

A VILLAGE OF TRADGEDY

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June 1998:

In two months I will be celebrating my fifty first birthday. Never expected to get this far. Never in my wildest dreams. Caught up with my wild horse this year. Stang. A '91 Mustang convertible . . . 5.0. She is my freedom. She has become my purpose. I take her out on old country roads. We ride fast and hard. I know she is just a machine and a way to escape. And we do. I put the spurs to her. Hard! Like to hear her pur-r-r and growl. Like to live on the edge sometimes. I like to go fast. Like to define territory. And she'll do it for me. Sometimes, I think I'm doing it for her. Blow the carbon out of her finely tuned engine.

Rock-n-roll baby! And she does. Why? Because I like it on the edge! Never got off it. Found ways to incorporate it into civilian life - fast cars and motorcycles, skydiving and SCUBA diving. The very thing that drives Stang and me to find peace at a hundred miles an hour down some old country road - keeps me alive. A survival instinct! An adrenaline high!! Love signs that mark a curve at say 30 mph. If I can't scoot through them at double that - then . . . Well, I'm still here.

Some have tried to keep up with us. In fact I make it a point to weed out the weak of heart, by taking them into my world (at their invitation of course) - at mach speed. When I'm by myself with Stang - it's one thing. I would never expect anyone to be able to understand us or go through those kind of 'G' forces. Too CRAZY. Maybe insane. Most of the time I'll loose them real quick, while I'm 'taking it easy'.

White Feather: Pretty young woman (of the same tribe even - Cherokee) - best of intentions. Wanted to show me her world of faith and destiny . . . Swore to me she could ride ANY horse into the ground! Figured she would understand my world of FATE and destiny . . .

About half way through Mine's Road, a beautiful road that winds through the coastal foothills, and at times a thousand feet off the canyon floor. And we (me and Stang) had decided to back off from our give 'em hell routine . . . She leans over and yells to me through the roar of Stang's engine:

"Careful, dear. Remember - you're carrying precious cargo here!"

Looked at myself in the rearview mirror and ran my fingers through my hair. Said:

"You're right!" (She didn't last the week. Don't figure.)

One of my favorite riding companions is my friend Julia. She loves to take the wheel and put the spurs to Stang. She can pump my adrenaline to the max. Loves old country

roads and old country bars where you can still smoke and play fifty cent pool. (A rarity in California these days.) Loves real people. Fits in - no matter where we go. Lives life. Defines territory in her own way - and at her own pace.

She fascinates me . . .

I just recently figured out why. I've probably known all along, but never tried to define it until now. She is young and vibrant . . . And, she is half Vietnamese. A very intelligent girl (I.Q. of one hundred and forty). Her dad was a Navy Commander - her mother a Siagon embassy worker during the war.

When I look at her I briefly have a flashback of long ago. She is my little girl. Someone that once touched my life for a brief moment - and that moment has now lasted thirty-two years.

Oh, I've seen her time and time again over the years. I have even seen her in the faces of my daughters as they were growing up. They would sometimes catch me staring at them.

"Why do you look so sad daddy?", They'd say.

But, I could never tell them why. How could I?

I would see her often in 1975 when Vietnamese boat people, encamped on Camp Pendleton would come into San Clemente, the closest town, to shop at the local stores.

Once, my wife at the time, after catching me staring at a little Vietnamese girl in the Safeway store - was able to prod the story from me.

I regretted telling her the story after seeing the horror of it in her eyes. I have kept it to myself ever since then.

Until now.

Why now? Is it because I'm nearing an upcoming reunion of men that were there. And, that while there is much gaiety and laughter - so too a degree of sadness? A time in my life, every year, for reflection of the past. But, mostly a happy time among those that I trust and love. That, might understand me for who I am?

Don't know. But now - I have an overwhelming desire to write about it.

Sometimes I think she came back into my life, after all of these years, to let me know that everything is all right. Has no idea what I'm talking about, nor does she need to know. We have these long in depth talks about the world in general, while doing time at warp speed. Punching holes through some old lonely country road.

Julia is a straight shooter. Honest and to the point. Lets me know where she is coming from. Always. But would probably have a hard time grasping this story.

Like me - she feels comfortable with reckless. With living on the edge. Will stop and get a six pack of beer and drink it as we drive along some old road - turning it into a blur. Endangering no one but ourselves - or maybe an unfortunate cow or deer.

Defying rules and regulations - she'll toss her long glossy black hair into the wind and say 'Fuck it!' And mean it. Her life hasn't always been easy either.

She wasn't even born when this story takes place.

None-the-less she is a part of it. Even my own daughter, Lacey, could sense a connection. A parallel of some undefined dimension involving the past.

Life has been that way with me. Can't figure it. Just go along for the ride . . . Content, sometimes, with letting another take the wheel. Content with just being alive - and yet guilty of the privilege.

Late August 1966

Started out as point once again. The novelty of this position had long since worn off. The responsibility of it was still very real. It was a company size operation (problem).

They had dropped us off at Tam Ky. By truck this time. No engine-less helicopters - which was just fine with me. Started off real slow. Once again organizing into squad, platoon and company infrastructures. Positioning on some grid of some map - and moving it out. Like some sort of wind-up toy - the momentum picking up as the wheels touch the ground.

We had spent the last couple of weeks at Chu Lai building defensive bunkers along the air strip. Chu Lai was a new innovation of the war. A land base. A go between of ground assault, air support and the carriers. A statement to the enemy. Here we are! We're not just going to give you the impression that we fly off into the South China Sea - and disappear after every conflict.

I suppose this was going on all over this small country at this time. I'd seen Dong Ha after being extracted from the 'Hill'. Remember downed aircraft sprawled off to one side of the airstrip. We were letting the enemy know in our own subtle way that the big stick was here. These were statements of power.

'I Corps' was just an area on a map from Cam Ran Bay to the DMZ, but someone would have to define it. Mark this area and set it's boundaries. We had become the surveyors.

The Marine Corps, had as far back as 1962, initiated this measure. Outlining it's purpose and procedure if drawn into this conflict. Visionary - protective.

General Charles Krulack Sr. In his book, 'First To Fight', Talks about going to Vietnam to analyze the situation and report to the Commandant as to how we should best handle it.

There were two areas he outlined in particular:

Mine Hyphong harbor. North Vietnam having little in the way of industrial capabilities in the manufacture of heavy guns and ammunitions, and relying on this support from other countries (particularly the USSR) - would be shut off from a protruded ground war. (And this long before President Nixon initiated the action in 1968 in forcing the Paris peace talks.)

And the pacification of the South Vietnamese lowlands, where the majority of the population existed. This would be done in several ways: By providing protection and medical help to the populace. And by providing physical help while working within this

populace - helping with rice harvests, community projects, and so on. By this - gaining their confidence and support. Leading by example.

He suggested both of these initiatives be implemented simultaneously.

General Krulak had some very good ideas. But they were of no use. Once again the Army took control of this war as in the past two, and dictated procedure.

Get your bad-ass Marines out in the field and into the highlands where they belong - make a statement to the enemy and give them something to think about. Give them something to worry about.

So we did. And once again died for an Army general. (In this case Westmoreland.)

'I Corps' was to become 'our' territory. And, we would define it. It was full of scary little nooks and crannies. Places like 'Helicopter valley', 'Elephant Valley', Kha San . . . Kon Tien to name a few. These places would become very well defined. In blood. Ours . . . and the enemies. And those too, that unfortunately got caught up in this 'defining' process - the Australians, and the ROK (Republic of South Korea) Marines, and others.

But this was 1966. We were still getting to know the grid. We were still in an offensive mode. The aggressors. The 'Bad Boys' were back in town. Lima 3/5 was here! Lets kick some ass!

{ You can see it on our smile'n faces when you look at the original company picture - before going into 'Indian Country'. In 1966 we were going to finish this war. We may have been a little scared, even nervous - but confident. We had a legacy to protect. And a history of combat rarely paralleled by any other outfit in the Marine Corps. A history initiated by Marines fighting in Belleau Wood and the Argonne Forest. When in Dress we proudly wore our 'Pogy Ropes' (The French Fourrageres awarded the Fifth and Sixth Regiments.) Yup, we'd win this one. No problem! Maybe the French couldn't get it together in 1954. And maybe the Army was bogged down in the South. But, weez Marines. }

Let's still try to apply some of our original doctrine . . . Protect the villagers. Give them medical aid and help whenever possible - post guard when they had to get their rice harvest in. Show them that we could also be good boys.

We had spent a lot of time on the USS Renville (a troop ship) on the way over learning Vietnamese customs and to some degree the language.

We had also learned a great deal about the Viet Cong. As far back as ITR (Infantry Training Regiment) we had learned about their tricks and cunning and demoniac control over the populace. We were ready for these boys . . . We would help the Vietnamese people and gain their confidence, and at the same time defeat the communist cadre. You bet.

This was our sixth company sized operation. It was my fifth having missed Operation Colorado due to situations beyond my control. (A gunshot wound to the head and malaria.) And as it would turn out - it was to be my last. It was originally called Operation El Paso (And, like Deckhouse II/Hastings would evolve into Operation Colorado - where it is recorded), and once again was an offensive package involving all

of the companies of the Third battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division. It would last several weeks. And, accomplish nothing.

Many things took place during this operation. Not one of them of any importance overall in this war. And, after all of these years may be a little out of sequence. But, together they would come to exemplify the 'typical' small unit action of this era.

I was lucky. I had been released back to active duty and sent back to my outfit - Lima Company 3/5. Lucky, because this wasn't always to be the case. If you were a peon (a Marine of the lowly ranks) you could be sent just about anywhere the Corps thought you might be needed. The thought of being sent home had never even occurred to me. Home was Lima Company and she needed every man she could get.

A Navy launch had plucked me from The USS Repose a hospital ship that had become my home for about three weeks. It had deposited me in Da Nang and from there I had made my way to the airstrip and caught a C130 cargo plane to Chu Lai. I had no idea what part of Vietnam I was in, and no idea as to which way to go to find Lima Company.

I wandered around for awhile checking the place out. You could tell Chu Lai was a brand new base. It had steel-plate runways stretching out all over the sand, and new tent buildings clustered here and there. You could smell the fresh new canvas in the sweltering heat. I found a clerk at a tent marked 'receiving' who took my orders and made a phone call with a PRC 25. Hadn't seen one of those before. Told me to wait, someone would be by to pick me up and take me to my unit.

It was hot out! It just always seemed to be hot in Vietnam. And I wasn't used to it. I had a light-duty chit for a week from the doctor. I hoped I would be in better shape by then. I was still weak from malaria.

It wasn't long before I heard a familiar voice. It was corporal Troy who had been sent to get me. Guess he'd been demoted to the company driver while recovering from his close call. We shook hands and I piled into a Mighty-Mite (jeep) which he had parked outside. It wasn't a very long ride to the company area - a bunch of tent buildings scattered amongst some pine trees to the north of the runway. I checked into the Company office.

Sergeant George Semrau was there to greet me and take my orders. I liked the sergeant. He always seemed to be smiling and in doing so exposed a gap in his front teeth that reminded me of the British actor Terry Thomas. Told me where to pickup my gear at supply and where our platoon area was - several squad size tents in the sand and pines. He said we had moved from the ship and this was to be our rear area for awhile. The others hadn't even been here yet - having to go from operation Hastings into Colorado. I asked him if I could join them out in the field - anxious to get back into it. Said there was no transportation available and besides I had a light duty chit.

Once I was situated in my tent I sat down on a cot and opened my sea bag. I retrieved a small reel-to-reel tape recorder that I had carefully stashed away, and started to record a tape to my parents. I had bought this recorder in Okinawa at the urging of my dad who was into that sort of thing and felt it might be easier then writing letters all the time. (He was right - but I did both.) I was glad to have the tape recorder because I would play their tapes to me over and over again listening to the voices from home. It became increasingly lonely in that tent. There was hardly anybody in the company area.

{My mother, before she passed away some years ago had saved the tapes I had sent home from Okinawa, the Philippines and Vietnam. On them are the voices from the past that had become my close friends. I re-recorded them onto three two-hour cassettes, filling in gaps where we couldn't talk about where we were or what we were doing. I sometimes refer to these when writing about my experiences in the war.}

After a couple of days the rest of the company straggled in from Operation Colorado looking tired and beat. And, minus a couple more of the original gang. PFC John Hawkins and SGT Gerald Perry had been killed while guarding a downed helicopter.

We were put to work building bunkers around the perimeter of the Chu Lai airstrip. Although it was hot dirty work we were rotated every so often to the rear for hot chow and sometimes a jog down to the beach. Aside from frolicking in the surf of the China Sea, we would trade C rations to the fishermen there for the local crabs that when boiled up in a steel helmet were a tasty break from our usual diet.

Sometimes it would be a tank that was sent out to relieve us off bunker duty and a bunch of us would pile on and ride it back through the sand dunes. It was kind of a novelty. But most of the time we would straggle back one-by-one along a road that was etched into the sand at the north end of the landing strip.

On one such walk back to the rear I was startled to come across Captain Tatum and Lieutenant Anderson walking in my direction.

"Good morning sirs!", I belted out while passing them.

Got maybe six paces further down the road.

"DON'T YOU BELIEVE IN SALUTING OFFICERS, HARRIS?!", Barked the Captain, catching me completely off guard.

"SIR! I - I uh thought we weren't supposed to salute while in the field. Sir!", I stammered.

"NEGATIVE MARINE! This is a rear area. You WILL salute all officers. Is that understood?!"

"SIR! YES SIR!"

And I had no sooner got that out of the hole beneath my nose when a shot rang out sending the three of us into the sand face first. A couple of minutes went by as we searched all around for the sniper.

"Uh, belay that last command Harris." Said the Captain in a whisper.

"SIR! YES SIR!"

"You needn't say sir either!", said Andy - whispering loudly.

Several more minutes ticked away without any more shots being fired. I knew the sniper was long gone.

Finally, breaking the silence and not knowing quite what to say I whispered, "Permission to carry-on Captain?"

"Granted!", he said while getting up. "You'd better move-it quickly Harris!"

"Aye, Aye - gentlemen. By your leave." I said while moving out at a jog. Not even daring to turn around and look their way - for fear of them seeing the huge smile that had permeated my face.

The shot was fired by a character we nicknamed Chu Lai Charlie, and like clock work he'd fire off a shot in the morning and one in the late afternoon usually at a jet or chopper. We'd send out patrol after patrol and never could find him.

MAIL CALL!

The most memorable mail call in my entire life happened while at Chu Lai. Didn't matter who you were or where you were at everybody in a war zone liked mail call. But this one stood out more than the others. I hadn't received mail in several weeks since leaving the Repose. Took awhile for them to track me down. Don't know who 'them' was, but I had to wonder that with all of the moving around we did that any mail would find us at all. I don't think anything was anticipated nor appreciated as much by so many, as mail call. Except maybe a ticket home.

One of the things that made it so memorable is that a friend of mine who had gone into the Corps with me on the Buddy Plan - had managed to find me. That by it's self was amazing enough as you just couldn't traipse around doing or going wherever you liked.

But Dick McClean had managed to not only locate me, but then had managed to talk his sergeant into letting him go. Dick was in a CAG unit. CAG stood for Combined Action Group and was in this case several Marines combined with some Popular Forces (South Vietnamese Army) guarding and participating with the local inhabitants on some island off the coast. Doing exactly what the Marine Corps had initially wanted to do with the whole country.

Dick had convinced this sergeant that since they were in short supply of everything especially soap, and since this new base Chu Lai probably had everything they needed - that he should be the one to hazard the trip and stalk up. The sergeant agreed and seeing right through Dick decided to go along.

As it turned out he had a buddy in the first platoon. They spent most of the day with us in between getting the necessary supplies over at the air wing side of the landing strip.

Just before mail call was announced one of our guys was cleaning his .45 cal. automatic. He'd forgot to check the chamber and it discharged - sending all of us into the ground. Dick was beginning to think he was safer back on his island - then with us.

I'd been finishing that tape recording, I'd mentioned earlier - when he walked into the tent surprising me. Hadn't seen him since boot camp. He was helping me finish it as his parents didn't live too far from mine. Since he hardly ever was able to get mail let alone get mail off this island - figured the tape would be much appreciated. (Found out later it was.)

We stopped the tape briefly when the mail call was announced. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw me struggle back into the tent with several large 'care' packages and a couple dozen letters. You could see a pang of jealousy on his face - so I let him participate in this ritual which up to now I had always kept private.

The tapes were different. I was always having difficulty filling the two sides of a thirty minute tape, and would often ask my friends to chip in and say something to my parents or sisters. (Guess who got the most attention?)

Believe-it-or-not I was still kind of quiet in those days - didn't say anymore than I had to. Guys like Bob Stewart for instance had no problem rambling on.

I knew the care packages would be full of goodies. So I opened one of them first so we could munch on cookies and beef jerky, and pour the latest Cool-Aid flavors into our canteens - while reading the various letters and news articles that they contained.

My mother had a knack at figuring out what I craved and what I needed and would take great pains at getting me things that were impossible to get in a war zone. She'd even dye skivies (under ware), and socks olive green and pack them in and around the other things so that they'd get to me intact. Having been in a war zone herself as a nurse in WWII - I guess she just knew (without me ever having to ask her) what I needed.

I read the family stuff first. Letters from mom and now and then one from my dad. But it wasn't until I read the letters from my sisters that I began to get a clear picture of how my getting wounded up on the hill in Hastings had so adversely effected the family as a whole.

Seems it was Marine Corps procedure of the time to have an officer hand deliver a Western Union telegram from the Defense Department if someone were wounded or killed in action. (I wasn't even aware of this at the time.)

But in any case, my mother having been a WWII veteran in an era where an officer was sent out only when someone was killed, at seeing an official Marine Corps car pull up and not only one officer but two (the other being a Navy Chaplain) get out and come towards the door - sunk to the floor screaming hysterically locking the door on her way down. My sister Gayle not knowing what this was all about opened the door, and fortunately the Marine officer along with the Chaplain, were able to immediately convey to my mother that I was all right. (Ironically these officers were on their way back from another 'house call' in which someone had been killed in the war - when getting word to stop in on my mom.)

I guess up until now I hadn't thought too much about what had happened to me. I was alive. I'd been lucky - for sure. But I was alive. The only thing I thought of at that time was getting back out in the field and avenging my brothers. Letters from home were just a reward for getting back alive.

Dick on seeing the deep concern etched into my young face stopped what he was doing and said, "Anything wrong? Is everything all right at home?"

"Yeah. Everything's fine." I said getting up off the cot and walking to the doorway of the tent. Just leaned against the framework of the doorway - staring into space.

"I fucked-up Dick." I said slowly, "I fucked-up because I got hit. You don't get hit over here. And you'd better not get killed!"

I continued staring into space until I focused on one of the guys outside. It was Poole. Good 'ole Poole. Making noise with that damn mule. He was hauling some water and other things on a mule - a small, four wheeled flat-bed vehicle that sounded like it had a giant Briggs and Stratton lawn mower engine strapped to it.

Poole and I went back to the beginning of it all.

Been through hell with that kid for sure. He was damn lucky he wasn't blown out of the rice paddy we had to charge under fire a couple of months ago. I could still see the water spouts popping out of the rice paddy like rain in reverse all around him. Shit! That was a tough one! (Read Rice Paddies and Machineguns.)

Watched as he chugged into a draw in the sand and got stuck. Ha! Couldn't hear his voice over the noise of that damned contraption but I could see the cuss words flowing from his gaunt hillbilly face.

Poole was from the Ozarks or somewhere in that area. Lanky kid. Always spoke real slowly. Had a down-to-earth kind of way about him. Always seemed older than he was. Probably had a real mule back home, which I pictured mentally, somewhere in the hills of Arkansas. One of those types that was always tinkering with machinery and such. Could probably get any thing to work - for awhile. That's why he had become the designated 'mule driver' of the company when we were in the 'rear'.

When we weren't - he was one hell of an automatic weapons man. Always kept his cool. Good 'ole Poole.

I turned and walked back and sat down on the cot again.

The next letter I picked up was addressed 'From the friends of Masfield Drive'. I opened it and immediately it brought tears to my eyes.

I had grown up in a relatively small neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay area of California. Like so many little areas that would grow eventually into big areas due to the baby boom explosion after World War Two - Poets Corner in Pleasant Hill was comprised of new little houses that would spring up in clusters almost over night. My mother, being a veteran, was able to qualify for one of these in 1949.

It was a tight neighborhood. People didn't have a lot of money after the war. They looked after one another - and after one another's kids. As a kid I found out real quick I couldn't get away with anything.

I used to consider myself a Montanian, spending summers on the family farm, which my grandfather had homesteaded at the turn of the century, thinking it was different. It wasn't. Both had a small town atmosphere where everyone knew everything about anybody - including me! (I wouldn't appreciate this type of harmony until I became a parent myself.)

Here was a card that someone had taken around the neighborhood for some two blocks and it was signed by everyone that I had ever known in my growing years or that I had ever wreaked havoc upon. And, everyone had something good and supportive to say.

Evidently the word had got out like wildfire that the dumb blond kid had been wounded in battle. It was too much.

Dick, seeing the tears in my eyes, came over and like a brother put his arm around me.

"Hey man. It'll be Okay - we'll get back all right - you know we will."

"Dick, you don't understand. A bunch of people that I once knew got together and sent me this nice card. And, I don't deserve it!"

"Well.", he said. "They seem to think you do. Think I'd consider that an honor. Not a detriment."

"Look!", I said jabbing my finger into the card. "Here's one from Mrs. Liston. My next door neighbor. She's a school teacher. Right! Nice little note. You know what I did when I was a kid?"

"Nope!", he said. "I hesitate to wonder."

"Well, one year she decided to grow a pumpkin patch in her back yard. We have big back yards - you know?"

"Yeah. I've been over to your place - so what?"

"Well, she grows all these pumpkins so she can have her first grade class carve them for jack-o-lanterns. It's right around Halloween. My dad gives me this pearl handled pocket knife about this time. I'm like five years old.

The temptation was to much, man."

"What did you do?!"

"There was about forty pumpkins in that yard. I was young, but I could count you know. In my stupidity I lined them all up on a fence separating our yards. Proud-as-hell at what I had accomplished."

"You mean you cut each and every one from the vine and lined them up on your fence. Cool man!"

"No! I cut all of them out of the patch and had carved 'em into jack-o-lanterns by the next morning. All forty staring into her yard by the next morning. I was so proud of myself - didn't even consider the consequences. Man my butt's still sore to this day! And here she writes me this really nice note."

"That why they call you 'Slice' around here?", he chuckles.

"Naw. It's because I carry a couple of German daggers in my pack loops - swastikas and all. Gives me comfort. Hard to explain Dick - just does. The krauts were a bunch of assholes - It's like one deserves the other. Know what I mean? Besides they got good balance."

"Going to carve some gook jack-o-lanterns?", he chides.

"Yeah maybe that's it. Fuck you anyway! You're doing what we should be doing. What we trained to do on the way over here!"

"Hey! I'd take your job any day asshole! You think it's easy working with a bunch of dink PF's? You've seen the sand flea scars on my legs - like shrapnel? You want to trade places? Well any day mother fucker!"

Could tell he was getting worked up a bit. After all, he'd gone out of his way to check in on me.

"Hey! I'm sorry all right. Been one of those days Okay - man?"

"Yeah right! You get all the mail. All of the goodies!"

"Yeah. Sorry man. We'll laugh about this some day. Okay?"

"Okay. Open that other package, man - I'm still hungry!"

So I did. Meticulously unfolding some two weeks worth of newspapers, that I had always requested from home. Don't know why - just always wanted to stay abreast of things back in my home town. Transcripts - I called them. And I was tempted to stop at this point and just read. Figuring that there was just more of the same 'pogy bait' to get a sugar high on.

Dick urged me on. He was as excited as a kid at Christmas time. Hey! Don't stop now!

Couldn't believe it as I unraveled the last layers of newspapers. It was just so beautiful it defies (even now) any descriptive verbalization. Just stood there in awe looking at it. Breathless.

Had it been a woman in the nude it couldn't have taken my breath away as much!

There - laying before me was the most beautiful sight I had ever in my young (up till then) life - ever gazed upon.

A brand new Colt Model 1911 .45 caliber automatic pistol! In a brand new black leather holster with security flap. You could smell the freshness of the leather and just a hint of gun oil. I gently pulled the weapon from the holster unsnapping the flap with USMC stamped deep into the thick but flexible leather. Pulled open the slide to check the chamber. The action was smooth. The gun and holster complimented each other.

There was a little note sticking out of the barrel. I pulled it out. Pictured my dad's heavily callused hands gently wrapping it around a pencil in order to slide it in.

Said: 'Hope this'll work for you son - Dad.'

My dad and I hadn't always got along over the years but that simple sentence left a lump in my throat as big as the baseball glove he'd given me as a kid. In fact the smell of that leather holster put me back in time as if it were yesterday. Could almost feel the slap and sting of the first hardball burning in when we went out in the yard to try it out.

"DAMN!" "Look at THIS BEAUTY - DICK!"

"Yeah. Yeah! I see it! I see it! Damn! Itza beauty for sure!", He says.

Both of us, by this time, had spent many hours with a .45 cal. Pistol. The Marine Corps had made sure that we were well acquainted with one of it's primary weapons of war. We had learned to 'field strip' it blindfolded. But, the weapons they had given us to practice on had probably been in it's inventory since day one (1911?). The actions were sloppy to say the least. Many of these weapons, I was sure, had been used since the 'Banana Wars' of the 1920's, and had been field stripped over and over again.

Later in the Corps I would have to qualify with the forty-five. I could do no better than 'Sharpshooter'. Which although better then 'Marksman' frustrated me, because I was pretty good with a pistol (.22 cal.) growing up on the plains of Montana. Had a natural feel for them and would practice long hours drawing from just about any position and hitting anything I aimed at. I was even deadlier with a rifle.

What was unique about this particular event was that at nineteen most kids my age would have felt the same kind of exhilaration about buying their first car. The truth of the matter was that had I been able to I would have preferred to have had the opportunity to turn the keys to the new car.

But the would have's and should have's and could have's didn't matter at this point in time. Right now it didn't matter if I had a little extra weight on my hip. This was not the old west - this was reality. The reality was survival. Survival, with the possibility of buying even a few extra seconds was what counted.

We had been given permission during these earlier years to carry our own private weapons (with approval through the chain of command of course). My choice was a Rugger .44 caliber Black Hawk revolver and I had made this desire known in my first letter home after being wounded on Hill 362. We had lucked out by having machine gun belts of ammunition with us (as support ammo for Weapons Platoon). But it was a close call nearly ending in hand-to-hand combat. And as fond as I was of my knives - a side arm would have been preferred.

I had requested the Black Hawk be purchased from funds I had been building up in a joint account with my parents. But as it turned out when my dad went to buy it, the gun dealer had convinced him that it would be easier to obtain ammunition for the .45. (He was right. Must have been a Marine.)

My dad had also bought a couple of extra magazines for the weapon which he had tucked into a pair of mom's dyed socks.

I would wear the pistol on my left side (butt forward) so as not to interfere with my rifle which I always slung over my right shoulder.

And I would practice with it at every opportunity so that I could whip it out of the holster with the speed of light. I sacrificed a canteen on that side and hung it on my pack instead. My cartridge belt was now loaded to the max. Starting from the front left-to-right: one M-14 magazine, .45 cal. pistol (holstered), M-14 bayonet, two more M-14 magazines, one canteen, K-Bar knife and one more M-14 magazine.

AIR-RAID!

It was about this time that a few of our guys got together and traipsed on down to the little airstrip town (and growing) of Chu Lai one night. They had heard that there were a couple of servicemen's clubs established there. They had developed a thirst as we had not seen any of the beer rations promised us – and, well Marines just have to have a beer now and again. As fate would have it – they accidentally stumbled across the Officer's Club. But, before politely leaving they happened to spot on a wall as you walked in – a series of pegs upon which were hanging objects that even these well disciplined men of our company just couldn't resist.

They eventually found the EM Club (Enlisted Man's Club) - and proceeded to partake in one of the few pleasures of Vietnam that existed at this time. Commending themselves on how lucky they were to have been (albeit briefly) stationed next to an airstrip, they got caught up real quick with what they had been missing in the field. For ten cents MPC (Military Provided Currency) per beer - it wasn't long before they were feeling pretty good about themselves for surviving this long in a very precarious business.

But their thoughts kept reflecting back to the objects hanging on the pegs of the OC (Officer's Club). At first they would laugh about it and toss it off as insane. But the more they drank – the more they reasoned. (Intelligently of course.) That as much as we needed and were thankful for the protection of the airwing – they really didn't need those .38 caliber Smith and Wesson's. Shoulder holsters and all.

{ And even after all of this time notice I'm not mentioning any names here. }

The more they reasoned the more they drank. So, they further reasoned that pilots weren't known for their marksmanship with a handgun on any account. The rest of what they did (in the air) was just fine. No problem. That the only reason they carried a weapon at all - was for balance. Having to use the right hand constantly for the joy-stick of the aircraft.

So having the shoulder holster under the left arm would compensate for that.

They, at some time or another - did conclude that it could be used for self protection if they ever were shot down. But, just a quickly eliminated that possibility. The gooks in our sector didn't take prisoners. Finally they concluded that even if their weapons turned

up missing – that being airwing – and having all sorts of advantages that most of us didn't – they could easily have these weapons replaced.

But as the place closed down they eventually concluded that as bad as Marines could be they were not thieves. No way Jose'!

So as they stumbled out the door more concerned about getting back to the Company area undetected and keeping their rank. Fate once again intervened. They once again happened across the OC (Officer's Club) on their way out of town . . .

The door was open. They could plainly see that these righteous young gentlemen were either asleep or slumped over their tables. Tch tch, what a shame! Marines should always be found with their weapons close at hand if not directly tucked into their bodies in one way or another. Especially in a combat zone!

Well, that did it. If they couldn't take care of a weapon properly then they knew a few that could. The temptation was too much . . .

It wasn't long before the word came down from a higher source that the airwing was missing some of it's weapons inventory. Aside from everything else being intact – bombs, twenty millimeter cannon, etc. (whew) There were a few .38 cal. Pistols with shoulder holsters – mysteriously missing from the OC. It was strongly advised that anybody with any information regarding this issue step forward immediately.

No one ever did. Besides who-in-the-hell in their right mind would want a pee shooter like a .38 cal. revolver?

In fact it was the very next morning as a (ahem) few good men were groggily climbing out of their bunkers on the L 3/5 side of the Chu Lai airstrip. It was noted that several bunkers were being completed more feverishly than before. (I'm sure it was just sand going into those bags.)

The .38 cal. Smith and Wesson's with shoulder holsters were never to be seen again. There were several instances after future fire fights with the enemy that it was noted that some of the dead had small caliber holes in them. (The .45 cal., M-14's 7.62 and even the M-16's .222 cal. Which wasn't in existence at this time in our area - were noticeably different.)

But since autopsies were not in vogue it was never pursued any further. (And for some reason nobody ever claimed a kill.)

I know for some this seems like a trivial insert into what will eventually be an important part of the overall picture. For those that were there – close the book – you needn't go any further. Unless you have something to add.

The bottom line is this. Marine's are taught how to fight. They are taught to love to fight. They are taught how to fight with weapons of all makes and caliber's – and knives, hands, feet, teeth and whatever. But, because they always seem to be required to do the most with least (a budget thing), then they also learn to adapt, ad-lib, and improvise. So, what some may misinterpret as thievery . . . To a Marine – it's just an improvisational skill.

OPERATION EL PASO – The Dawn

In June of 1999 – Lima Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment (Vietnam 1966 – 1971) will be celebrating a reunion in San Antonio, Texas.

San Antonio, Texas is about 564 miles from El Paso, Texas. (Big State!) El Paso, Texas was and is about 7,564 miles from what was then El Paso, Vietnam. Across a sea (the South China) and an ocean (the Pacific) and then overland through some pretty harsh territory. If there were anyone in our outfit that were indeed from El Paso, Texas at this time – then they would have indeed been better adapted to the territory of El Paso, Vietnam - then most of us. It was harsh. The hills were barren except for lots of cactus.

Every school kid of my age knew where San Antonio, Texas was. The Alamo – Davy Crockett and coonskin caps. It's been said that members of my family (on my dad's side – Tennessee) fought at the Alamo. But the only thing I knew about El Paso, Texas – was singer Marty Robin's ballad about the street's of El Paso, and Rose's Cantina. A classic gunfight over a pretty young maiden that ended in the swirling dust of the street's of El Paso.

El Paso, Vietnam was a different story. The dawn started with it's beautiful array of pearl and Champaign. The taste of humidity and smell of rice paddies and decomposing matter - pasted into your nostrils.

Your senses are on a hundred percent alert. You can see a bug crawling a hundred yards away. You can hear your buddy's heart beating at twenty – and smell his sweat. You can feel every scratch and flaw on your weapon and the pressure of the magazines and canteens against your cartridge belt digging into your gut, and the sixty pound-plus pack digging into your back

And when you feel the hair on the back of your neck crawl - you can sense the enemy watching you. Focussing in on your head or your heart through a gunsight.

That's the sixth sense. It is not a phantom sense nor a sense peculiar to only a few. But a culmination of all the senses you posses when at one hundred percent alert – in combat.

So we'd been driven up to this wide stretch of rice paddies in Quang Tri Province in the early dawn. We had passed 155 howitzers and tanks fortressd into massive earthen berms at the edge.

The trucks screeching to a halt and the sounds of bodies rapidly unloading and getting organized. Moving out. On line and into the dawn across the rice paddies.

That really bothered me. I'm sure it bothered most of us. Exposed and in the open – the last thing hunters want to do! For your adversary to have clear view of you

movements. You don't want to leave a silhouette – nor anything relating to your position.

You want to disguise yourself in a tree line or just under a ridge. Blend into the surroundings. But, sometimes there's no way around it.

We had two things in our favor (or so we thought):

One - Numbers.

The gooks would rarely attack a Company size operation and only if they knew they had us outnumbered by at least ten to one. In which case our intelligence (Reconnaissance) would usually have gotten that data to us.

Two – Support.

{I once read an interview with General Giap the chief military strategist of the North Vietnamese Army, who when questioned by French journalists after the war said in part:

“We made it a policy never to attack a Marine Corps unit unless we outnumbered them ten-to-one. And, could rapidly deploy afterwards - as their support could nullify any damage we may have done.”}

The ‘Support’ was from the air, land or sea. It maximized everything the Marine Corps was about – even in 1966. A very complex system even back then. Going to great lengths to take care of our own – the men on the ground. The one's most likely to go head-to-toe against the enemy.

That, can use every edge they can get while in enemy territory. (Enemy territory defined here as: Geographically dominant positions controlled by the enemy – hills, plateaus etc. And, all other terrain known by the enemy – rice paddies, valleys, streambeds, villages, etc.)

So support was/is absolutely necessary and essential to the ‘surveyor’ when ‘exploring’ new territory.

Let me explain:

Structure of a rifle company – structure of support – structure of one's self – the civilian understanding – what we brought back with us- how we are perceived today

Dogs and support – FO's – The workings of a rifle company – structure - my feelings Point and those that we had lost

Bob Stallings and the point position- getting across no-man's land -thinking of it now- what are the differences,

Defining it details and examples – Boshe and others

Ontoes's

The first day and attitudes

Gunny Dias and Hastings the dog

Bamboo mats and today- ricepaddies and machineguns- where are we- what have we accomplished?- what have we learned?

I was lucky once again to be started at point by Lt. Anderson. I think he trusted me. (But sometimes, now, I think it was because our resources were limited.)

I think, now, that probably everyone in our platoon drew 'point' sooner or later. I don't think we even referred to it as point. 'You got the go' – or something like that. But in areas of questionable concern – I'd find myself at 'Point'. Was an honor.