would get fresh ammo at the small bridge. And then told me not to worry about getting office hours. Said that Sgt. Bonners could not pursue it any further without SSgt. Daclison's approval. "Go on about your duties LCpl. Gatlin, and don't worry about it". SSgt. Daclison was all right. Friends, Butch

Dan: I joined the U.S. Marines in November, 1965, finished boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, and then on to Camp Lejeune, N.C. for Infantry Training. Then finished up my training with escape and evasion training at Camp Pendleton, California before going to fight with the Marines in Vietnam.

I was now, or so I thought, a seasoned Marine with 6 months time in service. The training thus far had kept most of us as "Buddies" together. We then flew to Okinawa and spent 3 days being processed before the final leg of our trip to Vietnam. We flew into Danang airstrip about the second week of May 1966. There we were separated. Just about everyone I had gone through the training with was sent south to Chu Lai. I, Stanley, and Davis were being sent north to Phu Bai. Tonight we would stay at the famous "Dog Town" at Danang airstrip. "Dog Town" was a transit barracks (hooch) for Marines rotating in and out of Vietnam. We were told which hooch to sleep in.

In this hooch were two seasoned Marines that had just finished their tours and were flying out for home the next day. We talked some to these war seasoned Marines. I could see in their eyes and face a sinister look of death. And could only wonder what waited for me. Next morning we boarded a C-130 bound for Phu Bai. A jeep awaited us at the airstrip at Phu Bai that would take us to 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. Once there Stanley and I were assigned to Golf Company. Our Friend Davis was sent to Hotel Company. Standing outside the Golf Company tent waiting to check in, a Marine helicopter landed and a bag was unloaded at the entrance to the tent beside me. It was a dead Marine wrapped in a poncho. This Marine was killed today while out at Golf's outpost the Quo Bi Tan Tan Valley.

Turned out this Marine was the original drummer with the Four Seasons before joining the Marines. After drawing my gear and ammo I was sent out to this Valley on the re-supply truck that evening. It was hot, but I hadn't heard any shots fired so far. Heat was almost unbearable. Reaching Golf Company I was assigned to the 1st Platoon and put in Cpl. Rivas's squad. The first night I spent on the perimeter in a foxhole standing perimeter duty. The next morning Hotel was going on a Company patrol riding on top of tanks. Hotel Company was on a hill just a few hundred meters from my company.

Nine tanks would carry "Hotel" on their patrol. A tenth tank would take the lead carrying engineers with mine detectors to sweep for mines. I and 3 other men from "Golf" would ride on this lead tank to provide security for the engineers as they cleared the roads. I thought, well this won't be too bad a day just riding around on a tank. After all who's going to mess with a Marine tank? Much less ten of them carrying about 120 Marines. Now the engines started and you couldn't hear anything except the roar. Then we saddled up on these metal beasts that weighed 52 tons each. I had a good feeling about this day. Just maybe this war wasn't as bad as the news made it out to be back home. Coming to a road the four of us stood security while the engineers checked it for mines. Then it was back to our beast and back to the lead.

Proceeding on, the tank column came over a hill and started down the far side. This far side of the hill was a gradual slope that leveled off about half a mile below with pretty green grass. About this time the tank behind us challenged our tank wanting to race to the bottom of the hill. The race was on! Our tank was in the lead. These tanks could cruise at about 45 mph. We were still in the lead when we reached the pretty green grass at the bottom of the hill. We were really moving on. It was a real chore just to stay mounted on this beast. Sometimes the tracks would clear the ground. Wow what a ride!

As we started into the grass water flew up on both sides of our tank. Turned out that beneath the pretty green grass was about 4 or 5 foot of water. This 52-ton beast stopped almost instantly. Bottoming out its belly in the muddy bottom. Going from 45 mph to 0 mph threw all the Marines on top of this beast flying through the air. Some of the airborne Marines in full battle gear were body surfing on the surface of the water. Luckily no one was hurt. It did take two of the other tanks cabled together to pull ours from the mud. We gave the crew chief of our tank a thumbs up for the ride. Returning back in the evening, we had just crossed the last road before getting to the Company area. At this time one of the tanks threw a track and the column had to stop while it was repaired.

Engines were shut off and we stood watch while the crews worked for two hours repairing the broken track. Then with the repair made we saddled up on our metal beasts. Our tank was to be the last tank in the column for the rest of the trip to the Company perimeter. With engines now started, the roar was deafening but we had no problem hearing a large explosion about 50 meters from the tank I was on. I thought no problem we will all get inside these armored beast. WRONG! Hatches started closing and being latched. We were under an 82mm mortar attack. The four of us from "Golf" quickly dismounted, getting clear of the tank.

It was too easy of a target for the mortars. We started running cross-country in the direction of our Companies perimeter. I turned and looked over my shoulder just as the second round exploded. This round hit exactly on the tank where my chest had been only moments before. Maybe being on foot is not too bad after all, I thought. During all this one of the tanks had spotted the NVA mortar crew at a distance and was aligning his 90mm tank gun on them. BOOM! That one round put an end to the mortar attack. We were offered a ride by the tank crew back to our Company perimeter about 500 meters ahead. But we declined, saying we felt better on foot. Back in the perimeter we had evening chow of C-Rations and fresh baked bread that was sent out on the re-supply truck that day.

That night, as I stood watch on the perimeter, I looked up at the moon and wondered about my loved ones. I wondered what they had done that day back home. Now just 12 months and 29 days left I thought. Friends, Butch

From Former Marine, Arnie Levin: Hello Danny: I served with Foxtrot 2/1 from April 66 - Feb 67. I carried Captain Spence's radio and was with him when Lt. Hap was killed on the jungle trail up north (Author's note: First Lieutenant Edward F. Hap, East Chicago, Illinois). I think it was on Operation Hastings. (Author's note: Arnie is correct, it was during Operation Hastings that Lt. Hap was killed).

Were you still with Fox Co then? Later we went south and Captain Gene Deegan took over. I was with him till Operation Union when he got hit. I still keep in touch with him. He retired as a Major General and now lives in Tampa. Hey 58 ain't that old, I'm 57. I'm live near Poughkeepsie (NY). We are supposed to get snow tonight, but I bet you get more up there. Anyway, stay warm. Let me know if you remember Captain Spence or any others. God Bless, Arnie

From former Corporal Paul Mangan: Dan: Thanks for writing again and of course, I apologize for not writing sooner, another one of my extended trips took me out of the loop. But that may change soon, I'm at 60/40 odds of retiring next year, not bad for 55 I think.

I was sorry to hear that Gunny Thurmond passed on.
(Author's note: Gunny Joe Thurmond had been our Gunny in Fox Company. He was later selected to be a Warrant Officer. He left us and went into the Corrections Field -- I saw his name in the Marine Corps Gazette's obituary column a few years ago. Joe made Captain before he died, but he also attended Jim Page's retirement in 2/1 -- that must have been a nice thing to have seen; those two alive and together after so many years). I've thought of him often over the years and wished I could have been able to chat with him before he died. Where did he live? Matter of fact, what state do you live in? I'm in Iowa now, but lived in California for 40 years. Paul

Dan: Now about your book. I can probably send you some recollections about several things, but I may not be able to send you something complete real soon. Maybe I could put something together in spurts, do you have a specific deadline?
Paul

Dan: I may have a vague recollection of you getting wounded in February. That was Operation Hastings, wasn't it?

(Author's note: Actually, it was during Operation New York). It was after that operation that we were split up, I remember that encounter well. As we approached the tree line across that cemetery we all knew the damn thing would open up with heavy fire.... and it did.

(Author's note: Paul has his facts right, he just had the wrong operational name). We lost a lot of Marines that day. I can tell you one thing, I am mighty proud to have been in Fox. Paul.

Dan: I came pretty close to going for the commission after coming home the in late '66, but what changed my mind was the attitude of the Marines at (Camp) Pendleton. I was an E-5 and had E-2's & 3's telling me to piss off. I wasn't all that excited about going back as a Platoon commander with troops like that to lead. Bless you for doing it. I finished my tour as a TI with the Infantry Training Regiment at San Onofre. It turned out to be the best duty I could have had in setting me up for the career I'm close to retiring from. Paul

Dan: I will put together some thoughts about a few experiences (I take it the fights and drunkard encounters in Subic Bay may not fit in your book) and send them on to you. Take care and have a safe as well as happy Holidays. Semper Fi, Paul Mangan

Good to hear from you Dan: As for Donkey Don Kinard, maybe we should send a recon patrol out to find his sorry ass. I've got some old phone numbers and addresses on him and do a little recon, maybe I'll turn something up. (Author's note: former Corporal Don Kinard was Paul's Fireteam Leader in early 1965-66). Semper Fi, Paul

Notes from former Navy Corpsman Bob "Doc" Greding: Dan:
It has been a long time old friend. I was your corpsman, Doc Greding. Hopefully we can get in touch. If you would like please give me a call. I live in West Covina, California. Hope to hear from (Author's note: Doc called me on Christmas day in 2000 and we spoke for over an hour). Doc Greding

Dan: It was so good to talk with you the other day. I just wanted to pass on some information. I was able to locate Lt. George. He is living in Twenty-Nine Palms, California. He is retired from the Corps and teaching school. We had a nice talk by phone and he seems to be enjoying retired life. I thought I would pass on his address and phone number to you.

I hope some day we can get together and talk over old times. (Author's note: I contacted Lt. (now retired Colonel) George and we have exchanged greetings from time-to-time. Oddly enough, I now work in Syracuse, the place he grew up and where his mother now lives). Until then your old friend, Doc Greding (Author's note: Bob has a fisherman's website at which he owns and operates in California).

From former Corporal Carl Kirksey (known in Fox as the Rocketman (3.5" rocket launcher) and one of the best damn story tellers in Texas): Hey Sgt. Francis! Good to hear from you, and no I don't know where Don Kinard or Frank Pruitt are but sure wish I did. Here's my new E-mail address.

I'm cleaning up this mailbox and shutting it down. I am living in Arlington TX. SEMPER FIDELIS, Carl & Jackie, Arlington, TX

Dan: (former 1st Lt.) Terry Moulton is supposed to be in NY City according to the Skipper (Captain Jim Page). You might ask him for his address. Also, (former 1st Lt.) Barry Beck is an Attorney in Midland Texas. Last I heard of Frank Pruitt, he was in Memphis TN. I sure would like to see him and the rest. I don't know if you remember a skinny little fart that was in Supply Co., a driver and in third herd named Jim Turner? He lives in Lipan, Texas which is about 75 miles West of here. Do you know whatever happened to Old Recon McGee? Last I saw of him was just after Operation Jay.

He was showing Paul (Mangun) the wound he just got in his thigh, when he got hit in the upper chest region by another. Paul and I told him that he had better sit down and wait for the Medevac choppers, cause they only gave out one Heart per day no matter how many times you got hit! He was a character! Tough too! SEMPER FIDELIS, Carl & Jackie, Arlington, TX

Dan: Jimmy Lou Turner, Automatic Rifleman in Cpl. Casebolt's squad (Author's note: Cpl. Henry Casebolt, killed during Operation New York, and awarded the Navy Cross, from St. Joseph, MO).

Francis/Last Ride Home/360

And was in McGuire's fire team (Author's note: LCpl. Andy McGuire, also killed during Operation New York, from Chicago), and 3rd Platoon under Moulton. I have some more and will dig them out and send them to you. SEMPER FIDELIS, Carl & Jackie, Arlington, TX.

Dan: I remember you getting hit, but I can't remember how bad. Any hit was bad, but some worse than other's. Was it your arm? You missed the fun and the CS attack too. Where did you go for treatment and when did you get back to 2/1? Fox was split up just after New York, we had 16 KIA and 22 WIA that day. We fired our 60 Mortars so fast I set my helmet cover on fire and Marx (Captain Dave Marx) came over and beat it out. A lot of good guys got hit that day. You need to ask Sandy "Doc" Sanderson about his Purple Heart. It is too cool of a story for me to tell and he wouldn't mind. You would be proud of him!

Turner was real skinny and blond headed. He worked for Sgt. (George) Borges when he wasn't with 3rd Platoon (Author's note: George Borges died in the late 1980's or early 1990's). Jackie and I are about to leave for Waco TX, and I write more when we get back. Her parents live there so we are going down for Mother's Day. Take it easy and I will call you soon. Carl & Jackie

Dan: One day, we were all standing formation. Gunny Thurmond was chewing the hell out of someone in the 1st Platoon.

I hadn't heard who he was chewing out, because I had been talking to one of my Ammo Humpers. Well, he wasn't chewing anybody out in 1st Platoon, he was chewing me out and looking at 1st Platoon. (Author's note: Joe Thurmond's eyes were so bad that he look directly at you and see others people on his left and right at the same time. We used to say the Gunny could stand in a circle and keep an eye on everyone around him). I knew when he said, "By God, Lance Corporal Kirksey when I tell you to shut up I by God mean it! Do you understand that?" Needless to say, I understood it completely. Another tale on Gunny Thurmond. He had come by my hole on Hill 41 and hooked me up for a working party. He also got Koehler from my squad. We were to find out A-Gunners and Ammo Humpers and see him at the Company CP.

Well we had to dig a four-holer (Author's note: A four-holer is a shithouse with four seats -- hence: four holes) down the hill on the side facing the ville. We had to dig it 14 feet deep and 4x4 feet square. You know the size. When we had it finished Sgt. Pruitt yelled at the Gunny to come down and see if it met with his approval. Well, the Gunny climbed down into the hole and began measuring from side to side. Pruitt had us pick up the four hole cover and set it down over the hole. After it was set in place, Pruitt pulled down his trousers and sat down on one of the holes and started farting!

Gunny began yelling, "Sergeant Pruitt, Sergeant Pruitt! I recognize your big hairy ass! Get that cover of this hole and don't you dare shit on me!" Most of the hill had gathered to see what happened when the Gunny came out of the hole. He was a good sport about it. But hell, no one could stay mad at Pruitt for long. Pruitt got hit bad a little while after I did. I don't know much more than that, but from what I heard it was real bad. According to whoever told me about it, a machinegun tore into him and rolled him. I never heard how many times he got hit, but according to the teller it was a lot. Well, enough tales for now. Good to hear from you. SEMPER FIDELIS, Carl & Jackie, Arlington, TX

Dan: Now, I remember about Pruitt and how he got hit: CAC's XO at that time was 1st Lt. Blaha, he and Pruitt got into it about one of the PF's. Pruitt and Kinard suspected this PF of being a VC. Pruitt told Marx that every time they took a patrol out and this PF walked point, the patrol got ambushed.

Each time, the PF would do something like cough or sneeze just before the ambush was sprung. They wanted MI to have at this PF but the PF had clout with the village chief. The village chief told Blaha that the PF was no VC. Pruitt told Blaha that he wasn't going to take the PF out on any patrol. Blaha ordered Pruitt to take him out.

Pruitt refused to obey the order and got fined six months pay for his trouble and still had to take the PF out on Patrol. The first patrol they took him out Pruitt got hit and cut all to hell by the MG. The one thing Pruitt did when the ambush was sprung; he blew the shit out of the VC/PF! I never heard if Don Kinard ever got hit. I know for a fact he was always in the middle of the shit when it hit the fan, but somehow he made it through as far as I know. Man, you got hit on New York then again in September!! That had to have been tough. SEMPER FIDELIS, Carl & Jackie, Arlington, TX

Hello Dan: Do you have any idea if Vince Lorio is still living? Last I heard he was around the Lejeune NC area. Also, where did S/Sgt. Vince Sowers go? (Author's note: Sowers was a platoon Sergeant in Fox who later was commissioned). Do you have any contact with him? SEMPER FIDELIS, Carl & Jackie, Arlington, TX

Note from retired Navy Chief Hospitalman, former Doc Larry "Sandy" Sanderson (relates to wound received during Operation New York that Carl Kirksey also spoke about earlier).

Hey Dan: Thanks to the miracle of the internet, another old name from what I consider the proudest time of my life has popped up. I don't know how well you remember me, but I remember you well. And from the picture on your web site, it looks like the years have treated you pretty good.

I am the red headed third class corpsman who was assigned to Foxtrot Company, but somehow always managed to end up with Lieutenant Fellers in the 3rd Herd. Not that I am complaining, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. I caught a round through the chest on Operation New York when I went into the treeline with Casey, Lt Fellers, Smokey Williams and Casey's squad.

(Author's note: Corporal Henry Casebolt was killed; he later was awarded the Navy Cross. Lt. Fellers was shot in the stomach and his belt buckle helped save his life. He and I evaced together to the USS REPOSE. I know corpsmen aren't supposed to go in with the assault squad, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. After nine months in the hospital at Yokosuka, I got a set of orders to USNH Subic, married one of those Filipino gals for which I have such a weakness, started a family that would eventually include five children, and will celebrate my 35th wedding anniversary this year (in 2001).

I decided to stay in the Navy and retired in '85. While in the course of completing college after my retirement, I took a job as a land surveyor just to supplement my income. When I graduated in '89, I was hooked on surveying and have been doing it ever since. Hey, where else can you get to stumble around through swamps and marshes WITHOUT getting shot at. I have a couple of other names of some old F Co troops that you may be interested in.

Corporal Archie Williner and I talk on the phone once a year or so, but he is not on line. He lives up in Detroit and I can supply an address if you are interested. The last time we talked, he told me that he had been in contact with a PFC named Phillips who also lives in Detroit. I have attached a picture of Archie and me in a bar in Olongapo which may jar your memory of me (and him). I also attached a current picture of myself and my two sons after a deer hunt down here. I realize we are a pretty motley looking crew, but hey, we are southerners. I intend to keep track of your website and learn more about your political leanings. I must warn you that I am a little right of Jesse Helms and a little left of Carl Kirksey. Drop me a line if you get a chance. Semper Fi. Larry W. Sanderson HMC/USN/RET, Williamsburg, Va.

Notes from former Corporal Tom Miller, who served with Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter in 2/7.

(Author's note: Tom lost an eye during Operation Harvest Moon. Tom is now an artist. He sent me some of his art showing his memories of Harvest Moon on that awful day. He now lives in New Jersey):

Dear Dan: So, you're writing a book about Harvest Moon. God, when we get done, that operation will be more famous than Normandy.

I am in the process of creating a 100 plus piece art show about OHM (Operation Harvest Moon), and I have 9 of the 15 or 16 paintings done. Several but not enough drawings and some ceramics finished. The D-Day + 2 (10 Dec 65) is about Fox getting caught in the paddies. I have the cemetery in the background and Carl Kirksey shooting off his 3.5, and Capt. Page bleeding over the right side of the canvas. It's all right but my later pieces are better. This was the first piece I did for the show. Mike Shinkle (I believe engineers - he was in the cemetery area) gave me some pointers as I was with 2/7 jerking around in the boonies at that time. Besides the art show, I finished a full-length screen play about it and our time over there. Alex Lee (Utter's Battalion [\$6.95]) has a write-up about it in the book also. Let me know when it is going to come out and as long as it is within reason (some guy is selling his book for \$25.00 a pop which I don't feel is reasonable). But, I'll get one. I'll try to keep your address so when I hit upon a museum that will display the pieces. I'll contact you. Semper Fi, Tom Miller

Dan: I wouldn't forget about 3/3. More when I get the time. Carl and I are old friends as he is my "eyes" with his memory for 10 Dec 65 in the paddies. Mike helped somewhat and the finished piece I will attach to this short letter.

I'm just starting 9 Dec 65 with 3/3 getting ambushed after being followed for most of the morning by VC. I just finished the Rangers and 5th ARVN ambush painting on Wednesday and finished (needs some changes) on 13 Dec 65. I still have one more day left on 18 Dec 65 (one of 4 or 5 for that day) and I'll have 9 paintings done. Still 6 or 7 to do plus the rest. Well, I'll still buy your overpriced book, just for you. Semper Fi, Tom

Dan: It's fine by me (Author's note: I asked Tom him if I could put a couple of his painting in the book that showed Fox's landing -- he said okay. I never got around to it - which I still regret today - the pictures (art) are quite good. If he buys my book, I'll buy his paintings). They are copyrighted. It might be a nice transition into each day. One shows Chaplain O'Connor giving Last Rites (he ended up as Cardinal O'Connor of NYC). Don't know if you knew it or not but Colonel Utter passed away in January (2001). Semper Fi, Tom

Finally, I add this segment to the story. It is the chilling firsthand account of Captain Jim Page who was our Company Commanding Officer during Operation Harvest Moon. What follows is the account in his words of the day he was seriously wounded and when many of us thought he was dead (all day long!). Some of the things he writes about were unknown to me and other Marines until recently. We thank him for his insight.

BLOOD ON THE HARVEST MOON

Written by Captain (now retired Lt. Col.) Jim Page
Former Commanding Officer
Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines

"Land the landing force!" These were the words that blared through every compartment aboard the USS Valley Forge (LPH-8), on that eventful early morning of December 10, 1965. This announcement marked the beginning of an operation where the Second Battalion, First Marines (2/1) received its first real baptism of fire in the Vietnam War. Operation Harvest Moon is briefly covered in the USMC publication, U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965, The Landing and the Buildup. The official description of the battle is incomplete, misleading, and in at least one instance, completely false. It is time to set the record straight.

The Second Battalion, 1st Marines (hereinafter referred to as 2/1) deployed from Camp Pendleton, California in August 1965. After a week's training in Okinawa, we were assigned to amphibious ships of the 7th Fleet, as the SLF (Special Landing Force). In the three months as the SLF, 2/1 participated in four amphibious landings along the South Vietnamese coast. In these operations, the battalion had made very little contact with the VC and received only single digit casualties -- most of which were due to friendly fire.

We first heard of operation Harvest Moon on December 7, when 2/1 was briefed by some 3rd Marine Division staff officers aboard the Valley Forge. We were told this was a historic operation because it was the first time Marines would fight alongside South Vietnamese troops in a combined operation. Due to the Viet Cong and NVA (North Vietnamese Army) attacks on ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), units west of Da Nang, General Walt, the Marine Corps I Corps Commander of the five most northern provinces of South Vietnam, and his South Vietnamese counterpart, General Thi, decided on a joint operation to deal with this threat. General Walt created Task Force DELTA on December 5th, with BGEN Melvin D. Henderson, USMC, as the Commanding General. The Marine forces consisted of: Task Force DELATA headquarters - personnel drawn from various units of the 3rdMarDiv; 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines from Chu Lai; 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines from Da Nang; a provisional artillery battalion drawn from the 11th and 12th Marines; the SLF (2/1) as TF reserve and support units from 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines. BGen Hoan X. Lam, CG, 2nd ARVN Division contributed the 11th Ranger and 1/5 ARVN Battalions to the combined operation named Harvest Moon/Lien Ket-18. The concept of the this operation was to use the ARVN forces to draw the Viet Cong and NVA units into battle (FIX 'EM) and then bring the Marines in by helicopter to close the trap (KILL 'EM).

In the briefing, we were told that intelligence believed the enemy units were located. I specifically remember the Task Force S-2 (Intelligence Officer) pointing out Hill 407, as the likely location of the 45th VC Heavy Weapons Battalion. We were also given the radio frequencies to be used in Harvest Moon. The only other thing I remember from that December 7th briefing was the logistics instructions for a limited ammunition load. We were told to carry only two M-14 magazines per man. After the briefing officers departed the ship, a spirited discussion ensued between the S-3A (Assistant Operations Officer) and me about the designated ammunition load. Finally, I declared that Foxtrot was going to carry the maximum load of ammo, period. When Lt. Col. Hanifin (CO, 2/1) sided with his company commander, the discussion ended in my favor. The morning after our briefing on the *Valley Forge* the two ARVN battalions jumped off in the attack as planned. About 1330, when halfway to Que Son, the South Vietnamese units were ambushed by the 70th VC Battalion. A badly mauled Ranger battalion withdrew under protective Marine air support. The rangers lost a third of their unit in the battle and were replaced by the 1/6 ARVN battalion. The following morning (9 Dec), 1/5 ARVN and its regimental headquarters were overwhelmed by the 60th and 80th VC battalions. The Regimental Commander was killed and 1/5 ARVN's troops scattered away from the action.

The 1-6 ARVN battalion was also attacked but held its ground. At this point in the operation, General Henderson finally decided to commit the Marines to the battle. The ARVN forces had been battered, for 48 straight hours, by the 1st VC Regiment, before any Marine Corps ground assistance was sent to help them. At 1000, on the 9th of December, 2/7 was helo-lifted five miles west of the beleaguered 1/5 ARVN Battalion and established a blocking position. That afternoon, 3/3 was helo-lifted one and half miles to the south of the 1/5 ARVN Battalion. As 3/3 closed on the ARVN position they ran into about 200 VC; a firefight raged until darkness, when the enemy broke contact. The next day 3/3 fully linked up with 1/5 ARVN. On the 10th of December, General Henderson ordered 2/7 to attack eastward and 3/3 to push northwest in order squeeze the enemy between them. To complete the encirclement, the General planned on using 2/1 to block the enemy's southern escape route. Unfortunately, 2/1 was not given a warning order for their role to be carried out on the following day. About 1045, on December 10th, I was sitting on my bunk writing a letter when my thoughts were abruptly interrupted, as the 1 MC (the ship's main intercom circuit), blasted out the words: "Land the landing Force" -- the traditional Marine Corps call to arms. I immediately stowed my writing gear and raced up to the hanger deck.

Our packs, weapons, and ammunition had been staged on the hanger deck since December the 8th. Foxtrot was to be 2/1's lead company on this operation, so our gear was positioned in the forward section of the hanger bay. Upon reaching the hanger deck, an announcement on the 1 MC ordered me to report to the O-2 level (two decks above the flight deck) for a briefing. After running half the length of the hanger deck and up four levels of ladders, I was winded when I arrived at the battalion's shipboard CP. Crowded around a large map was the Battalion Commander and his staff. Col. Hanifin pointed to large circle on a map indicating 2/1's objective area. I marked the location on my map and listened to the shortest operation order I've ever heard. The Battalion Commander said: "Jim! Secure this LZ (landing zone.) The rest of the battalion will follow. Hurry! Your company is already loading." Even though I only received one paragraph of the standard five paragraph order, my mission was perfectly clear -- seize the landing zone and protect it for the rest of the battalion who would follow in subsequent waves. I ran down the four ladders and back up the crowded hanger deck to my staging position. Just before my helo-team was called away to flight deck, I was able to show our LZ on the map to Lt. Charlie George, who commanded the 1st Platoon (Author's note: The author's platoon).

The rapid deployment prevented any briefing of the other platoon commanders and executive officer (1stLt. Barry Beck). My helo-team consisted of the members of my tactical CP, who were: GySgt. Joe Thurmond (our company gunny); LCPL Len Senkowski (battalion radio operator); HM2 Van Brunnise (senior company corpsman), and the 81mm mortar forward observer and his radioman. Our helo-team was positioned between the First and Second Platoons. As we reached the flight deck, we were led to one of HMM-261 Squadron's noisy, vibrating helicopters. There were fifteen UH-34 "choppers" in the First Wave of the helicopter assault. The *Valley Forge* was still about 25 miles from shore and the LZ was another 25 miles inland. This meant that the Marine helicopter squadron would have a 100 mile round-trip for the succeeding waves of 2/1 Marines. The helicopters were quickly loaded with about 90 Foxtrot Marines and their fire support personnel -- in total: All of the 1st platoon and two-thirds of the 2nd platoon. At 1100, the First Wave lifted off the flight deck of the *Valley Forge*. We formed up into a formation our aviator friends called a "gaggle," and headed for the objective. After about fifteen minutes of flight, the helicopters landed at a friendly position in Que Son. With the noisy rotors swirling clouds of dust, the First Wave sat on the ground without any explanation to me -- the assault ground force commander.

Another fifteen minutes passed as Foxtrot's Marines pondered the single thought which was present every time we went on an operation -- "would this be a hot zone or a cake walk?" Finally, the pilot of my "chopper" told me that one of the UH-34's was having engine trouble and that we were going on without it. I didn't know who was in the helo-team but it did mean that there were six less Marines in the First Wave. The 14 Marine helicopters lifted off from Que Son and resumed their "gaggle" formation. There are two principle ways of conducting a helicopter assault into enemy territory. One tactic is to maximize the element of surprise, by flying at tree top level, and suddenly dropping down into the LZ. The other method is to "prep" (use of preparatory artillery and/or air strikes) the LZ in order to stun the enemy. That prior to and during the landing of the troop helicopters. On this operation, I didn't have a clue as to what assault tactics would be used. After about ten minutes in the air, the "choppers" began a large circling maneuver. It was then obvious that we didn't plan to use the surprise tactic. While the "gaggle" circled, I attempted to locate our LZ on the ground. Because our aircraft was tilted inward due to the turning movement, I was unable to recognize the LZ marked upon my map. However, I did notice fixed winged aircraft attacking someplace in the valley, with bombs and 20 mm machine gun fire.

I assumed that our LZ was being thoroughly "prepped" to protect our landing. After about three times around the track, our helicopter leveled off and began a rapid descent. About 200 feet off the ground our worst fears were confirmed when bullets started ripping through the thin-skinned helicopter. I vividly remember a stream of liquid, about the size of a quarter, streaming diagonally across the troop compartment of the aircraft. The "chopper" began making some radical gyrations. Expecting a crash, I hunched over in a protective position. Fortunately, the pilot regained control of his aircraft and we made a hard, but safe landing. The helo-team quickly exited and to our amazement our helicopter lifted off and "didi maued" (Vietnamese expression to leave quickly) away from the fire storm which had enveloped the entire LZ. Foxtrot deployed on line and began moving across the open rice paddy in order to seize the far side of the LZ. We were met by a hail of automatic weapons and mortar fire from a large hill, which loomed above us. We were quickly pinned down in a water covered rice field. The only available cover was behind little one-foot paddy dikes, which compartmentalized the growing area. It was about noon and I knew that it would take at least an hour for the "choppers" to fly back to the *Valley Forge* and return with the Second Wave. Quickly, I began the process of formulating an estimate of the situation. The first concern was where were we?

Looking at the map and the hill front of us, I discovered that we had not landed at the place circled on my map. Crouching behind the paddy dike, I carefully oriented the map, my compass and the surrounding terrain. The solution shocked me so much I didn't believe the findings. I placed my rifle and helmet on the ground and crawled six feet away to negate any magnetic effects on the compass. The second analysis confirmed the first -- we had landed right under the guns of the 45th VC Heavy Weapons Battalion. The 45th was located exactly where Task Force Delta's Intelligence Officer had said it was -- on Hill 407. This unit's main armament was mortars and 12.7 mm heavy machine-guns. I wondered, "How could such a blunder have occurred?" The answer to that question would not be clear until several years later when I had an opportunity to talk to other Marines, such as, my 1st platoon commander, 2nd platoon sergeant; some of the HMM-61 pilots; members of 2/7 and 3/3 battalions; and those who were still on the *Valley Forge* when the first wave landed. It is still a mystery as to why Foxtrot Company did not land in the zone that was designated in the *Valley Forge* briefing. But the facts are that I was briefed on one zone, a second zone was "prepped" and Foxtrot was landed in third. I did learn why Hill 407 was not "prepped." One of the HMM-261 pilots told me that Colonel Michael R. Yunck, TF Delta's Tactical Airborne Control Officer, didn't want to attack the civilians.

He said Yunck had observed them in the hamlet of Cam Lo, located at the foot of Hill 407. Marines from 2/1 paid dearly for the good colonel's humanitarianism. Colonel Yunck, prior to departing the area with a serious leg wound (which later had to be amputated), closed our landing zone. It was several hours before we realized that the rest of 2/1 was not coming to our LZ, or one even close by. When the first wave of "choppers" returned to the *Valley Forge* with the frightful details of the situation at Hill 407, an angry confrontation occurred. Lt. Col. Hanifin was very upset over the closing of the LZ and not opening another near Fox Company's position. His anger was directed at the Marine Colonel who commanded the SLF, for not allowing him to immediately come to the aid of his beleaguered company. The problem was not with the SLF Commander because he was really only a figurehead in the operation. The blame for not quickly selecting a new LZ belongs to the same people who landed Foxtrot at the base of Hill 407 and failed to come to the aid of the South Vietnamese units - the CG 1 and the Task Force Delta staff. Having located our actual position on the ground, my next consideration was to get some fire support on the enemy. After attempting to locate our Forward Air Controller and his communicators, we discovered it was their helo-team on the "chopper" that was forced to land at Que Son.

I knew it was useless to attempt to contact Lt. Col. Hanifin because he was still 50 miles away on the *Valley Forge* and our PRC-10 radio's range was limited to ten miles, under the best of conditions. Ditto for the radio with the 81 mm mortar Forward Observer, whose guns were still aboard ship. Our next thought was to attempt to make contact with other Marine Corps units -- Task Force Delta, 3/3, 2/7 or one of the artillery batteries. Later, I learned that Marine Corps artillery was in range of our position on that fateful day. LCpl. Senkowski tried all the frequencies given to us at the briefing on December 7th -- but nobody answered. As our radioman began the expediency of working on both sides of the assigned frequencies, I wondered what else could go wrong? Fact - we were given one set of frequencies, but the "friendlies" were using another set. Exasperated when it was apparent that we couldn't get any help, I told Gunny Thurmond: "The name of this operation should be SNAFU" -- or barnyard words to that affect. *HARVEST MOON* was a classic example of Murphy's Law. From the beginning what could go wrong, usually did go wrong. After realizing that we were cut-off from the "good guys," my attention focused on how to make the best of a sticky situation. The Foxtrot troopers fought back courageously against a well concealed enemy dug in on the dominate high ground above them. There is no way to determine how many casualties we inflicted on the VC that day.

But, I observed many instances of well-aimed fire into enemy positions. One particular incident stands out in my memory. A Marine (later to be determined to have been LCpl Carl "Rocketman" Kirksey) in 2nd platoon, raised up, aimed his 3.5" rocket launcher at a 90 degree angle, and fired at a target on Hill 407. In a fantastic piece of marksmanship, with a weapon designed to kill tanks at close range, the young gunner silenced an enemy machine gun. The initial firefight, between the combatants, lasted about five minutes and then, both sides slacked off to conserve ammunition -- thank goodness, I didn't follow the Task Force orders to carry only two magazines per man on this operation. We continued to receive sporadic heavy machine gun and mortar fire from Hill 407. As long as we stayed down, the enemy machine guns were not very effective. But, their mortars were still inflicting casualties upon the company. The best way to reduce the effects of mortar fire is troop dispersal. The Second Platoon had good dispersion but the First Platoon, on my left flank, seemed to be too close together. I couldn't raise Lt. George on the radio - an enemy bullet had hit him in the arm and damaged the radio he was holding. Using hand and arm signals, I tried to order the First Platoon to spread out -- that didn't work either. Thoroughly frustrated by all that had happened thus far, I told Gunny Thurmond I was going over to see Charlie George.

If I had chosen to crawl behind the paddy dike to the First Platoon position, I might have avoided my first Purple Heart medal. However, I impulsively decided to go by leaps and bounds. I jumped up and began running in a low crouch, zig-zagging towards the First Platoon. My first leap was too long or maybe I zigged when I should have zagged, because suddenly my body was flipped upside down. I felt the .50 caliber bullet rip clear through my chest. My first thoughts were: "Jim, you just bought the farm! And, it's a good thing you bought that extra life insurance for the wife and kids before you left the states."

Surprisingly, I experienced very little pain and as my head began to clear, I noticed "Doc" Van Brunnisse crawling towards me. "Doc" was wearing a huge black, rubberized pack, about 3 times as large as a Marine haversack. That monstrous pack must have looked like a bulls-eye to the VC gunners because a flurry of fire was aimed in his direction -- two bullets hit the "Doc's" pack but he kept crawling until he reached me. As Van Brunnisse cut through the 782 gear to treat my wound, he asked me: "Captain! Can you move your legs?" To my relief, I was able to move my legs. The bullet had missed my spinal cord by only an eighth of an inch. As "Doc" was applying a compress bandage to seal the sucking chest wound, we got another thrill. A mortar round plopped down about five feet from us, in the flooded paddy. Poor Van Brunnisse!

He was a pale-skinned Dutchman and at the sight of that mortar round he almost became transparent. Having spent my first two years in the Marine Corps as an 81mm Mortar Platoon Commander, I assured "Doc" that the mortar shell wouldn't go off if we didn't disturb it. The projectile fins looked very much like the American WW II ammo that produced so many duds, when I was in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Being embarrassed about foolishly allowing myself to get wounded, I was anxious to crawl back to my CP. Doc told me that any movement with a chest wound like mine was very dangerous. We discussed the merits of my return to the CP until Van Brunisse sent me into dreamland with a morphine shot. Prior to taking a nap, I placed my head, face down, inside an upturned helmet liner. I was afraid that I might drown in the rice paddy, if I passed out. This had actually happened to Ira Hayes, one of the flag raisers on Iwo Jima. Hayes had drowned in just two inches of water in the Gila river, after a big night on the town. For the next hour, I serenely floated upon cloud nine. I seemed to be more like a spectator sitting in the bleachers rather than a player on the field. I was conscious most of the time but just didn't give a tinkers damn. After awhile, the drug wore off and the pain snapped me back to the real world again. The Gunny sent Senkowski over periodically during the afternoon, to keep me abreast of the situation.

When a unit loses its radio communication, friendly units become too cautious in delivering supporting fire. This can be just as dangerous to the "grunts" as being attacked with over zealous friendly fire. Aircraft constantly circled our position during the first two hours in the zone. The pilots refused to attack because we lacked radio communication with them. Their inaction was puzzling because it was a cloudless day with both friendly and enemy positions clearly visible. While in a happy state, I noticed a small piper cub aircraft drop something in front of our position. It was an Air Force airborne controller aircraft. The Gunny sent one of the troops out to receive the missile. A short time later Gunny sent Senkowski over with a message that had been wrapped around a wrench. The contents of the message was simple: "Enemy troops dug in on hill to your southwest." Incredible! After muttering a few expletives, I thought: "Why didn't that 'fly boy' do his job and call in some air strikes on Hill 407?" If our situation had not been so desperate, I might have died laughing. As bizarre as that incident was, I still don't find it humorous. I believe that if we had received the close air support when we landed, there would be fewer names today on that wall in Washington, D.C. Sometimes, when nothing goes as planned, Murphy's Law works in your behalf -- such was the case in *Harvest Moon*.

About 1400, by a strange twist of fate, a lone HU-34 appeared out of nowhere and quickly discharged its helo-team at our position. Everybody was surprised -- the VC fired very few rounds as the aircraft escaped over the horizon. To our amazement, we discovered that the "chopper" had just deposited our FAC team. How could this have happened? This was the aircraft we lost to engine trouble at Que Son. It had been repaired but no one told the pilot that our zone had been closed. This was strange because the TF Delta CP was also located at Que Son. It took only a few minutes for the FAC to contact the circling, close support aircraft. Now it was the "good guys" turn to hand out the punishment. For the next couple of hours, Hill 407 was pounded continuously by fighter-bombers with napalm, bombs and 20 mm machine gun fire. With the enemy hunkered down, Foxtrot received a reprieve from their nightmare in hell, but the price was high -- over 40% casualties for the First Wave. They drew the most attention from the VC gunners. A high proportion of those killed and wounded were officers, SNCOs, NCOs and crew served weapons personnel.

About 1430, after a great deal of procrastination, Task Force Delta finally issued orders to reinforce Foxtrot company, by first ordering 2/7 to send their Echo company to our aid, and then by designating an alternate LZ for the remainder of 2/1.

Echo company was attacked by a large group of VC en route to our position. Despite heavy casualties, E/2/7 pushed through the VC and arrived about 1700 to give Foxtrot covering fire. The new 2/1 LZ was about five kilometers from our position and it took them several hours to cover the difficult terrain between us. The Battalion commander arrived at our position, with the rest of 2/1 (minus E and H companies,) shortly after E/2/7. That night it was a bloody Harvest Moon that rose over 20 dead and 80 wounded Marines, at Hill 407's killing fields. Even the official published accounts of this operation couldn't get it right (Author's note: This is the part of the story many of us also believed to have been true at the time that Page now sets the record straight):

"Marine Corps history contains a fantastic story that I was pronounced dead on the battlefield and that it was only the following morning that a corpsman discovered I had a faint heart beat. The tale of my dramatic resurrection sounds great, but isn't true. Prompt medical attention, by HM2 Van Brunisse, kept me alive that afternoon and Lt. Tony Colby's diligent care brought me through that long, rainy night. As proof that I was not left for dead in *HARVEST MOON*, here is an excerpt of Dr. Colby's description of that night: "I never thought you would pull through but you did! Every time I went to check on you, I expected to find the worst."

"But you gutsed it through in Marine Corps tradition."

The next morning, our casualties were medically evacuated to Que Son for processing and treatment. The first three days of Harvest Moon were a complete disaster and when such events occur in the Marine Corps -- the heads usually roll. During the evening hours of the December 10th, General Walt relieved Brig. Gen. Henderson and selected Brig. Gen. Jonas M. Platt to command Task Force Delta. In another critical move, Colonel Peatross loaned his experienced 7th Marines staff to General Platt. The new Task Force commander took positive control of the operation and the friendly situation improved immediately. The revitalized Task Force Delta Headquarters stopped the strange troop maneuvering and used the new tactics against the Viet Cong. B-52's plastered the Phouc Valley with 500 pound bombs which was followed by Marines sweeping the area behind the air attack. On December 11th, Echo and Hotel Companies rejoined the battalion and for the next week as 2/1's Marines slogged through the Monsoon drenched countryside. The majority of 2/1 casualties, after Hill 407, were a due to the operating in the flooded valleys near Que Son. This new affliction was called "immersion foot" and it caused the evacuation of 54 of the Task Forces Marines -- mostly from 2/1. The last major action of the operation occurred on the 18th when 2/7 was ambushed at the village of Ky Phu -- both slugged it out with heavy casualties.

This misadventure officially ended on the 20th of December. Shortly after the completion of Operation Harvest Moon, General Henderson was the subject of two Boards of Inquiry. The first inquiry was conducted by the 3rd Marine Air Wing Commander, Maj. Gen Keith B. McCutcheon, in Vietnam. A second inquiry was ordered by Lt. Gen. Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific. While I was an outpatient at Tripler Hospital in Hawaii, Colonel Robert H. Barrow (who later became the 27th Commandant of the Marine Corps) interviewed me for over an hour on the circumstances of Harvest Moon. After the second Board of Inquiry, General Henderson was retired from active duty. I thought I was psychologically prepared to deal with combat casualties. However, the deaths to the Foxtrot troopers in Harvest Moon. I questioned my actions and those of the senior Marine commanders who controlled that operation. I was so bitter, that I rejoiced when I read of Colonel Yunck's leg amputation and General Henderson's forced retirement. I finally had to resort to counseling to get myself straightened out. The leadership of General Henderson and his staff were the main culprits in the Harvest Moon tragedy, but it wasn't totally their fault. You couldn't find a nicer gentleman than General Henderson - I still have the condolence letter he sent my wife a week after I was wounded.

I can remember the general when he served as a regimental commander (8th Marines, I think) in Camp Lejeune. His command was always first in blood drives, community chest donations, athletic events, etc. General Henderson's command, in Camp Lejeune, had great morale because the Marines knew he cared for them. His problem was that he had been a Marine engineer until getting the infantry regiment. To be blunt, General Henderson was great at public relations, but he lacked the experience and temperament of a warrior. The Task Force Delta staff was hurriedly assembled from various units of the 3rd Marine Division. This staff was still learning the names of its members, when they were thrust into a complex and combined operation. I believe that Task Force Delta could have overcome their significant obstacles, if the Commanding General had been a warrior, or that General Henderson had been dealt an experienced staff, such as the 7th Marines. Colonel Peatross and the 7th Marines staff had performed brilliantly just a few months before in Operation Starlight. One major distinction of the U.S. Marine Corps is the development of a well-coordinated air-ground tactical doctrine. The hallowed Marine Corps tradition, of the air-ground task force, failed miserably in Harvest Moon. The helicopter assault and close air support were both poorly planned and executed. The overall concept of the Operation Harvest Moon was tactically sound.

The South Vietnamese carried out their assigned task of finding and fixing the enemy. But, the complete break down of the Marine Corps command and control functions prevented the Marine-ARVN combined force from capitalizing on a promising battlefield opportunity. The shock of the mistakes made by Task Force Delta had an impact on General Walt and his senior air and ground commanders. Operation Harvest Moon became the model of how to not conduct a helicopter assault. All of this happened in the month of December 1965. The 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines would serve six more years in Vietnam and that would involve thousands of combat actions and just as many thousand combat casualties in that tropical land of nightmares.

Author's Final Thoughts

Jim Page's story fills in many missing blanks that I could not even comprehend as blanks before. We are indebted to him for his insights. Many of us have tried hard to find but were unable to locate our former friends and fellow Marines Paul McGee, Edwin Lobatto, Don Kinard, Frank Pruitt, or others. Jim Page reminded me of Navy Corpsman "Doc" VanBrunisse and Doctor Colby (a real MD) who treated him - I had totally forgotten about them. I don't know where they are today. But, they are heroes for saving Jim Page's life. They are all here in this book, and mentioned throughout because they were central characters in so many of our lives and noted in the words of those closer who remember them with finer detail. I hope all of them are still living and doing well, especially Frank Pruitt. I hope they are enjoying life as much as I am. Although we couldn't locate them, doesn't mean they are forgotten - let's just say they are TDY (on Temporary Duty) temporary misplaced or not available for phone calls! I pray they all are well and enjoying life all these past decades. We need to remember the past and our friends, but we need not dwell there. There is still much to be done, because as many before me has said, "Freedom is not free." That holds more truth now as we enter this unsure and insecure new Century!

Few men and women have earned the right that allows others to live under the blanket of freedom or even say that phrase. We have tasted the bitter agony of war with all its hardships. That experience has hardened us and has made us sensitive to talk about committing our men and women to combat without a good reason. "No more Vietnams is a true statement." It seems that the anti-war crowd had it right all along! I regret having to say this after all these years, but it's true nonetheless! We who served in war in Vietnam earned our place in history, and in a sense, perhaps a small sense, we have earned the right to preach against war that art and science that we practiced so long ago. Time surely goes by and memories surely fade over time, but the agony of war lingers forever. We did our best; we must ever forget that. Many like me believed in the cause and to a certain extent, I still think that what we set out to do was the right thing to do. The outcome is now part of history. I ask all my comrades to enjoy the freedom we fought hard to preserve. We surely have earned the right to live free. We fought far away from home so that others could live free. Enjoy life with all it offers. Savor it with every breath. We earned our place in history. Don't let anyone tell you differently. "Welcome home" are two words most of us never heard from a great nation! I'm proud to have served, but I'm more proud to have served with you and our buddies who now rest in peace! God Bless America!

The Author

Danny M. Francis was born in the small rural town of Royalton, Illinois on October 11, 1941. He grew up in nearby Du Quoin, Illinois, where after graduating from high school in June 1959, he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. He entered active duty on July 2, 1959, and began his training in San Diego, California. He remained on active duty, and after completing twenty years of honorable active service retired as a First Lieutenant on August 1, 1979.

His Marine Corps service included duty all over the world on land, at sea and two full tours of combat duty in Vietnam where as a Staff Sergeant, he earned a direct commission to Second Lieutenant in October 1968 (just before starting his second tour of duty). He was wounded three times in combat and earned more than a dozen personal and unit citations for valor in combat.

Dan lives in Upstate New York (Watertown, NY) after he retired (again) – this time as a DOD-Army civilian in Syracuse, NY in December 2006.

(Updated after the book was published and now is out of stock).

AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

"If you think *Last Ride Home* is just another war book, you probably think America's ten-year agony in Vietnam was just another war. This story will touch every American who reads it. It's poignant, well-written, and conveys the feel of sweat, fear, and frustration that is common to all wars. Francis has written an uncommon work that deserves attention. This is a story that needs to be told now, as our nation undergoes yet another trial by fire."

**— Captain Dale Dye, USMC (Ret.), Author, Actor, and
Military Advisor to the Entertainment Industry**