



HASTINGS AT 34

RECOLLECTIONS

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OPERATION HASTINGS

Battalion Landing Team 3/5

18-30 July 1966

(research, write-up and maps courtesy of J.D. Murray, in honor of Hans Haupt, H&S Company Commander, 1966)

During the early summer months of 1966, evidence was mounting that large NVA forces were building up in Northern Quang Tri Province, Vietnam. With rare exception, most recon inserts were encountering armed, uniformed NVA throughout the province. Deserters stated the NVA were there to drive the ARVN out of the province.

General Walt (CG III MAF) met With General Westmoreland in Hue and discussed Operation HASTING. Westmoreland approved and authorized Walt to transfer up to an entire division to the Quang Tri Province.

Gen Kyle (CG 3RD MARDIV) established the 4th Marines (forward) at Dong Ha, and activated Task Force Delta headed by his Asst Div Cmdr, Gen English, in preparation for the operation. The Task Force included four infantry battalions (2/1, 1/3, 2/4, and 3 / 4). 3/12 Artillery Battalion also joins the task force.

Based on intelligence reports, General English decided to seek the NVA in the Song Ngan Valley.

Deckhouse II began with an amphibious assault conducted by BLT 3/5 in an area just north of the Qua Viet River near Dong Ha, in Quang Tri Province. The purpose of the assault was to support 3d Marine Division in Operation Hastings-the largest Marine operation in Vietnam at that time. BLT 3/5 mission along "The Street without Joy" was to halt NVA movement across the DMZ and to root out enemy units already inside South Vietnam. Plans call for BLT 3/5 to assume blocking positions about eight miles north of Dong Ha after landing via a combination of surface and helicopterborne lifts. In accordance with amphibious doctrine, once the landing force was firmly established on shore, Deckhouse II would be terminated and BLT 3/5 would conduct further operations inland under the OPCON of Task Force Delta of 3rd Marine Division.



(click to enlarge)

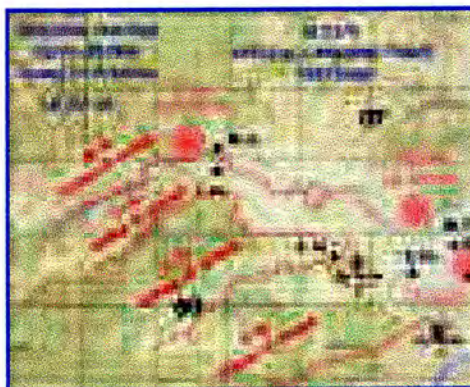
BLT 3/5 was airlifted into the area to exploit the B-52 strike and act as a blocking force for any NVA units escaping from the Song Ngan area where most of the Task Force were located. No friendly forces had operated in BLT 3/5 initial zone of action prior to their entry. It was suspected that the area might include a regimental sized CP, and perhaps, even the CP for the 324B NVA Division.

BLT 3/5 was commanded by LtCol Ed Bronars, with his able commanders, Capt Hans Haupt (H&S), Capt Sam Glaize (I Co), Capt Dick Maresco (K Co), Capt Reiss Tatum (L Co), and Capt. Harold (Dell) Pettengill(M Co).

In the initial landing, only Capt. Pettengills M Co. encountered serious resistance. The company landed on an NVA unit in LZ CROW at 043623. and after heavy airstrikes were able to overrun the NVA. 20 NVA killed during the afternoon battle.

L Co also landed in LZ CROW. Cos K, I, H&S, and BLT CP landed in LZ DOVE.

18 July 1966



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

There was little contact during the morning of the 19th. L Co made contact with a platoon of NVA at 045625 and K Co had NVA contact at 038608 that afternoon.

L Co discovered a Bn CP at 040620 with 140 bunkers.

19 July 1966



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

At first light all BLT companies resumed search and destroy operations west in their assigned TAOR's. At 0915am Co L destroyed an NVA Hqs. At 040620. Both L and M Cos had contact early in the day. A patrol from the 106rr platoon discovered a possible political reception center at 098619. At 1610 K Co at 044598 found a Bn/Regt CP with hundreds of uniforms, packs, shirts, shelter halves, etc and documents. All were new.

Co M had contact at 028616 and 022610 killing 4 NVA and capturing supplies and documents.

At 1815pm L Co killed 2 NVA at 025610.

At 0100am K Co ambushed 10-15NVA. Results unknown

20 Jul 1966



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

All BLT 3/5 companies continued search and destroy missions in their TAORs.

Co M at 0920am discovered prepared positions at 024618 with much equipment. 200 bunkers, hospital and mess hall in area. Large quantities of engineering equipment and explosives and mines found indicating probably an NVA Engineering Bn. Probably evacuated because of B-52 Arc Light. M Co found a Chinese Mine Detector at 028618. 2 NVA bodies, 12 graves were also found, apparently caused by arty fire or an earlier contact with Co K or M.

21 Jul 1966



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Continuing search and destroy operations to the west, Co M reached Hill 314, which intelligence sources indicated was the site of a regimental CP. 1 NVA killed by M Co 024625. At 1545pm Co M 2d platoon surprised 30-40 NVA in prepared bunker positions vic. 034625. Co M overran the positions. While evacuating the wounded, the NVA assaulted from 034623. Both the 1st platoon under John Keker, and the 3rd Platoon, under Joe Mirgeaux overran the NVA on top of the nearby hill. The NVA probed M Co positions throughout the night.

At 1700pm, an ambush from L Co. fired on 4 NVA at 025610. Reinforcing squad helped

kill 4 NVA.

At 1845pm I Co at 026608 contacted 12-15 NVA. NVA withdrew.

22 July 1966



(click to enlarge)

At 0040am Co M killed 2 NVA.

At 0815am I Co killed 1 NVA.

At 1000am Co M killed 2 NVA. at 033627. Co K found 1 dead NVA at 025611.

Co I at 1105am sighted 2 NVA at 018602, killing one, capturing one and one 57mm recoilless rifle.

At 1555pm I Co discovered a large equipment cache at 017607. and captured another NVA.

At 2230pm L Co killed 1 NVA at 005605.

23 July 1966



(click to enlarge)

At 0700am L Co was approached by 2 NVA at 005605 wearing camouflaged utilities and U.S. helmets. 1 NVA killed..

At 1115am I Co discovered 21 NVA bodies near 016617, in area of previous L Co ambush.

At 1155am H&S Co. patrol found NVA bivouac site at 083614 with 140 bunkers.

At 1200 Co I made contact with 3 NVA near 011616 along well used trail. 1 NVA killed, 1 captured.

At 1215pm Co I came under intense automatic and small arms fire at 013616. At 1425pm Co I received mortar and automatic weapons fire while moving up draw at base of Hill 362. Once on top of Hill 362 and moving across a saddle, I Co came under very heavy concentrated enemy fire from three sides. LtCol Bronars ordered K Co to reinforce I Co. K Co got within 300 meters before heavy NVA fire from an estimated 30-40 NVA halted their advance at 018614.

Meanwhile, I Co. remained under intense enemy firing including at least 4 NVA mortar positions. The mortars took a heavy toll on I Co Marines until an UH-1E helicopter gunships strafed the NVA mortar positions identified by Lt. Jim Kirschke, the 81mmMortar Platoon Commander, who deuced the position through a quick map study.

NVA captives identified the NVA forces as 6th Bn, 812th Regt, 324B NVA Division. Captured were 3 mortars, 27 rifles and machineguns, 1 57mm Recoilless Rifle and large numbers of packs and equipment.

At 2335pm M Co was probed at 025636.

24 July 1966



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

During the early hours, Co I was continually probed by an estimated 2 reinforced NVA companies. NVA broke contact 0430am.

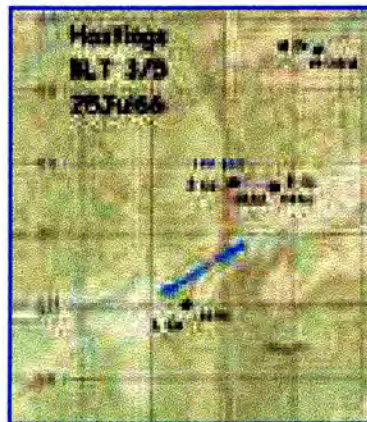
At 1000am L Co killed 1 NVA at 016607 and at 1500am they sighted 7 NVA, killing 1 NVA at 011612. At 1630pm L Co was attacked by approx. 20 NVA at 011617, killing four NVA.

At 1645pm L Co received a tear gas grenade.

At 1700pm Co K discovered 6 NVA bodies and numerous drag trails vicinity 018617 and a large store of equipment including machineguns, submachineguns, grenades, and uniforms.

By 1715pm I Co patrols around 011617 had found 14 more NVA bodies and numerous drag marks.

25 Jul 1966



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Today was relatively quiet, with contact consisting chiefly of small probes. M Co joined the other companies on Hill 362 in preparation for the foot movement to a newly assigned TAOR.

26 July 1966



(click to enlarge)

L Co received probes at 0015am on Hill 362.

After conducting intensive air strikes and artillery preparation, the rifle companies moved westward to designated positions in the new TAOR. The BLT CP displaced by helicopter.

At 0815am, L Co. received sniper fire, returned fire killing 1 NVA. at 011617. and capturing 1 NVA with 2 submachineguns.

27 July 1966



(click to enlarge)

The following companies conducted search and destroy operations against NVA forces in the grid squares indicated:

Co K – 7960

Co L – 9660

Co M- 9860. 9960, 0060.

At 1215pm Co M found a cache at 999593 of NVA equipment. An hour later M Co

found another cache of clothing and equipment at 999593.

At 1400pm K Co received 10-20rds sniper fire from 987592.

At 1605 L Co made contact with 4-5 NVA snipers at 965603.

At 1815pm I Co moved into the BLT CP area to provide security and constitute the BLT reserve.

28 July 1966



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

At 0915am Co K commenced movement to Landing Zone Bluejay vic. 983563 for subsequent helilift to the USS PRINCETON. H&S Co., 2d platoon, Co B, 1st Motor Transport Bn, and I Co followed in trace. The helilift was completed by 1610pm.

Battery F commenced helilift from vic 117579 at 0900am to USS PRINCETON.

At 1227pm, the 2d Platoon M Co sighted 25-30 NVA at 989613 digging a mortar and 50cal MG position on top of the hill as the 2d platoon moved up a steep ravine. Artillery and air strikes were called in on NVA position.

During a search conducted by Co. M, a trail eight to ten feet wide was discovered in the area of 0161 to 9661 along the mountain ridge line. It was noted that tall trees were pulled and lashed together to complete the jungle canopy over the trail. The trail showed signs of frequent use and had communications wire throughout its length.

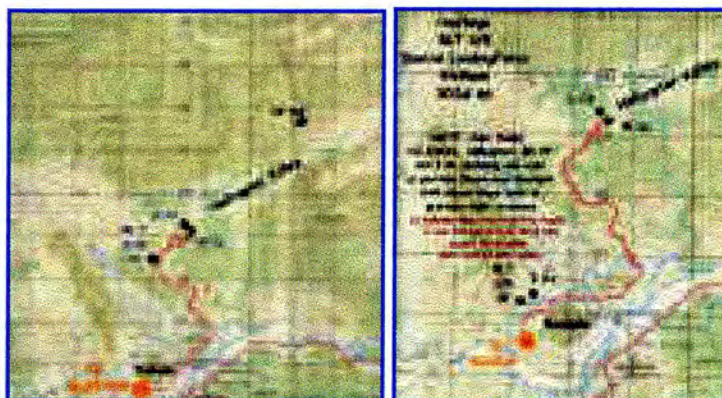
29 July 1966



(click to enlarge)

At 0830am Co L and M and the remainder of H&S Co commenced movement towards LZ BLUEJAY. Helicopters lifted the first elements of Company M at 1305pm and by 1530pm all units of BLT 3/5 were aboard assigned shipping.

Operation Hastings ended for BLT 3/5 on 30 July 1966



(click to enlarge)

I have used the following references:

A few Good Men by Ronald Brown

Semper Fi Vietnam by Edward Murphy

BLT 3/5 After Action Report and Command Chronology

My experience with M Co as 2d Platoon Commander on Hastings

Input from Reiss Tatum, CO of L Co. on Hastings.

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SEMPER FIDELIS

Note: This document was written on July 18 – July 24, 2000
With the invaluable (and much appreciated) help of Theresa S.
Haan – editor/soul mate

HASTINGS AT 34, Introduction

The following is a day-by-day personal account of the events leading up to the worst period of time in my life - Operation Hastings (July 18 - 24, 1966). Tomorrow marks the beginning of what has now become a 34-year vigil to commemorate it. Those 'brothers of valor' of Lima Company 3/5 ('66), the other companies who were there (India, Kilo, and Mike Company), and anyone else from the 3rd Battalion 5th Marines (corpsmen, weapons, artillery, etc) who wish to join in this recollection (what were your thoughts, feelings, actions etc.?) are invited to do so. If not, I apologize for the intrusion into your cyberspace.

Let me say that writing about the war-time events of my life, while serving as a rifleman scout for the company in 1966, has helped me to come to grips with those sometimes chaotic excursions into turmoil. I've shared other stories about the Nam with you, with hopes that I might awaken an urge for you to also participate in recording these historic revelations into our past. Possibly even preserving them for others to view one day. My hope has also been to encourage members of the company who came after me - to add their histories as well. Those men who fought the battles of Union I & II, Swift, Tet, The Mothers Day Massacre - and so many other heart-wrenching campaigns while serving our Corps and Country through trying times. The Vietnam War.

I suppose I should just forget it . . . I suppose 'it don't mean nothin'. But, I happen to be proud of what I did for the Company. Although, I still have a sore spot for what the country thought about it. And you know what? Danged if it wasn't the most exciting time of my life.

Oh yeah, there's somethin else . . . I want to see the history books get it right. Too many times I've seen things about our Company printed up wrong. Books are still being written about our exploits, and I want to see them get the facts right. I kinda think it's important . . .

First, let me introduce myself. My name is Johnnie F. Harris. Friends now call me Yukon. A lot of us ended up with nicknames. Sometimes, I think it was the nicknames helped us keep things less personal. Sometimes it was hard to get close to a guy. Sometimes you just didn't want to. I think the term FNG is one of the most impersonal of nicknames, but that broaches another subject I'd like to get into another day.

I served Lima Company as a rifleman scout. I was a Pfc. most of the time, and then a LCpl. - before being wounded the second time and med-evaced out. I spent most of my time in the 3rd fireteam - with the 3rd squad - of the 3rd platoon. I joined Lima Company in late January 1966, and left her in late November of the same year. I had been an avid outdoorsman before joining the Marines. And, I was a pretty good tracker. So, I spent a lot of time on point. (Although now I'm not even sure we called it that back then.) Some of you may remember me from that position (I was the skinny blonde kid). There were a couple of us that traded off the point position all the time. Soney was one, and Robert Stallings was another, that come to mind.

There are a lot of guys I still remember from my platoon. We were pretty tight. It's hard to remember them all. Since the ones I do remember are pretty numerous, so I won't list their names here. Many are on this email list. (Hi guys!)

I'll throw a name or two out as I progress through this day-by-day event. Maybe you can help me remember others... As for the other platoons (1st, 2nd & Weapons), I remember a few. I should remember a lot more because after all we trained hard together. We trained more than any subsequent company that took our place. We trained in the States, we trained in Okinawa, and we trained in the Philippines. So, you'd think I would remember a lot more names. But, damn it! I don't . . .

One of the things that helps me write about my experiences is some tape recordings I made way back then. You know those little reel-to-reel jobs? I had them converted to cassette in 1980. About six hours worth. Some of the guys I served with helped me make the recordings because believe it or not I had a hard time talking back then. Really - swear to God!

Something else that has helped me is a handful of letters I wrote home from the Nam. They were discovered in my mother's belongings after she passed away in 1990. Some heavy stuff, but accurate in detail. The bottom line, though, is that we really couldn't discuss where we were or what we were doing most of the time. So, I could sure use some help now filling in the blanks.

Well, there you got it! Just thought I'd toss this idea by you. See if it makes any sense. Used to be I'd just get drunk - hole up in a room and watch old war movies. For a lot of years, I'd go off into my mountains and disappear for a few days. Crazy huh? I'm lucky though - my excuse is that I can blame it on the bullet that went through my head on this very operation.

I've included the whole Lima address book in this endeavor, because a lot of guys were(are) interested in the battle. Also, there are guys like my good friend, Gunny Loucks, who was there at the same time - but fighting for his life in a different rifle company. (Sure would be great to get your perspective, Wally.)

If you don't want to be bothered with any of this, then let me know - and I'll strike your name from the list. Or, if you're not able to receive this (because of service connection limits, ie. hotmail, pocketmail, etc.) but want it, please let me know and I'll separate it out on a different list for you. Regardless of what era you may have served during, I welcome all of your comments.

Okay then. The first of this episode will come to you first thing tomorrow - the morning of July 18th. On this day, 34 years ago, we flew by helicopter into LZ Crow . . . Man! Was it hot!

Till then, Semper Fi. Yukon John Harris

Next - HASTINGS AT 34, Part I. *(July 18, 1966)*

HASTINGS AT 34, Part I. (July 18, 1966)

COMBAT... "It's hot!?"

I guess one of the few words that can sum up combat is *confusion*. As hard as you may train, and as agile a warrior as you may be, there's just always a little confusion when the shit hits the 'ole fan.

Another word might be *recovery*. How fast one may recover from the initial shock of contact with the enemy (combat). Still another could be *focus*. With adrenaline pumping through every vein and pore in your body – What IS your most immediate threat?

I wasn't aware of anything particularly unusual about how the last operation, Operation Deckhouse II, was finishing up. It was the shortest operation we'd been on so far. We'd been 'in country' for over a month, and had already pulled several operations – Deckhouse I and Nathan Hale. I'm not even sure whether I was assuming it was over. It never even dawned on me why the USS Princeton had abruptly left the Philippines. Or why it left in such a hurry that some of our guys were left behind in the little town of Olongapo (?). I was just an 18 year-old Pfc., and had learned quickly in my brief career as a Marine that mine was not to reason why – mine was but to do or die.

The one thing that was certain was that it was extremely hot in the July sun. We did find one comforting respite from our wanderings in the "Sahara Desert". *(That's what I called it, because for about three days we had wandered around in the sand dunes of the northernmost coast of South Vietnam...and to me, it looked like what I pictured the Sahara Desert to look and feel like.)* That respite was a wide river, which may have been the Song Ben Hai. All I remember about it was the cool water that was so refreshing after our walk in the desert. Isn't it funny how some things still come to mind. Are they always stored there in our brain? Some we keep at the front of the library, and others are back in the shadows? Well anyway, I still remember the softness of the water. Lazy - kind of. With sampans (those flat-bottomed boats) drifting out in the river. Their owners, snaking a single oar at the aft to push them through the murky water.

The peaceful scene was suddenly broken by the loud whapping of air through the rotors of an all too familiar sight... Our squadron of UH-34 helicopters coming in for a landing. Mixed feelings... Were they coming to take us home? (The USS Princeton – LPH 5) Or were we going to take a ride?

I didn't have long to ponder as the barking words, "Saddle up!" drifted down to where I was just coming out of the water after a refreshing dip. "Helo-teams! Grab your gear on the run. Run! Run! Move it! Move it!" There wasn't time to think. Everything was a conditioned reflex tuned to verbal commands. Whether we were going home, or off on another '*adventure*' as we called them, the results were the same – to get on board a chopper as quickly as possible. Normally this meant quickly locating the rest of your helo-team - usually a couple of fireteams from your squad, and piling on board a chopper in an orderly-like fashion.

But, not only was I literally caught with my pants down, but I wasn't even close to where I should have been. I think back on it now, and I'm pretty sure I had spotted a couple of my close friends from Mike Company, and had wandered down

to where they were also bathing along the river. A lot of us in the battalion had friends strung out in the other companies. Many of us had gone through boot camp together, or ITR, or had known each other in some way. The guys from Mike Company shared the same ship with us, the USS Princeton. So, they usually weren't too far away during these first couple of operations, which were basically battalion-sized in nature. The Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment was at this time, the designated Special Landing Force – or reserve battalion. To be utilized as needed... So, as I was saying, Mike and Lima Companies were stationed on board the Princeton, while India and Kilo operated off the USS Pickaway. Both were on station in the South China Sea off the coast of South Vietnam. The Princeton was an LPH (Landing Platform Helicopter) and the Pickaway was an APH (Amphibious Platform Helicopter) which usually set our companies ashore by 'mike' boats and/or amtracs. We (Lima and Mike) got to fly into the Nam by helicopter. Our Weapons Company (machineguns, rockets, and mortars) was spread out through all of the four rifle companies.

So here I was, scrambling to get on board a chopper. Any chopper, because when you get a Sgt. barking up your ass - you do what you're told. I'd just have to try and sort things out later. Hopefully I'd never be missed, and when I got back to the ship - I'd just do a teaberry shuffle back to my own company. Nope! Wrong again! I realized after a very short time in the air that we weren't going in the direction of the ship, and therefore out to sea. I could only guess where we were going and was already trying to formulate a plan as to how to get back to my squad. I had managed to get on the chopper last, and was closest to the hatchway (door). This was probably due more to instinct than any direct intention. Or maybe it was because whoever was barking at me had made it perfectly clear that I would be on THAT chopper...NOW! (I was, after all, just a Pfc., you see.) In any case, I found myself in the same position that I normally would have been in, had I boarded with MY helo-team on the right chopper.

Helicopter Etiquette:

It amuses me that a lot of people think that during a war you just hand a bunch of guns (rifles) out to some young guys with helmets and boots, and put them out there where they're needed. Then, to get them there, you just cram them into a tank, or a truck – or whatever, and send them into battle. Same thing with helicopters. Just throw 'em on board the little gizmatrons, and get them quickly into action. Ha!

The Marine Corps (*and I'm sure it's probably true with the Army*) has certain procedures to cover everything they do, and how they go about doing it. One such procedure is how to embark and disembark from a helicopter. Groups are put together into what is called helo-teams. These teams are the exact number of men that can safely travel through the air on a helicopter with the lightest (greatest?) of ease. I think with the UH-34, it was around nine guys – or two complete fireteams with weapons (machinegun, etc.). Sometimes less, if the pilot was running out of fuel – or time. Sometimes more, like trying to leave an area during overt hostilities!

(like... "Fuck You! I don't care if there's too many of us! Just get us the fuck outta here!")

But, from what I remember, you boarded a helicopter *(or chopper, as we used to call them)* with the idea that when it touched down at your final destination, you disembarked as quickly as possible, and took up defensive positions in order to protect the next chopper coming in. There was an imaginary face of a clock spread out on the LZ (Landing Zone). Choppers would land, for instance: first chopper – 12:00 to 1:00, second chopper – 2:00 to 3:00 and so on, until all choppers had unloaded. I may be wrong, but I think 12:00 was usually due north.

It was important that this procedure be followed for the obvious reasons of orderliness, but also to try and protect the next helicopter coming in as much as possible. *(The slow moving UH-34, was very vulnerable.)* Along with this strategy was the protection provided by the chopper as well – in the form of armament (rockets, guns, etc.). Unfortunately, at this time in the war the UH-34 only had a single door gunner. The door gunner was equipped with an M-60 machinegun fixed to a swivel device that could be aimed in just about any direction out the hatchway (door) of the ship (chopper). If he was good, he could lay down some protective fire if needed. It was his duty also, to shout out any orders or commands from the pilot, as he was directly connected to the cockpit with a built-in headphone in his helmet. Now you know about as much as I do.

The first indication of trouble that I can remember was the little light holes appearing in the fuselage. I remember just seeing them appear, but really not (at least immediately anyway) associating any danger with this strange phenomenon. You see, the 34 made so much noise that you could hardly hear yourself think. Any type of exterior noise (like enemy machineguns, et.) was masked by the noise of the huge engines directly under the pilot, and just forward of the troop compartment (where we were).

So on this day, after I don't know how many other uneventful landings, we made a "hot" one. Hot, as in bullets penetrating the fuselage around us. And, HOT as in...more to be expected upon landing. When those light holes started to appear, the door gunner started firing his weapon and cursing at the top of his lungs out the door. The chopper began to lurch heavily one way, then another. I don't think that it was because of the bullets hitting it. I think the pilot was doing everything that he could to lessen the profile of the chopper, and make it less of a target. (If I'm not mistaken, it's a maneuver commonly referred to in aeronautical circles as 'jinking').

The gunner turned and screamed at us to get out. "OUT! OUT! OUT! NOW!" Being closest to the door, I could plainly see that we had not landed (in any way, shape, or form.) We weren't even close to the deck (ground). But, the gunner grabbed my arm and shoved me, physically, out the hatchway. I was off balance as I hit the ground, and tucked and rolled to one side, trying to regain my footing.

Just recently, while going through a reenactment of this landing in order to try and remember more (My girlfriend, Tess, had me squat just inside the French doorway at home...as if it were the doorway of the chopper I was on). And I

remembered seeing a horrible sight. A sight, which up until then, had been buried deep in my subconscious.

As I was rolling out from underneath the chopper, I saw a chopper in the distance hit the ground sideways and crash. It erupted into heavy flames as soon as it splintered against the deck, and pieces of it went flying into another chopper close by. That's it... I remember I kept rolling until I regained my footing, and then ran, zigzagged towards a tree line in the distance. I remember the terrain being flat and gravelly, with sparse brush dotting the immediate landscape. I remember being in extreme danger. It seemed like the whole world was flying apart in all directions. There wasn't anybody going towards any type of imaginary clock...the clock was scattered, as the chopper I just left, tried to get others out. It was like some big bumblebee scattering pollen. It would jink one way and someone would fly out the door – go a few yards further, and do it again. Guys were scattering in every direction, and I just focussed on getting to some cover. I still hadn't figured out what all was happening. It was as if one minute we were bumping along real easy, and the next - all hell broke loose. It was, for me, complete and utter confusion...

Some have said that everything, so far, was about the way I remembered. Some had a different perspective. Most guys say they remember a large stream or river there. And that we had to cross it, in order to form up eventually. But I don't remember any type of water that day. I was distinctly aware of being in a riverbed however, with a lot of gravel and sparse vegetation. At least briefly, until I got out of the open – which was fairly quick. If there was any water around, it had to have been behind my forward progress. Maybe I was in an old dry bed of a river...like an abandoned oxbow. As I've said: I think I may have been with Mike Company on landing. Wherever they were... (*I've found out in the years since that this landing area was designated LZ Crow. Yup! It was HOT alright!*)

God knows, I don't know how I survived those first few moments at LZ Crow. I wasn't a battle-seasoned Marine. Sometimes I think the only difference between surviving and dying is some inner instinct. Something in your genetic code, that hasn't been measured yet. Something passed down for generations... Some infinite measure of energy that causes you to react the right way. Something that feeds an impulse to your brain that makes you to turn right instead of left, or duck instead of stretch. Some just call it Luck. Whatever it was, I managed to rapidly put two and two together. The first place I hit the ground (*after zigzagging off the landing zone*) was an old hollow log at the edge of the riverbed. But, there was an enemy machine gunner that had me in his sights who decided it was my time to die, and he started blasting away at it.

I had no place to go, but I was dead meat if I stayed there. At first, I just tried to burrow into the log like a termite. I remember my body desperately trying to disappear into the profile of it. Twitching back and forth as the log started to splinter apart. Then, I remember thinking 'This isn't working!'...letting out a yell, and going for it as I raced towards the hill directly in front of me.

When I got to the base of the hill, I just laid there for a moment panting like a dog on a hot summer day. No more bullets coming at me. Whew! It'd been close. For the first time I could decipher where the fire was coming from. The top of the

hill above me! Shit! Now what? Okay, okay – you can do this. This is what you're supposed to be here for. This is why the Marine Corps spent thousands of dollars on your training. This is what you're getting paid for. To take apart machinegun nests . . . I know I must have looked behind me at this point and seen others still struggling off the landing zone.

I started to work my way up the hill. The hard way. Run and drop – kneel, crouch - and do it again. There was another guy close to me, and a little behind me. He was doing it too. I had help. We didn't say a word. If we're quiet, the enemy won't see or hear us. Took a while. Bush to bush, and then into the trees. I had a feeling others weren't far behind. I didn't see them, but they had to be coming to help wipe out the threat. I felt confident. But, I was so scared the adrenaline must have been poring from my body. It was darker there in the shadows of that hill. I don't know what time of day it was. I'd lost all track of time. It was late afternoon (I think). I moved on, again and again. It was like a game. Like hide and seek when I was a kid. (How long ago had that been?) I was good at that game. I was even better at sneaking up on animals in the forests where I grew up. But this wasn't fun. This was real, and it was scary. (It was almost like John Wayne and Audie Murphy - all rolled into one. Shit! I started having mental pictures of the enemy just about to overrun the pill box, then at the last moment, they get picked off by the good guys. Shit! that could be us in reverse!)

I could hear the constant chatter of that machinegun up above us. The trees were dark and foreboding, as we inched along. A yard here...a couple yards there.

Then, all of a sudden, there was this huge roar right on top of us. It was the unbelievable sound of man-made rage...an F-4 Phantom! So close I could hear the metallic clicks of a million rounds of ammo slamming into chambers, and then the unforgettable roar of twenty-millimeter cannons letting go, all at once – tearing into the hill just above our heads! *SHIT!* There was this sudden pause of energy, then a massive effort to back pedal down hill. All of a sudden, it occurred to me that an air strike had been called in, and they didn't know we were there! And even worse, we had no way of telling them where we were!

When my ears stopped ringing, I stopped my backward momentum. I don't know why, other than if I could hear again, then maybe the gook could too. I waited for a minute. Nothing. *Good! They must've gotten him.* Then, just as quickly, my heart sunk - as once again I heard the unmistakable and familiar (by now) chatter of the machinegun.

I was no longer aware if the other guy (Marine) was nearby. Don't care. Gotta get out of here quick, before the jet comes back in on us again. Might see us and think we're gooks... Whoa boy! Shit! Stop! Stop! STOP! If that pilot sees me, I'm dead. Now I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. Don't move, idiot...

Just then, the world just literally turned upside down. The wind in my lungs was suddenly sucked out of my body, and my hearing (what little there was after the twenty millimeter canons) shut down completely as my ear drums felt like they'd been shot to the twenty thousand foot level of Mt Everest in one second. The impact of the ground slamming against my torso, caused me to levitate upward, as if I had been drop kicked by a giant.

The five hundred pound bomb released by the Phantom's second dive, must have hit pretty ding-danged close. I watched silently in slow motion, as brush and trees were mowed down by a wall of shrapnel right before my very eyes! Shit flying in every direction!

I lay there for what felt like about five minutes waiting for my senses to somehow take control. I wasn't sure if I were alive or not - for a few of those five. When most of my hearing came back (I had a ringing in my ears for a couple of days afterwards), I was pretty sure they had gotten the machine gunner. And, by then, I was pretty sure that I needed to get off that hill as quickly as possible.

The rest of that day is rather vague. I sort of remember getting back with my guys, but I remember being with friends from Mike Company as well. A few of the guys I served with can't remember a thing about the first few days, aside from landing at the hot LZ. But, for the rest of the operation, it would be the same. Life flashed by in a heartbeat...as action, constant action at every turn, became the rule of the day (and night).

I remember something else that as the years slowly eroded my youth and time has slipped away... It was exciting! I hate to admit it now, but it WAS exciting. The taste of the horrors that came later with bitter combat - had not yet tainted my youthful exuberance.

Compared to the little scraps with the Viet Cong that we'd experienced in previous operations, this was for all intents and purposes - conventional warfare. We found ourselves fighting an enemy that wasn't afraid to duke it out face-to-face. This enemy, whoever they were (we didn't find out until much later, that they were contingents of the North Vietnamese Army - NVA), were good. And, we would learn the hard way (*as our numbers slowly dwindled*), they were just as good as us. Not only that - I figured out real quick . . . that they out numbered us.

Before the 18th of July was over, three of our best had been killed in action, and a handful more had been wounded. I think Mike Company had been hit even harder. (*I don't know this for a fact - just a piece of information stashed away in my subconscious for so many years.*) And, I had no idea where the other two companies were - or even if India and Kilo Companies had been on this operation.

Next: HASTINGS AT 34, Part II (*July 19, 1966*)

HUS/UH-34D

This machine was a hit from the day the first one rolled off the production line. Relative to its predecessor helos, its performance justified its looks. It was responsive, agile, well-powered, and forgiving. It required few hours of maintenance per hour of flight time. For its time it was the ideal helicopter in reliability and performance.

Prior to the commitment of helos to combat in RVN there was considerable wonder among the aircrews as to the ability of helos to survive direct enemy fire, there being scant practical experience in this matter. The initial commitment of H-34s to assault and medevac operations proved that helos were more difficult to hit than imagined and that they could absorb a lot of damage and still fly home. That so many damaged H-34s made it home is not so much a criticism of the VC gunners... they put a lot of holes in helos and scared the hell out of a lot of aircrews... but a testament to the plane and its crews, frightened or not.

In RVN there was literally no mission to which the H-34 was not assigned, from Holy Helo (delivering chaplains to conduct services) to emergency recon team extractions. No matter the mission or conditions, the aircraft and crews found some way to get the job done. Missions in the mountains west of the coastal plain were especially challenging since rotor and engine performance deteriorated quickly with altitude. Under these conditions an H-34 with any appreciable payload was operating at the edge of the envelope.

For many reasons, the most rewarding mission to the aircrews was probably medevac. It provided a lifesaving service to fellow Marines, often when the LZs were hot. There were a lot of nuances to doing this mission correctly; land with the helo between the medevac and the source of enemy fire so as to shield those carrying the casualty to the chopper; land as close to the medevac as possible to reduce the carrying task and exposure of the grunts to the VC. In the event of enemy fire have the escorting gunship blow up the general part of the world from whence the fire came. Flying the [UH-34 "Dog"](#) in RVN changed the meaning of the phrase, "Dog days." They were a joy to fly. H-34 pilots and aircrews hold a special place in their hearts for the "Dog."

FLASHBACKS . . .

Now he had him! Had him dead to rights! After all of these years, the piece of shit crouching and quivering in horror at the end of the barrel of his M-16, was doing just what he expected. Just as he had imagined so many times over and over again. Pissing his pants. The yellow puddle spread slowly across the dusty sagging floor of the run-down old motel. A distorted and crooked smile started to unfurl at the corner of his mouth, as the finger on the trigger, began to twitch uncontrollably. The other man's eyes became as wide as saucers, and then tears began to pour forth as he squeezed them shut for the last time.

"Well Dak! Guess you never thought you'd see me again, huh? You slimy pile of grunt shit!" As the words slowly left his clenched teeth, the flashback began to play across his brain...as it had so many times before.

The electronic impulse of a VCR, plugged into the deepest dark recesses - hit 'Play'. In slow motion, he was running across a rice paddy somewhere in Vietnam. Mortars were coming down around him like rain. Mud and green slime splattered in every direction, as explosions twisted him one way, then another, as he zigzagged towards the waiting Huey. Then, suddenly he was hit! Just as his hands touched the skids of the hovering chopper, he was hit yet another time. As he looked up into the shadows of safety, he noticed the door gunner slumped silently over his weapon. Dead!

And, Dak was just sitting there...smiling wickedly, down at him. His mind was spinning. Reeling from exertion, and from the pain of multiple wounds...yet another bullet slammed into his body. A hand reached down for him, as the chopper started to lift away, and with one last giant effort he let go of the skids to grasp it.

"EAT DIRT, MAC!! MAYBE YOU'LL THINK TWICE BEFORE YOU TAKE THE LAST OF THE B2's..!!" were the last words he heard from Dak through the noise of the whopping rotor blades. The hand had turned into a fist, and then there was darkness, as the slow pulsing rotor blades faded into silence.

He shook his head, as if to ward off sleep, and it brought him back to the scene before him. For six years after that scene, he'd clung to life in a prison camp. The only thing that kept him alive, was the thought of someday exacting revenge on Dak. Then, there were the long years of tracking him down...all the sleepless nights, scummy hotel rooms, and greasy burgers. Almost getting the worthless maggot in his sights a time or two - only to be denied his just cause, for one reason or another. Sure, maybe he was just another no-count Vietnam Vet - but he had a purpose.

And now, there he was twitching on the floor before him, cowering like a rat. Like some quivering glob of Jello. His pale, sallow skin was like puke in a Tijuana alleyway. He paused for a moment, taking it all in. Savoring every second. This was going to be even easier than he thought, as he slowly reached into the faded pockets of his worn trousers. The feel of the cold steel against his finger tips, brought a shallow sense of pleasure flickering across his brain like the flames of a burning hooch.

"Here you go, Dak!", he seethed as he slowly brought the cylindrical object into view. "I've been saving this for you . . . For a long, long time. NOW EAT IT!"

(Click! I turned off the TV with the remote...and sat in the darkness. Thinking.)

Why can't I have flashbacks that play out like a movie script? Why are mine just snippets of scenes, like the flash of a meteor through a dark night? Like a piece of a photograph. Rarely a complete picture. Never a moving film. Nothing in color. Is there something wrong with me...? With my brain...?

For years I'd think I wasn't quite normal. A smell, or a sound, or even the feel of something – would trigger a snippet. ZAP! It would flash by. That quick. And then be gone, leaving me hollow – sometimes shaking. Many times I'd stare at something, like I could almost see it. But I couldn't – it was always too far away. Sometimes, someone would catch me. (Like a wife. I had three.)

"Hey! What's wrong with you!?" I'd ponder that for a moment. Try to make sense of it. Then, just as quickly, try to cover it up and go on. I got pretty good at that. But, I couldn't make it go away. Sooner or later...there it would be again. ZAP!

Even worse when something hits me in my sleep. Nightmares. Sit straight up, in a cold sweat. Many times, scaring the hell out of the woman next to me. But, I couldn't put anything together. Sometimes, the remnants of the dream would take over my life for days. I'd get moody, and snappy—not knowing why. And I'd drink. Drinking would always make me feel better. And I found out soon after coming back from the Nam, that if I drank hard enough - I wouldn't have the nightmares. Or if I did, I'd seldom remember them. Good enough for me.

So, I'd escape. One way or another. I was generally pretty responsible. Had a good job, and kids. The sort of things that most of the time I could use to smother things. But sooner or later . . . ZAP! Another piece of the past would pop up and whack me as if I'd been slapped on the face. What's wrong with me? I must be losing my mind!

If it got really bad, I'd just run away. That's right. Just up and disappear. Go to the mountains (sometimes the sea), and get lost. Take a fishing pole with me, and some C-rats, and go so far back into the mountains that I wouldn't see anyone for days. I even got me an M-37 Weapons Carrier w/winch, so I could really get into nowhere land. It helped...(mostly?). The trouble was, I could never seem to explain to my wife (any of them) adequately enough... Why?

I had a lot of troubled times after leaving the war. After thinking I'd left it behind me, I became pretty convinced that something was wrong with me. After all, I'd had a bullet rattle my brains on Hill 362 during Operation Hastings. But I was afraid to do anything about it. I wouldn't have known what to do anyway. Shoot, our fathers didn't have any problems after WW II, or at least they never gave the impression that they did. Just changed their swords back into plowshares, and got on with their lives.

I served my Corps honorably. So what if the Country never gave a damn? I never had anything to be ashamed of . . . so I was sure, eventually, things would just go away. Yup! (*Wrong.*)

Well to make a long-story short, I did eventually get help with my 'dilemma'. Been working at it ever since. It takes time, and it takes...dealing with it. The war.

But, to be honest with you, and although I've had a great many things come

back to me, some things are just (still) foggy. Take for instance, the 19th and 20th of July, 1966. A lot happened over these two days...and on throughout the whole operation. I've tried over the years to systematically separate things out. Trying to remember day-by-day. I have a hard time of it. I think it was because back then, there was so much happening. I was just getting inundated with so much all of the time. It was just constant, through those days. But, I'll give you what I've got...

After the chaos at the landing zone (LZ Crow), things moved pretty rapidly. I think the Company pretty much spent the rest of the day (18th) trying to link up. The platoons were scattered, as you can imagine. I'd like to think that we'd caught the enemy off guard. But I'm not so sure anymore. I've read some accounts of 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines (I think) who had already been skirmishing with the enemy. Was that why we had been called up?

A couple of Medals-Of-Honor were won (earned the hard way) in the same general area, during actions only a couple of days before. (...even hours maybe?)

Note: Included with Part 2., are the citations for the two Medals Of Honor awarded Captain Robert J. Modrzejewski, Commanding Officer of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, and SSgt. John J. McGinty III of the same company. Reading these will give you some idea of the tenacious enemy, we hadn't yet fully begun to appreciate.

In the meantime, we lost several of our best men during furious, albeit brief, skirmishes. I don't remember anyone ever telling me who we had come up against during those first few days. Had they, I'm sure I'd have reacted this way, "NVA? Who are they?" After all we had trained specifically to deal with the shadowy but ill-equipped Viet Cong (VC). Even back in ITR (Infantry Training Regiment), we had been taught of their conniving little tricks. Why...they were just slimy little mole people, who could pop out of a spider hole and try to shoot you in the back. They couldn't even shoot straight...their weapons were so ancient they were lucky to hit the broad side of a barn.

Hell, I believed it! Particularly after the last two operations we'd been on. Our dead and wounded were just fluke accidents. (*Right?*) I even joked that we had started the war (which up till then, had just consisted of a few minor battles). On the very first night we came in to save the country and win the war, someone thought they heard a human wave attack coming across the rice paddy. Lock and load, baby – we unleashed the fury of a Marine Corps rifle company. Devastating! I mean, it was one awesome display of pyrotechnically interlocking fields of fire. One helluva earth-shaking destructive force!

The next morning, there was this dead water buffalo laying with all four feet sticking straight up in the air. And, one mad Ho Chi Min looking farmer, jumping up and down on a rice paddy dike - screaming that we'd cost him his livelihood. Our Captain quickly ordered us to pay for our sins, by anteing up three dollars MPC (Military Pay Currency) apiece.

I've always maintained ever since, that the word quickly got out and the whole country had a crash course in capitalism. I never said they were dumb.

In recent years I've heard folks remark that communism would fail in Vietnam, and it will relearn capitalism again. Hell yeah, they will - we taught them pretty good as far back as 1966.

So, instead of reeducating ourselves- we assumed (the first couple of days) that we'd just uncovered a highly organized bunch of VC.

I'm pretty sure that I spent the first night of the operation (July 18th) on ambush duty. I kind of remember that instead of being able to kick back a little the next day (July 19th), we were moving pretty fast up these creek beds. (Normally we would have had a break if we'd just spent the whole night on ambush duty.) I was being traded off with a couple of the other points in the company. We went from a more open river bed area (of the day before) up into narrow streambeds and rugged gorges.

We were hitting pockets of resistance along the way. Because it was getting narrower and more difficult to climb up and down these big boulders scattered everywhere in a canyon like area - we began trading off platoons for the head of our company sized column. (It was too difficult for any flanking maneuver.) Making progress was tiring work - especially without getting any sleep the night before.

I remember that we started to uncover caches of enemy supplies along the way. Lots of them. The one thing I remember most, was the huge amount of .51 cal. machinegun belts we found. They were boxed up in spot-welded galvanized boxes. No kidding! It took us most of a drizzly morning to move the boxes, fire-bucket style, to the rear. (Wherever that was?) Slipping and sliding in the red clay mud. Every time a box was passed to me, my mind would flash to metal shop class in high school, just the year before. Shit - I had made boxes like that...bending the galvanized sheets in a huge press, and then spot welding them together.

Something else that brought back old memories almost surrealistically, was winding our way up through the canyon areas, and along fast-moving streams. It reminded me of the trout fishing excursions I'd taken into the mountains as a kid. Again, not that long before. Instead of following the trails and the easy way up these canyons, we had to leap frog around. The reason for this is because the gooks would place an automatic weapons guy along the trail to slow us down. It worked, too. A couple of our guys got hit, before we started changing tactics. It got to be real tiring climbing around on those boulders with all of our gear on. Banged up knees were the rule of the day. A couple of times, before we moved too far into the canyons, we had air support drop in. Usually they'd be these neat prop planes like a P-51, that would come down, drop their ordnance, and then barrel roll out of the canyon. I felt like we were in WW II or something.

As I finished this last piece, I decided to take a ride down to the stables where we keep our horses. The pieces and snippets were starting to come at me, and I needed a break - if you know what I mean. Anyway, I find peace around nature. It's been that way for most of my life. Growing up as a kid, I had a lot of elbow-room. The solitude of the mountains in Northern California, and the wide-open prairies of Montana were a kid's best friend. Hunting, fishing, exploring - you name it. I was lucky then, and probably never really appreciated it until the war. I was lucky, because I had both

worlds, the mountains and the plains, and knew how to find adventure. And, I was comfortable with solitude. As I am now. It helps me think. And, it soothes my soul, when I think about things relating to the war.

I'm pretty certain (now) that I spent the night of the 19th with one of the new guys. He wasn't really new, because I'd seen him before, and I think he was from one of the other platoons. His name was Cpl. John C. Holoka, and they stuck him in our platoon as a squad leader, because we were short a few guys. (I don't remember who he replaced because things were changing practically every day.)

John was one of those guys you just liked right off. His smile, maybe, and/or his easy style and demeanor. We dug our hole and started the normal 50% alert for the night – one guy on, for each guy off. I remember being apprehensive that night, with the way things had been going since we started the operation. I made it known to him that I wasn't sure who we were up against, but that to me they appeared to be better supplied and better equipped than us. And, I could tell even at that time – we were outnumbered. He tossed it aside, and said we'd be alright because we had lots of air support, and even naval and field artillery to back us up. He made me feel a little easier, and I think he realized I was concerned enough to stay awake a little longer to keep me company. I was just dead tired too, and I think he may have been worried that I'd fall asleep. (Something that I would never have done under any circumstance.) I'd glance over at him from time-to-time as he talked to me. I could tell he was writing someone, by cupping a match for a second - then trying to write real fast before it went out. I think he might have been writing his girl friend, because he mentioned when he got home, he was going to spend a lot more time with her. And, he said he was going to go back to school, and further his education. That got me to thinking. I supposed I wasn't the only one there that night thinking about doing things a little differently, if given another chance. I found out that he didn't even have to be on the operation. He had volunteered to go because of the men... He hadn't wanted them to think that he'd bug out on them until they made it back from the operation.

On July 20th, we pretty much repeated what we'd done the day before. We came across Mike Company again. At this time, we were rotating our platoons. One would let the other move ahead whenever they got too tired. So, it may have been true with the other companies (India & Kilo) as well. I saw my buddies, and was disturbed to hear a couple of guys I'd been through Boot Camp with, had been killed on the first day. (Could they have been on those choppers that I'd seen going down? I didn't think those choppers were ours.)

We kept hitting enemy base camps. We kept getting sporadic fire trying to hold us down. But, we'd work around them, and get them in the end. We found more and more of their stuff. Uniforms drying on bamboo racks and fires with kettles of rice and fish over fires that were still burning. I found myself thinking, "Who were these guys?"

Next: HASTINGS AT 34, Part III (*More of July 20, and 21, 1966*)

McGINTY, JOHN J. III

Rank and organization: Second Lieutenant (then S/Sgt.), U.S. Marine Corps, Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, 3d Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force. place and date: Republic of Vietnam, 18 July 1966. Entered service at: Laurel Bay, S.C. Born: 21 January 1940, Boston, Mass. Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. 2d Lt. McGinty's platoon, which was providing rear security to protect the withdrawal of the battalion from a position which had been under attack for 3 days, came under heavy small arms, automatic weapons and mortar fire from an estimated enemy regiment. With each successive human wave which assaulted his 32-man platoon during the 4-hour battle, 2d Lt. McGinty rallied his men to beat off the enemy. In 1 bitter assault, 2 of the squads became separated from the remainder of the platoon. With complete disregard for his safety, 2d Lt. McGinty charged through intense automatic weapons and mortar fire to their position. Finding 20 men wounded and the medical corpsman killed, he quickly reloaded ammunition magazines and weapons for the wounded men and directed their fire upon the enemy. Although he was painfully wounded as he moved to care for the disabled men, he continued to shout encouragement to his troops and to direct their fire so effectively that the attacking hordes were beaten off. When the enemy tried to out-flank his position, he killed 5 of them at point-blank range with his pistol. When they again seemed on the verge of overrunning the small force, he skillfully adjusted artillery and air strikes within 50 yards of his position. This destructive firepower routed the enemy, who left an estimated 500 bodies on the battlefield. 2d Lt. McGinty's personal heroism, indomitable leadership, selfless devotion to duty, and bold fighting spirit inspired his men to resist the repeated attacks by a fanatical enemy, reflected great credit upon himself, and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the U.S. Naval Service

MODRZEJEWSKI, ROBERT J.

Rank and organization: Major (then Capt.), U.S. Marine Corps, Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, 3d Marine Division, FMF. place and date: Republic of Vietnam, 15 to 18 July 1966. Entered service at: Milwaukee, Wis. Born: 3 July 1934, Milwaukee, Wis. Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. On 15 July, during Operation HASTINGS, Company K was landed in an enemy-infested jungle area to establish a blocking position at a major enemy trail network. Shortly after landing, the company encountered a reinforced enemy platoon in a well-organized, defensive position. Maj. Modrzejewski led his men in the successful seizure of the enemy redoubt, which contained large quantities of ammunition and supplies. That evening, a numerically superior enemy force counterattacked in an effort to retake the vital supply area, thus setting the pattern of activity for the next 2 1/2 days. In the first series of attacks, the enemy assaulted repeatedly in overwhelming numbers but each time was repulsed by the gallant marines. The

second night, the enemy struck in battalion strength, and Maj. Modrzejewski was wounded in this intensive action which was fought at close quarters. Although exposed to enemy fire, and despite his painful wounds, he crawled 200 meters to provide critically needed ammunition to an exposed element of his command and was constantly present wherever the fighting was heaviest, despite numerous casualties, a dwindling supply of ammunition and the knowledge that they were surrounded, he skillfully directed artillery fire to within a few meter* of his position and courageously inspired the efforts of his company in repelling the aggressive enemy attack. On 18 July, Company K was attacked by a regimental-size enemy force. Although his unit was vastly outnumbered and weakened by the previous fighting, Maj. Modrzejewski reorganized his men and calmly moved among them to encourage and direct their efforts to heroic limits as they fought to overcome the vicious enemy onslaught. Again he called in air and artillery strikes at close range with devastating effect on the enemy, which together with the bold and determined fighting of the men of Company K, repulsed the fanatical attack of the larger North Vietnamese force. His unparalleled personal heroism and indomitable leadership inspired his men to a significant victory over the enemy force and reflected great credit upon himself, the Marine Corps, and the U.S. Naval Service.

HASTINGS AT 34, Part III. (July 20, and 21, 1966)

WHO ARE THOSE GUYS?

A friend called me last night. Said, "I don't remember that Dak character, but I sure do remember the C-ration incident with the B2's." We laughed about it, and a couple of other things I've covered so far, and then talked about the first few days before the 'Hill'. Remembering is hard. For some reason, many of the guys of Lima Company have a hard time going there. It may very well be, that the situations that came later in the operation took precedence over the smaller details. I still think they're important. Even down to the C-rats we were eating, which by-the-way were few. The details trigger memories. (*..and may help others remember?*)

So, I'll start with that. Food.

We came charging into one base camp, on or around the 20th of July, only to find that once again we had caught our enemy off guard. Once again, there was a brief, but violent, gun battle. The gooks lost. This time though, along with various pieces of clothing and other paraphernalia, we found food still cooking on their fires. They must've been real close. What else was new . . . It was frustrating to be right on top of them (*whoever 'them' was*) and keep finding they'd gotten away.

As usual, I'm mentally trying to calculate how many had been there. Guess who's coming to dinner? Then it hit me, as if I had been slapped right upside my head. Shit! The balls of the little f***ers! To be eating supper at my table! Where art thou, Goldie Gook? Wait a minute . . . If they're so brazen to be eating over open fires, knowing full well that we're not only in the area, but right on their little tails – then . . . Damn! They've gotta have more guys than we do! Must be . . . we're not a threat to them at all!

I mentioned this to someone of importance, but the point gets lost with the excitement of finding all kinds of papers and stuff around. Not to mention more food, because along with whatever it was they were cooking (*dirty rice with bits of fish or some other meat mixed in it*). There were also some cages with live chickens - and even a couple of pigs. (*Several of these items made it to the palates of some of our more rank-conscious brethren later that evening.*) I sat down and thought about things for a moment, while the rest of the troops came through. I looked around. Real hard. I bet that it was a staging area. Had to be, with all of the stuff laying around. The paths leading in every direction were well worn. And, there were bunkers dug into the side of the creek bed. God knows what they'd carried off just before we got there. I was starting to piece together what I'd been sensing all along. Whoever they were – they wasn't VC.

I hadn't really seen any enemy bodies up to that point (*but that was rapidly about to change*). Somebody had remarked that these guys had uniforms of a sort we hadn't seen before. What did they mean? I looked around me. Scattered in the brush was something that caught my eye. I went over and fished the item out from underneath some bushes. A canteen and cartridge belt. They were the first like them that I'd seen. The canteen was made of plastic, I noted with disgust. Ours were made of aluminum. Solid. This one had a red star raised in relief towards the

neck. The cartridge belt was kind of like our web gear, but different. Cheaper, I noted again with disgust. Someone found a bunch of pith helmets (*in some boxes, I think*). They had red stars on them too. We had found some weapons in the last two base camps. They still had packing grease on them (*cozmoline?*). I carried one for a while, until Gunny Dias decided he wanted it, and relieved me of it. Okay by me, because it was a strange-looking rifle, and I had plenty to carry already. That one looked like it had been stamped out of a sardine can or something. Banana shaped clip and all. In fact, that's what I called it – 'the banana gun'. (*I didn't know at the time, that it was the infamous AK-47 assault rifle.*)

The clothes we found laying around? Well, they weren't the black pajamas we'd come to associate with the VC. Hmmm . . . I sort of remember that these were an OD-type green and there were some that were khaki or brownish-color. Well, didn't matter. I'd just be a little more careful when tracking them. Along with everything else, there were plenty of samples of their footwear laying around. It was interesting . . . they looked a lot like tennis shoes. I still hadn't found any mines or trip wires yet. (*That, too, was about to change . . .*) Besides, we had them on the run. As long as we could keep them off guard – it would be to our benefit. (That would change . . .) Each time we hit one of these 'base' camps, it would slow us down until we could sort through everything and check it all out. Usually we'd go into a perimeter-type defense around the general area. (*As if the gooks would be so foolish as to come back for their stuff.*)

"Harris! Keep it moving!" I guess I'd been sitting down a little too long. I remember already starting to feel dead tired. I was on point nearly all of the time. If not with the Company, then with our platoon, and that takes a lot out of you. As I got up, I thought about keeping the canteen and cartridge belt as a souvenir. Then, just tossed it back in the brush. Figured the S-2 (3?) guys might need it. They were the ones who were supposed to make heads or tails out of all of this. I noticed one of the guys walking by with some gook money. He gave me some paper bills (*piasters, dong?*), and I ended up stuffing them in my shirt pocket. I wondered if they got paid as much as us - about \$125 a month, with combat pay. I still have some of that gook money laying around in a shoe box in the attic.

I don't think it was more than a couple hours later, that I was coming around a bend in the streambed, and all hell broke loose. I'd just been admiring the beauty of the place. The tall trees were almost dusty looking as rays of light filtered down into the shade of the streambed. I was wading upstream in the water trying to be quiet, and at the same time staying off the trail. Pieces of the tree next to me started to fly by me, almost before I heard the noise of the automatic rifle. But I'd already started a dive for cover. How is that? I thought about it afterwards, and surmised that already my senses were so keyed into everything around me, that the slightest thing out of place registered 'real quick'. Survival instincts – that's what I called them. I began to trust that sixth sense or whatever it was that made all of my senses combine to 100% alert. That saved my can more than a few times. And they stayed with me long after the war. Have you ever had someone startle the hell out of you unexpectedly by coming into your peripheral vision? Happens all the time with me. It can be downright embarrassing at times, let me tell you.

I let off an instinctive shot, as I dove into the water behind a boulder, spotting a muzzle flash in the tree line to my left. And, damned if I didn't hit the little f***er!

No kidding! I just couldn't believe it – probably the best single shot I ever made in the Nam. The guy just flipped to his side as if he'd been hit by a frying pan. But, the thing that really scared the living shit out of me was the guy behind me about a hundred feet. He let go of his M-14 automatic. *(He was one of our guys!)* Tracers went zipping past my head. I almost swung around and shot him too. That was it . . . I was done for the day. I asked for someone else to take my place at point. I didn't even bother going over and looking at the gook. The other guy claimed the kill anyway. I was shaking like a leaf. Geez, that'd been just too damn close *(both of them)*. Had I blinked, I'd have died. *(It wouldn't be the last time...not by a long shot.)*

Later, after the sun had slipped down behind the hills, we dug in for the night. I drew Pfc. Robert Stewart for a fighting-hole partner. Man, did we luck out. Captain Tatum must've been aware that we were all dog-tired or something. Because, instead of climbing the highest hill around for the night *(which was his typical thing)*, we found a little knoll which stretched into a small meadow just before ending at the tree line. My platoon (3rd Platoon) dug in about one hundred yards from that tree line. For the first time on this operation, the ground was soft and easy to dig. Fine by me, because I was dead tired. Stewart and I dug a really good hole. It was deep for a change, and had a grenade sump and everything.

While I was rummaging around in my pack and setting the last of my C-rats out on the edge of the hole, Bob crawled over to the fighting hole next door and began to barter his stuff for some good (better?) rats. It was almost dark. Then, suddenly, there was a burst of automatic weapons fire, just as the dirt of our hole started kicking up. Several of the cans we'd set out went flying. To this day I don't know why I wasn't hit, because the can I'd set directly in front of me hit me in the helmet covering me with ham and limas. As I instinctively squeezed down into the hole (puckering my little you-know-what into the size of a peanut), Bob comes flying in landing right on top of me. The ensuing, rapid exchange of words and gunfire went something like this:

“Jesus f***ing Christ, do you always have to land on me like that!!?”

(As if this happened all of the time. . .)

“Didn't realize I was so hungry!” he quips, letting off a burst with his M-14 on automatic.

“Well, dinners shot!” I said with disgust, wiping off a chunk of lima bean with my sleeve.

Then we both opened up, even though we couldn't see a thing. I liked Bob. He always displayed a sense of humor – even in the damndest of situations.

Later that night, we got mortared. The shrill sound of incoming projectiles was the first I'd ever heard. I hoped it would be the last. Most of the rounds landed behind us in the CP area. One guy was killed, and a couple more wounded, before the terrible screaming stopped. I learned to dread that sound more than just about any other in Vietnam. *(Remember, this was still early in the war. We hadn't yet gotten to hear the rockets that became even more of a terror.)* To this day, I can't stand those whistling Pete's, or whatever they are, around the 4th of July.

JULY 21, 1966

I started the day out dog-tired again. After the initial automatic weapons fire from the night before, we'd been placed on 100% alert (everybody stays awake). And, who could sleep through mortars anyway?

I was placed on point again... for most of the day. To me, it was an honor to be on point, although to this day, I cannot explain why. Guess I felt like I was good at an important job or something. Being able to see things that others couldn't. At least hoping you could see things . . .

My squad leader, Cpl. Bill Troy, first noticed that I had a gift for tracking on Okinawa. We were up in the Northern Training Area (NTA), on a night maneuver, moving along the same kind of creeks we were dealing with now. After trudging along for most of the night, or what seemed like most of the night, I said to Troy,

"Are we supposed to get ambushed tonight?"

"No, you idiot. Why?" He whispers back at me in the dark.

"Well, because there's been a lot of traffic in front of us for about the past hour."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he sez to me, a little irritated.

"Don't you see the heel marks on the trail?" I sez matter-of-factly.

"No, I don't see any heel marks. Show me!" *(So, I practically put his face in them trying to point them out in the dark. More touch than see.)*

"How can you tell how long ago they've been here?" he snaps.

"Just look at the grass." I sez. "See how it's starting to spring back up?"

"Maybe I do. I don't know. What are you - Daniel Boone or somethin'?"

Anyway, I took the lead and we worked our way around, completely surprising the fake enemy (our guys). We ended up ambushing the ambush. Troy was delighted, and I got a second job. And...a lot of responsibility.

So now, about mid-morning, I'm at the lead, moving right along. For some reason, I think we're out of the creek and canyon area for a change, and moving through the forest. Tall trees everywhere. Spooky! The trail, like so many of the others, was well worn. There was a sense of urgency, but to this day I don't know why. It was really quiet. I had a feeling they were watching us. The birds had all fallen silent. I was pretty far out in front of the others.

If anything was a problem with being at the point position, it was trying to maintain a distance that would allow the others to stay in step, and yet, not crowd me. I couldn't get so far ahead that the others would not be able to see my hand signals. I felt the hair on my neck rise. I was thinking about how much I had loved the woods and forests of my youth. What had once been one of my most enjoyable interests - tracking animals and learning their ways), had now evolved into a deadly game of cat and mouse with the enemy.

Several times that morning, I had come across trip wires leading to booby traps. I'd mark them and keep moving as directed. *(Let the engineers figure out their detonation devices and explosive charges.)* Later, I'd hear the yell of "FIRE IN THE HOLE!" followed by a muffled explosion behind me. One thing I'll always remember (as anyone ever has, who has had the point position), is the dread of tripping a 'bouncing-Betty' antipersonnel mine. Of all the many ways of dying, none aroused as much fear in me as much as those damn things. The idea of one of these popping up and leveling me by blowing off my legs, not to mention taking the family jewels... Well, you couldn't think about it, or it would just drive you crazy. With

that thought, my ever-searching eyes became more focused. I never asked what kinds of mines I found during my time over there. *(The one that finally got me was identified as a Chi-Com 34 by the shrapnel that tore into my body...but, that's another story.)*

At one point, as I was starting to duck under a tree that was leaning precariously across the trail, something grabbed me as if it were human. My imagination playing tricks on me. *Or was it?* Whoa up boy! "Well I'll be damned!" I muttered under my breath. If I'd never done it as a kid to kill small game - it would have gotten me. I gave a hand signal to halt the column, and just stood motionless for a moment. There, just yards in front of me, but so well camouflaged I'd have never seen it in a million years - was a crossbow! Unbelievable! If I hadn't done the very same thing as a kid, I'd have missed it for sure. And, with the way it was set up, I'd have caught the bolt right in the chest!

I worked my way around the trip wire, cautiously checking to see if there was another trap. Gooks were good at that sort of thing...they'd give you the impression that you found their booby trap - just to nail you with another. Hence the term 'booby'. I have to tell you, that crossbow was one of my most prized possessions, until it disappeared into obscurity a few days later, after I was med-evaced from the 'hill'. It was very well made of laminated hardwoods...almost had a purple patina. I found myself musing over it after I'd shown the others. I wondered how my obituary would've read? Twentieth Century Marine warrior - killed by a crossbow.

Later that day, I was on point again when we topped a hill or a ridge (one or the other). I reeled back as if I'd been knocked over by a sudden gust of wind. My jaw just sagged with disbelief. In front of me, as far as the eye could see, unfolded a scene of complete and utter destruction. What I saw scared me beyond reason. I don't know why - except it reminded me of what a nuclear holocaust must look like. Nothing identifiable was left standing of what must have been a B-52 saturation bombing. Huge craters pocketed the terrain like a moonscape, and what may have been trees at one time were shards of splintered trunks and wasted beauty. Huge pieces of shrapnel protruded from anything over six inches high. *(The closest any picture, mental or otherwise, has come since - is the destruction of Mt. Saint Helens in 1980.)*

I just stared in disbelief for a few minutes while the others got up to where I was standing. I was witnessing something that I hope people will never see. It was indescribable. There is just no way anything bigger than a lizard could have survived. No way. No how. Thank God, the enemy didn't have weapons like that or we would have been up a creek for sure! *(Could this have been the support called in by Kilo Company 3 / 4 just a couple of days before?)*

Before the sun would rise to shine on another exciting day, several of the men shuffling by me, would witness yet another incredible sight.

Next: HASTINGS AT 34, Part IV *(Ambush of July 21-22, 1966 and more)*

THE AMBUSH

It took a while for the whole company to skirt the badlands. This is what I labeled the area where the B-52's had scorched the earth bare. In the field, we always tried to give the enemy as little opportunity at a target as possible. One of the most important rules of Marine combat tactical movement, was to never cross open ground if at all possible. The same reasoning that went right along with that was never leaving a silhouette on the horizon. Of course, there were times it was unavoidable. As I think back on it now, it may have been because of this minor delay that we made our evening camp a little later than normal. With all of the activity of the past three days, there was certainly just cause to minimize our presence as much as we could. Other than that, I can't think of anything unusual happening for the rest of that evening.

There was an urgency to send out our ambush teams for the night. I may be mistaken after all of these years, but I believe we always tried to get at least two ambushes set up every night. At least when we were on company-sized operations. I'm pretty sure that they were usually about squad-size, and there would almost always be a machinegun team (two men) sent along to consolidate the fire power. A squad if it were up to strength, which was very seldom, would usually have about twelve to fourteen guys. I'm going to give those who read this who aren't familiar with the nomenclature of a rifle squad, a little bit of an idea of what is involved here.

A squad is supposed to have three fire-teams of four men each, a grenadier, and a squad leader – usually a corporal or sergeant E-5. Each of these fire-teams is made up of an automatic weapons guy (in the Marine Corps of 1966, he usually carried an M-14 rifle with a selector set on automatic), and an assistant automatic weapons guy, and two rifleman scouts – all who carried M-14's without selectors. The grenadier carried an M79 Grenade launcher, a nifty little weapon that looked like a large fat single barreled sawed off shotgun. It cracked open, and loaded like a shotgun. It fired 40-millimeter projectiles that could be high explosive, illumination or smoke. It was a handy little weapon – but not much good unless you had at least twenty feet of space for the projectiles to arm once they left the barrel. Usually one man in the squad was designated the assistant grenadier in case he was knocked out of action, and usually had been through the same training as the grenadier. Along with my official titles of rifleman scout and tracker, I was also an assistant grenadier. I'll admit to it now - I always (secretly) kinda hoped something would happen to the grenadier, because I loved that blooper . . .

Of course, nearly everyone knows what kind of firepower an M60 machinegun can put out. So, theoretically at least, you had around fifteen well-armed men, at least three carried automatic weapons, a fourth carried a 'big' automatic weapon, and one guy that could pump out grenades as fast as he could crack, extract, load and shoot. Awesome! I think most of us saw demonstrations of this fire-power in action at one time or another.

To further give the reader an idea of the rest of the table of organization (TO) within a rifle battalion, there were three squads to a platoon, and three platoons to a company. Weapons Company which was divided up within the battalion's four rifle

companies, consisted of 3.5 rockets, 60 mm. mortars, and, of course, the stalwart M60 machine gunners.

So, with this in mind, I'm going to say from my memory of it back then, that you'd have two squads on ambush duty – one from each platoon, with an imaginary third team on reserve. And then, because those squads were typically on 100% alert all night (fully awake), they'd take a reserve slot the next day with little or light duty. These ambush duty slots were rotated through all three platoons with the thought that, not only was it the fair thing to do, but you could function better that way. Let me tell you...nobody liked ambush duty!

Unfortunately, none of the squads, in our platoon anyway - were up to strength. There were a lot of reasons why. Although heat hadn't been as much of a problem as it had been on previous operations, there were still some minor heat casualties. At least some of our absences were, in fact, from previous operations for one reason or another. We weren't getting a lot of replacements in at the time (that I was aware of) to compensate for it. Also (and I may be wrong here), some of the guys who had been abruptly left behind in the Philippines – still hadn't caught up with us yet. There are some interesting stories behind that missing movement event that would make up a chapter all of it's own. Some other time . . .

Having said all this, let me proceed with the rest of this segment. In my account of this operation 'The Battle For Hill 362', which I wrote off the cuff back in 1996 – thirty years after the battle, I mention the ambush of July 21, 1966. Actually, I had originally recorded it as the 20th of July. I'm going to revise that date now, as I feel pretty sure my present timetable is more accurate, and with what I've learned since 1996 – fits in better with later (upcoming) events. While reading this next part, I want you to understand that I had not yet learned fully all the facts of India Company's tragedy on Hill 362. And I'm still trying to piece it together in any case. So, let's go with the night of July 21st, until someone someday - sets it straight.

July 21, 1966 - 1800 hours. (or later?)

Fire team leader LCpl. Bob Sorenson's squad has ambush duty tonight. It's getting late to be going out looking for a site. All of us have been pushing it to the limits. We're dead tired, hungry, and every squad has had casualties of one sort or another. (if not from the enemy - then from the heat, and dysentery.) Water, for the first time, was not a problem. There were streams all over the place.

Sorenson gets his men together. Among them are Gerry Hohol and Tom Palardy. He can't get a machine-gun for some reason tonight, which leaves maybe one or two M-14s on automatic. I think there is a total of seven men on this team - not even two whole fireteams.

{Every night there would be at least one or more ambushes set up. They would usually be concealed along a trail or path, leading into the companies AOR (Area of Responsibility). A machine-gunner was almost always sent along to solidify the accumulated firepower within the team. The idea behind an ambush was to set in - in an area with good concealment - and hopefully an area that would leave little, if any, cover for the enemy. A rope attached to each man would be used by the team leader to make sure everyone was awake throughout the night. One tug (You awake?), two tugs back (Yeah), on down the line. You would only spring an

ambush if the enemy could be seen, front to back within your TAR (Target Area of Responsibility). With the element of surprise on your side, and the right firepower - an ambush was a deadly tool. Course we were taught that if WE were ambushed, our best chance of survival was to turn into the ambush and charge - hoping to psyche out our foe, and gain the advantage.}

Sorenson gets his team into a site just before darkness sets in. It's not a very good one, but with the only time available, the best he can do. Everyone ties up with the rope. It's a warm night. Bugs crawl into your nose and eyes, but you don't dare slap them, or make any kind of movement or noise. You hope a Cobra or other poisonous snake doesn't decide to make your body heat - home.

Palardy nods off to sleep, and starts to snore. A loud grating snore. Everyone attached to him tug the rope as hard as they can to try and wake him up.

Then it happens . . . The first NVA soldier enters the trap! Then another, and yet another. Asshole to bellybutton, more and more are entering the 'killing zone'. With a final frantic tug of the rope, Palardy is finally yanked from his beauty sleep. Fortunately the enemy doesn't hear his last abrupt snort. What he sees in front of him causes his eyes to pop out, and his heart and breathing to stop. Hohol and the others also stop breathing. For by now the whole zone is full of NVA! They are filling the trail in front of them - not more than ten feet away!

Sorenson loses count after thirty or forty. He is torn as to what to do. It is with the firing of his weapon that the ambush will be sprung. With the firepower he has in his team, they might with luck get maybe a dozen. It's sheer suicide. There are too many - too well armed. The enemy has enough cover on the other side of the trail, to protect them when the shooting starts. The company is too far away to reach them - in the dark - in time. He starts to squeeze the trigger. He is a good Marine - he will fight . . . to the death . . .

Beads of sweat are pouring from Palardy's face. He's afraid the sound of it hitting the leaves close to him will be heard by the enemy. Hohol, too, is sweating profusely, and is worried that his thoughts can be heard by the enemy. "Don't do it, Bob - please don't pull that trigger . . ." he's thinking - "We'll all die!" He has a grenade-launcher, but it won't do much good at such close range (takes at least twenty feet for the grenades to arm). He tries to remember how many magazines he'd brought along for his pistol.

Sorenson re-assesses the situation. Can't see the last of them yet, and the first ones are already shuffling out of sight - no telling how many more are coming through. He relaxes his trigger finger . . .

They spend the rest of the night afraid - to even blink an eye.

I wake up to the sound of Sorenson getting his ass chewed up one side and down the other. Can't remember who was doing the chewing. This after he reported back in - and was honest about his 'predicament'.

Over the years, there's been a lot of controversy over this incident. Many felt Sorenson should have sprung that ambush (regardless of the consequences.) Some say they may have prevented Hill 362". I talked with nearly every man who was on that ambush, and they all said the same thing - It would have been suicide. Every one of those men were good Marines...with no question of their courage. Had they committed suicide on that ambush, our whole company might have gone

down several days later in the fight for Hill 362. Gerry Hohol and Tom Palardy ended up defending the fighting hole next to mine during that battle. Had they not been there defending their position with an M-14 on automatic - we surely would have been overrun.

Corporal Bill Troy, several years ago during a phone conversation, pointed out the fact that we were trained 'not' to spring an ambush - unless the enemy was totally within it's fields of fire. My feeling then, as now, is that Lance Corporal Bob Sorenson - made the right decision.

Having recently discussed this ambush once again with Bill Troy, I stand by the way I originally wrote it. I feel it would be hypothetical (even now) to assume that the enemy that passed unscathed through the Sorenson ambush, might have been the same that attacked India Company the next day. With so much enemy activity all over the whole area, who could be certain? It may very well be, that one day it can all be deciphered from publicly released after-action reports and so on, but the fact remains, that had the ambush gone down that night...a bunch of good Marines would have surely gone down with it.

Next: HASTINGS AT 34, Part V (July 22-23, 1966)

A NIGHT IN HELL

I think what stands out most to me now about LCpl. Bob Sorenson's mishap, is I can still hear some of the guys who were on that ambush, describing it to me in detail the following morning (as if it were yesterday). I remember something else too – a very dejected Marine who up until then was always squared away, and an excellent leader. I felt sorry for Sorenson then and I guess I do now. I remember him getting chewed out, and without mentioning any names, will say that the guy chewing him out was one hell of a gung-ho individual and an excellent Marine in many respects, but wasn't always concerned with the *overall* well-being of the men under him. We'll let it go at that.

I'm certain at this juncture in my life, that today (the 22nd of July), was the lost day that some of us have referred to when trying to piece together these events. I attend a Lima Company Reunion every year. It is one of the most important and rewarding experiences I've ever enjoyed and hope to always be able to participate in. The camaraderie is just so strong between not only us of the 'Old Corps' ('66), but with the subsequent individuals who filled our shoes until the very end as well. We have a lot of fun – and pride is so thick you can cut it with a sword. Many times, we've talked about how this operation affected our lives forever, and many times these talks have shaken loose memories over the years. But there has been this one 'lost day' that we (I?) can't seem to account for (along with plenty of other things).

I may have just figured it out. Over the years, I've had bits and 'snippets' of a memory of sitting along a creek bed in the shade. Even dozing off for a while – something I was not prone to do. I'm beginning to think that we may have gotten a little rest (for a change). All these years, I remembered constantly moving without so much as a break. And, no sleep...certainly none worth mentioning. I'm going to say it wasn't much of a break, but enough so that now anyway, that lost day would (could) figure into the time frame here.

I'm also going to say, that this break involved the whole company – that it wasn't just my platoon. And I'm pretty sure that we didn't dig in, but instead spread out in a haphazard company-sized perimeter. It's this sort of thing that brings the memories into focus. A snippet comes to you. You go with it, and concentrate on it for a while . . .

Something I've been proud of since first writing about Hill 362, is that I have been able to retain some basic facts about what happened. Stuff that I kept in my noggin for years, and then finally spit out on paper some thirty years later. Writing was more out of frustration than anything else. I felt frustration over remembering some things that I thought were important (...*who could forget something like that?*), and over other stuff that either wouldn't come to me or wasn't important. Although by addressing it, I've had better insight into what was happening. By talking with people about it, I saw things from other people's perspectives. Many times, it would jar someone's remembrances loose. I've often been surprised over subsequent years to have guys come up to me and say: "Right on...I'd forgotten about that!"

I don't know why I feel that I have to keep hammering away at Hastings. Reliving it, year after year. Unless it would be to someday make some of sense of it. For whatever purpose, I'm not sure yet.

Anyway, I'm going to say that the whole company holed up for nearly the whole morning while patrols were sent out to try to verify Sorenson's observations from that night/morning. I don't remember having anything to do with this, as far as scouting or analysis. Plausible? Yes, and it does stand to reason. It would be the reason why we weren't required to dig in. We had to be able to move quickly if the enemy were found. I don't think anything came of it, and the company moved out sometime in the early afternoon.

Later on that day, and again using a snippet of a memory - I'm going to say that I must've been on point, because at least one other person remembers the same incident. I was in or near (once again) the streambed. I remember bending down to fill my canteen, and thinking this is what it had been like when I was fishing in the high Sierras and the Bitterroot as a boy. Clear, clean water rushing over mossy rocks. The water trickled noisily through various crevices making up the stream. The sound of it refreshing for some reason, as you anticipated casting an egg or a fly into a pool on the opposite side with maybe a cutthroat or a rainbow trout, lingering in the shadows of that big boulder. I had to be careful of getting carried away with my thoughts, especially after the incident just a day or so before. You couldn't relax for a minute. Still, it was hard at times to focus on the situation at hand, when the aesthetics of it all reminded me of other, happier times.

Just a few minutes later, further up the stream, the whole scene suddenly evaporated, as if it were made of clouds being chased away in a windy sky. The gruesome sight of a body floating in the dark shady pool of water in front of me - took me totally by surprise. I must have leaped back a foot, at least. It was the first time I'd actually seen a dead gook, up close and personal. Sure, there'd been times we had seen dead enemy since the operation had started, but I was never aware of them in that way. Just a brief glance, if any, as we moved on in a hurry.

This was different. This guy was laying face up in the shallow water. There was no blood - but his face was practically shot off. I could tell that he'd been in the water for a while. All of a sudden, the smell of rotting human flesh hit me as I spotted yet another one laying to one side in the shadows further up the creek bed. There is no other smell in this world as bad (that I know of) as that of rotting flesh. *God! And I'd just filled up my canteen!* I yanked it off of my cartridge belt and poured it out. I heard a noise just then and saw the guy behind me doing the same. Turned out, it was Gerry Hohol and, like me - he had a hard time ever drinking out of *that* canteen again. To this day, I don't know who wasted the gooks. Turned out, there were about three of them. This seems to be the thing that confuses the men that fought on this battleground, as much as anything. Who had done what where, and when?

Late that afternoon there was another gunfight with the enemy. I must have been in the rear by this time, because I remember coming up on the still smoldering bodies of three more of the enemy. It was a gruesome example of what a 3.5 rocket launcher can achieve firing willie-peter rounds (white phosphorous rounds). The charred remains of the bodies were hardly recognizable by the time I came along.

The phosphorous was still sputtering in the burned flesh as it ignited pockets of oxygen (in their lungs?). I mentally marked this down in my head on a list that included many other entries - as "not a way I wanted to die".

Later, as dusk was approaching, my squad leader Cpl. Troy came over to me and asked me if I could pick a spot on his map, for a good ambush site. I studied it for a minute and put my finger on a likely place from what I could tell by reading the contour lines and the trail. Before the actual ambush team was put together, I ended up sneaking out to where I could get a better look at the site with one of the other guys. (*I think Lopez of my squad went with me to check it out*). It was situated right off a well-traveled trail, and went right up against a steep hillside. It had a view of a slight depression or small narrow valley to the northeast. On the other side of this were some rather large hills. By the time we finished setting in for the ambush, it was nearly dark.

That night, July 22nd, we witnessed one helluva fire fight up on the hill to our northeast. It looked as if someone was having a pretty hard time of it. You could see the flashes of artillery and mortars and tracers flying all over the place. I mentioned it later, on one of those small reel to-reel tape recordings that I would send home every once in a while. Had it been earlier in the month, it could have been mistaken for a Fourth of July fireworks display. It seems to me, even with all these years behind me now, that it lasted much of the night. I don't know what time it was when it all started. Even though we couldn't talk among ourselves in that ambush site, I'm sure we were all thinking the same thing. What the hell was going on...and who was catching all of the shit?

Something else I remember about that night was that it was wet and damp. It wasn't raining hard, but it was really dark, and there was a damp chill in the air. It's still there.

When I wrote about this, back in 1996, I hadn't learned about computers yet. I had a Canon word processor, which had finally replaced an ancient Smith-Corona typewriter I'd used for years. Although I attended a viewing of the Moving Wall at Camp Pendleton in 1990, and noticed then that the dates of several of my friends who died during this operation, appeared to be recorded incorrectly on the Wall. So, in my writings, I still maintain that this night ambush took place on the 22nd.

Something I've taken into consideration while writing this, is the information now available for reference on the Internet. I keep a number of files on my laptop along with links to certain websites. I keep records and information about Hastings always within reach. Unfortunately, I believe some of the data is contradictory, as far as the dates of some of those who were killed during this time. There are a few examples of this, as I go through that particular set of events. From what I have read, since I first wrote my version of *The Battle Of Hill 362*, my dates as to when India Company was first hit by the enemy is about right. With only a couple of minor differences. I hope to someday consolidate these areas, but they are of little importance in the overall picture as it stands right now. Any discrepancies that I've inadvertently made (without knowledge other than my memories), will be changed.

I'll include a little of what I've already written in *The Battle For Hill 362*, as it remains to be proven what is chronologically correct. I also urge readers to get to the heart of the matter by going to India Company's present day Internet web site at: <http://www.securenet.net/3rdbn5th/india35>, and by reading the stories written by Joe Holt, John Olsen, and former Lieutenant R. S. Williams – all eyewitness accounts of survival on Hill 362 during this historical battle.

The following is an excerpt from *The Battle For Hill 362* written five years ago.

We got back to the company area early in the morning of the 23rd, only to find everyone is getting ready to move out. It was India Company of our battalion that had gotten hit last night, and we were moving out to provide support. Normally our ambush team would be able to pick up a couple of winks because we had been up all night. We normally would have been in a reserve position. But, not today. I volunteered for the point position. I've got buddies in that company. No way would they put me in the rear of the column. But they did. We tried for the shortest route. Wrong! The gooks figured on this, and pinned us down with machine-gun fire all day. We were stuck in this stagnate stream - full of leaches! (Always an excuse for a smoke break, to burn the slimy little creatures off.) An occasional spent round would slam into the brackish water around us. The whole time, I was desperately thinking, 'Come on let's go. LET'S GO!' We ended up having to turn back. Everyone was depressed - we all had friends in India Company. We sent out the dusk patrol along the way. Jim Yakubsin's squad with Pfc. Bob Stallings at point . . .

Note: We would sometimes send a flanking patrol out to cover the company as it moved in whatever direction necessary. Most often, these type patrols were sent out towards the end of the day – hence the term 'dusk patrol'. (I'd like to mention here that I was proud recently, of being asked to speak in honor of my longtime friend, Jim Yakusin, who went on to serve twenty seven years with the Marine Corps including an active duty tour in Desert Storm in 1990).

Through the years, I have run across those I call the 'ghosts' of India Company - men who had served and fought on Hill 362. We would talk, and through them I have been able to piece together most of what had happened during the two tragic days it took for us to get to them. They lost a lot of men over those two days. Twenty-five men were killed in action...most of them on the first night. Just about everyone who survived - was wounded.

Stan, who had been a platoon radioman, told me that they just made a lot of mistakes. They had been given orders to get up Hill 362, and use it as a radio relay station. There had been a lot of action in the area - not just within our battalion AOR, but with 3/4 and several other battalions. With high hills separating the various battalions, a communications link was badly needed. So India Company was sent to the top of Hill 362.

When they started up, it was already dusk and getting darker. There were signs of the enemy all over - foxholes and even com-wire. They were in a hurry, and weren't able to use normal scouting procedures.

The enemy hit them hard. First, with an ambush that cut off First platoon. Then, with an enveloping attack that pinned down the rest of the company. I'll go into it further, later . . .

We made our first mistake. We decided to set up in the same positions as the night before. Not having been in those positions because of ambush duty - my squad had to dig in. I buddy up with Stuart again, and grumpily started to dig our fighting hole for the night. We hear a major fire fight off in the distance. Who is getting it this time? As I'm digging, Troy suddenly shows up.

"Come with me, Harris - I need your help", he says hurriedly.

"Aw, Jesus - Troy", I complain, "can't you find someone else?"

"I want you!", he snaps, "Lets go!" (We were all on edge. No sleep - no food, its getting on everyone's nerves.)

Once we're away from the rest of the squad Troy told me, "That was the dusk patrol that just got hit. Sergeant Bishop (?) is hit bad. And Stallings is dead. Got it between the eyes. Didn't want to tell the others just yet . . ."

"Mother F—king Son of a Bitch!", I curse between clinched teeth once again feeling the pain of losing a friend.

"Stallings was a good friend of mine!", I said trying hard to keep the tears from welling up in my eyes. A lump began to knot up in my throat.

"I know", said Troy quietly. "I want to set you in by the trail down there - cover them (the dusk patrol) when they come into our lines." He added, "Make sure the gooks aren't following them in". "The password will be 'light - house'."

He walked with me down the hill to the main trail, and we picked a spot. Lots of cover, but close enough to see what's happening. It was almost dark by this time. The inversion layer is going to make it a 'pitch black' night. It was so quiet - you could hear a pin drop . . .

Suddenly, off in the distance I heard a sound, like someone hitting a tree with an aluminum baseball bat. Metallic 'thunks' - a bunch of them. F--k! Mortars! My heart pounded out the thought that flashed through my brain... 'Where are they going to hit?!' Within seconds, we got the answer - and heard the shrill whistle of the projectiles coming down on us! We had no fighting hole to hide in - so we lay as flat against the ground as we could get. The first one landed just feet away. The ear-splitting explosion blew the elephant grass around us - flat! Either a rock or shrapnel hit me in the knee, and I yelled!

"YOU HIT?!" I hear Troy yell, as the explosions continued, but were slowly being 'walked' up the hillside and away from us.

"YEAH!", I yelled back, while reaching down to feel my knee. The trouser at the knee was sliced open. I could feel blood, but it didn't feel serious.

"Just a scratch", I tell him. "I'm O.K.!"

The mortar barrage lifts for a brief moment. We heard blood-curdling screams coming from the hillside just above us.

"Who's up there, Troy?!" I'm whispering now.

"Holoka's squad," he whispers back.

"WE GOTTA GET UP THERE!" I yell, as the mortars start hitting again. "HE'S GIVING THEM OUR POSITION!"

And I started to take off up the hill.

Troy grabbed me, "Wait a minute . . ." he said, "let me call the CP."
Troy has a PRC-'prick' 10 radio with him, and he called the CP (Command Post). I hear Gunny Dias' voice answer. "Yeah, get up there boys. Try and quiet it down - before we all get blown away. I'll send help..."

We went racing up the hill - which was covered with elephant grass at least six feet tall and sharp! It was pitch black by this time. The only light to see by were the flashes of the mortars exploding on the side of the hill!

I was no longer concerned about getting hit. We had to get up that hill. My buddies were hurt. As we got closer, I see a tall slender figure silhouetted against an explosion. Shit! It looked like . . . Nickerson!

We were yelling as we neared their lines - "DON'T SHOOT! IT'S TROY- HARRIS!"

It was Nickerson, and we watched his contorted figure in the eerie light of a flare. He was screaming in an awful way that I had never heard before, and never want to hear again. Chilled my soul - and the blood in my veins - into ice.

I tripped on something and fell into a fighting hole. I saw Troy grab Nickerson and hit the ground. The flare went out and it was dark again. Close by, I heard Corporal John Holoka's voice mumbling, "Shut up, Nickerson... Shut up, Nickerson..." It was like a broken record.

"John - are you O.K.?", I whispered.

"Shut up, Nickerson - Shut up, Nickerson . . .", he continued to plead.

Note: During our Lima 3/5 Reunion in Cincinnati, OH (1996), the original company commander of Lima 3/5, Reiss Tatum, attended for the first time. He informed me that the mortar barrage that I'm referring to here, probably would have been much worse, had not our F. O. (Forward Observer) attached to the company, Lt. Ed Connell, braved the incoming explosions and accurately pinpointed and quickly eliminated the enemy position, by calling in artillery fire.

I realized something was wrong. I slithered over next to him in the dark. I could feel his body laying there - but it was so dark that I couldn't really see him. I started to feel him from the boots up. My fingers came across a deep wound, gushing blood from above his knee. I had left my pack with Stewart when Troy had come to get me. So, all I had in the way of a bandage was a field dressing that I always carried in my shirt pocket. (A field dressing could be placed just about anywhere on the body...being pretty large with cloth straps.) I strapped this around his leg wound. At least the shrapnel hadn't hit an artery. I continued to feel his body for wounds. Again my fingers felt blood and a wound in his upper stomach. I needed more bandages, and feverishly started to feel around his fighting hole for his pack - and first aid kit. I cut my hand on a sharp object. It turned out to be a helmet - which was all torn to shreds. "Shit!" I exclaim under my breath. And forgetting everything else, I reached for his head and pulled it back as if I'd been burned! He had a terrible head wound!

About this time, some others came stumbling into the area - a corpsman among them. I grabbed him and said, "You've gotta help, Doc. This man's in bad shape - take care of him first. I don't have any more bandages."

After assessing the extent of the damage, in the dark and under fire, he did the best he could, and said, "I've got to get over to the next guy. You better get him back ASAP!" He didn't have to tell me that! I managed to find John's poncho, and yelled for help to get him onto it.

We carried John down the hill first because he was in the worst shape. We stumbled through the darkness...four men, carrying a man weighing nearly two hundred pounds,

down a hill of sharp elephant grass. There were still sporadic mortar explosions in and around the area. At one point, we were sloshing through a creek bed, slipping around in the mud. Several times, sliding down the sides of the streambed, we lost our balance and dropped him. He would just moan. We could smell and feel his blood sloshing around in the poncho. "I'm sorry John", I said. "We're doing the best we can... Hang in there, buddy. We're almost there..." Helping carry John Holoka down that hill through that awful darkness was the most heart-wrenching experience I've ever known. Finally, we got him to an area where they were going to try and med-evac the wounded - and we went back after Nickerson. He had been some morphine to quiet him down - but he was still in a lot of pain. (We found out later that shrapnel had destroyed his pancreas, part of his liver - and collapsed one of his lungs).

In Boot Camp, we were taught how to die in battle. True! Sergeant Payne, one of our DI's -would gather us around him just about every night before 'lights out'. And he'd say - "Most of you are going to be sent to war. Many of you won't be coming back. You will be dead!", he'd continue in his slow nasal voice, "Your eyes - will no longer see. Your heart - will no longer tick. You will no longer get a hard on. You will be dead! But when you die, you will die like Marines. With your mouths shut! You will not make a sound. You will not make a sound, girls, because you will not want the enemy to target your position - and cause other Marines to die!"}

Three times, we made the torturous trek back through that streambed and up that hill to help bring down our wounded. The last time was with Robert Lopez. Although wounded in the arm, and (I believe) also the leg, he chose to walk out. Tough guy, Lopez, and a good Marine. Each time we made it back to the helo-zone, I checked in on John Holoka. The last time I saw him he was mumbling, "Sorry mom . . . Sorry . . ." His voice was getting weaker, and I could barely hear him as I knelt down to touch him on the shoulder. He died on board the med-evac helicopter, on the way back to the rear later that night. He died like a Marine, Sergeant Payne... With his mouth shut . . .

PFC Nickerson was horribly wounded and after nearly dying several times on his journey back to recovery (and eventually back to the States) wrote us a letter afterwards...letting us know that he was going to be all right. Lopez recovered... to fight again.

As an interesting follow-up to this sad chapter in my life, a historian in Gettysburg, PA contacted me last year wanting to know more about John Holoka's death. He was writing a biography to honor John, along with eighteen other men from that county (Adams County) in Pennsylvania, who all died during the Vietnam conflict.

This led to a long exchange of emails, and culminated with me taking a trip to Gettysburg to honor John Holoka during a Memorial Day presentation in front of the Moving Wall. The event was broadcast on TNT television's Memorial Day special programming that weekend. It would change my life forever. I met John's family in the process, which allowed for closure for all of us. I was also proud, that a bunch of my Lima Company guys dropped everything they were doing, and came to Gettysburg to show their support. Among them, were two of the three other men

who helped carry John down from our position that fateful night. (If you'd like to read more about this incredible story/journey, be sure to read *The Easter Story*, posted on the Lima Company web site at <http://www.members.tripod.com/Lima35> under STORIES.)

The final chapter of this vigil will be presented tomorrow. Everything that a Marine holds dear in life, death, and combat becomes the focal point in this next episode. I'll attempt to write about The Brotherhood of Valor that I have found to be of such pivotal consequence, for so many of us, for so long.

Next: HASTINGS AT 34, Part VI - (*July 24, 1966*)
THE BATTLE FOR HILL 362

HASTINGS AT 34, Part VI. (July 24, 1966) THE BATTLE FOR HILL 362

At this point, I want to make one point perfectly clear. I've learned over the years that the platoon commanders, as well as the platoon sergeants, played a very important role in the survival of India Company after the shit hit the fan on Hill 362. As I originally wrote my story, I was trying my best to sort out all of the bits and pieces that had been swimming around in my head over the past thirty years. In fact, a very close friend of mine who was a Company Gunny during all of this, has told me that as he continued serving a long career with the Corps over the years, occasionally he'd run into India's former company gunny, and another staff NCO. "They always bought the beer." He told me, adding, "They always let me know, that they at least appreciated our help on Hill 362 that day."

I guess my memories were mostly from an "enlisted perspective" because they were mine. Admittedly, my approach was somewhat biased. I must stand corrected! Right here and now, I want it known that as my story was unfolding, just clicks away, some heroic efforts were being put forth by the junior officers of India Company. *(I will include several of their citations for valor at the end of this series along with others.)* As a friend of mine from India recently put it *(in reference to a certain Captain who will remain unnamed)*, "He won't be mentioned, but I'll continue to praise the Lieutenants till the day I die." That works for me!

THE SOUND OF MEMORIES . . .

You know how music will sometimes play in your head when you're either happy or sad? Or even preoccupied doing something? Like rock-n-roll music when you're driving too fast, or Beach Boys or Jimmy Buffett when you're down at the beach? Well, maybe when your building a patio deck...? Anyway, I remember quite distinctly, Wagner's Siegfried Funeral March, playing in my foggy brain with all of its ominous notes and all of its ominous gloom – when I awoke the morning of July 24, 1966. To this day, and over the years since Hill 362, I've played this music. (Wagner – for those who don't know of him, was a classical, German musician.)

I awoke with a start! Not even all of the energy expended the night before, and on into the early morning hours, with so little sleep during the entire operation to that point, could preclude me from my destiny. I found it wasn't all my own reaction that had brought me back to reality, after barely an hour of sleep. Gunny Dias, my platoon sergeant, was standing there looking down at me, having nudged me firmly with his boot.

"Good work last night." he said with a smile. "You've got the lead. Get us up that hill." Man! Even a few words like that, especially from 'ol Dias (old at 30?), was enough to give me a boost. Rock-n-roll baby, let's go! But, nope! Not this time, as the beating of my heart fell into the solemn, and rhythmic base kettle drums of Siegfried. Dum, dum – dum, dum. As I got up slowly and looked around, I could see others getting their gear on. As I looked for mine, I was suddenly aware that I'd left it back at the fighting hole I had attempted to dig the previous night. *(Not long before someone handed it to me.)* The darkness of the early morning added to the

gloom. There would be no sunshine on this day. There was an inversion layer still laying it's heavy damp breath upon the surrounding area of the temporary refuge that the company had quickly established during all the confusion. It wasn't long before we linked up with what was left of the 'dusk patrol'. I became aware of a body laying on the ground close by, covered by someone's poncho. It was Stallings. I hadn't learned of John Holoka's death yet, but the vision of the lifeless form of what had once been a good friend, struck home. The dead (there were others, as it turned out) hadn't been air lifted out yet. It was too risky. I found out later that our Company Gunny Al Ross had risked his life by waving a couple of battery operated batons around in the dark (*in enemy territory!*) to bring in a med-evac chopper for our wounded. (*Besides John Holoka, there were at least four others extracted under the difficult conditions, in those early morning hours.*)

I don't know how much time it takes for a company of a hundred fifty plus men - to move through a particular set of grid coordinates. It depends on a lot of factors, the presence of enemy, of course, being one of them. I suspected that the reason I couldn't move my music into rock-n-roll mode, was because we were being cautious. I'm sure there were many behind the scene things that were taking place as we moved slowly along. I didn't have a radio, so I wasn't aware of all that was happening. Who was in communication with whom? I was, after all, and as I've plainly stated before - only a Pfc., you see.

So, it annoyed the hell out of me to constantly have to stop every time I felt that we were picking up momentum. I suppose it was just my own overanxious, possibly even overzealous efforts, to move the "herd" along a little faster. But, just as I'd thought we were going at a pretty good clip, someone would run up and tap me on the shoulder and say, "Captain says you'd better slow down, or he'll put someone else on point." Okay! No problem...(damn it!).

And, it may well have been that way for the rest of the day. Switching off at point occasionally. I just don't remember all of the details anymore, other than we just weren't moving fast enough for my satisfaction. However, I do remember seeing the trail I was on, as I had never seen it before. I was reading foot traffic that had come down it, maybe as far back as three or four days. At least the first part of the trail, which as I stated earlier we had attempted to traverse the day before, on our first attempt to go to India Company's aid. I've since looked at a map of the area, and I'm pretty sure we had originally tried to cut more directly to the north on the first attempt to get up Hill 362. I know that earlier rains had hampered my efforts to discern anything out of the ordinary that might have given me clues to the enemies' whereabouts.

At some time during the day, I felt as if I were an Indian back in the 1800's trailing my foe. I remember tossing the feeling aside with the thought that I felt like one of Custer's scouts at the Little Big Horn... Remembering the battleground's history, and a visual flashback of it, as a kid growing up close by. And the song that briefly replaced Wagner's in my head, "Gee mister Custer-ah don' wanna die..."

What I saw that day, especially after leaving the main trail and following a smaller one closer to the hills, was a lot of foot traffic. It was the enemy's...from the look of the heel marks. Of that, I was certain. (*Why weren't they trying to disguise their presence as before?*)

Sometime that day (*I'm going to say around noon*), I came around a slight bend in the trail as it started down a steep incline. I knew right away that I wasn't going to be eating anything for the rest of the day. The horrible smell of death once again assaulted my senses to the point of wanting to wretch. Strewn out before me were about six enemy bodies in various stages of decay. They had been dead for at least three days (according to my calculations, measured by the amount of biological activity engulfing the bodies). I sent word back to the CO that I was in an enemy position, and that they (about six) were all dead from what I could tell. He had me halt (*thanks, Skipper!*), and set me in with three or four other guys in a covering position around the area, while the rest of the company moved through. *The area* was a system of bunkers built into the side of the hill where at least two, maybe three, streams converged. Others had to search these bunkers, while I smoked nearly a pack of cigarettes to try to mask the smell.

Shortly after that, we made our way north towards the hill. Our objective became more and more visible as we started up the south slope. The south slopes of the hills in this general area, were almost always covered with elephant grass. Once up at the top, the vegetation covering the terrain would abruptly turn into dense forest which sprawled down the north slopes of the hills and beyond. It seemed a little strange, but I mentally figured it was from the rainfall, or an ancient forest fire, or maybe even both. Throughout the whole operation, there was very little evidence of any human habitation (other than the enemy's) in the area.

I had taken up a position of tail-end-charlie after we had checked out the bunkers, and started to move again. There was nothing of any importance at the enemy base camp (that I was aware of). I still had no idea of who might have wasted the gooks (although I don't think it was us). I'm *almost* certain we hadn't been through that area before. Two things struck me about the situation though. The enemy almost always tried to retrieve their dead, many times in the heat of battle, using meat hooks - in order to deny us the satisfaction of counting a victory. Come to think of it though, the Marine Corps is also well known for retrieving our dead, no matter what the circumstance.

So, what this meant to me was that they hadn't either the time (or the ability) to retrieve their dead. Something else that stood out in my mind then, and still does - is that one of the dead gooks was at least six feet tall (or more). Vietnamese don't get that big, at least I never saw any that size while I was 'in country'. So who was he? Chinese maybe, or North Korean? An advisor? Or what? His presence will probably always remain a mystery to me.

As we made our way towards the top, of what would soon come to be known as Hill 362 (it wasn't at the time), I became even more depressed. I hadn't yet heard how many casualties India Company had suffered, but the sight at the top of the hill was very ominous - to say the least. Big Chinook (UH-46's which were twin rotor, and much larger than the UH-34's) helicopters were hauling up baskets by cable from out of the barely visible canopy on top of the hill. My first impression was that it was the dead being lifted out. One by one. No sooner had one chopper gathered up it's cargo, then another would fly into place. Years later, of course, I learned it was India's wounded, and that most of the dead gathered at that time, were still on the ground. I'd realize this fact many years later. It was very depressing as I was

making my way up, and I'll never forget the thoughts that were coursing through my head. What could have happened there...!? And, I just hoped none of my friends got it. All of this, along with the gray inversion layer around us, fell into tune with Wagners' Siegfried Funeral March. It was so very depressing!

About halfway up the hill, I received orders to take the point again. It was getting to be late afternoon, and we were finally getting close to the top of the hill. As we approached India Company's lines, I was the first to see anyone. I only remember seeing one guy, a machine gunner, on the trail. He looked pretty bad. His utilities had been torn to shreds. I remember he had tears in his eyes, but a smile on his face. He seemed pretty shaken. I could only imagine what he'd been through. *(Years later, I wonder if this man may have been Lance Corporal Richard Pittman who had exhibited unbelievable courage under fire.)*

I apologized to him for not being able to get there sooner...that we'd run into trouble. He said he'd heard. He asked if I had a cigarette. I gave him what was left of my pack. I was glad to do something for a guy who must have just been through Hell.

I moved on, until I reached the top of the hill, where I was told to halt. I don't remember seeing any more men from India Company. While I was on point, our company had split up behind me. *(I was told later that two platoons, the First and Second, along with the CP group – had decided to take another path further to the North to move up the hill. This later turned out to be a wise decision.)* The remainder of my squad (about six men, including me) were told to set-in temporarily while the rest of the company decided on a defense for the night. As I stood there on the west side of the hill, I noticed a gook foxhole...a nice one - about four feet by five feet, and about two and a half feet deep. (I could always tell the enemy's foxholes from ours because they looked like a they'd been scooped out with a backhoe, making them deeper and more square than ours.) I remember thinking there must be others around and that the enemy had apparently once owned this hill. There were a couple of tall trees behind the foxhole I was looking at and one tree directly in front of it. The area was covered with a lot of vegetation (trees, bushes and some bamboo).

Corporal Troy gave me (and Bob Stewart) orders to 'dig in' near the general area of the foxhole I had just noticed. I was so tired by then, I could hardly stand. So I begged permission for us to use the foxhole that was already there. Especially since it looked like we were probably going to be moving out again soon anyhow. Although he clearly had other things on his mind, Troy grudgingly granted us permission to set in.

Bob Stewart and I were both so exhausted by the events of the past few days, that without saying a word, we tossed our packs into the hole, leaned our M-14 rifles together at the back of it, and sat down on the edge with our backs to the downhill side. I know it sounds careless *now*, but there was no reason *at the time* to think that the enemy would attempt another fight (with us now within the perimeter of the hill top). In fact, it never even crossed my mind.

We'd just opened our packs and started to rummage for some C-rations, when I heard the sharp snap of a twig behind me to the left, and instinctively turned

my head over my left shoulder towards the sound. There, not more than 30 feet away, was a NVA soldier walking up the hill with his rifle under his right shoulder! Without taking my eyes off of him, I slowly reached for my rifle. Just as slowly, I brought it to my shoulder, and took aim. Stewart noticed my movement, saw the enemy approaching us and reached for his rifle as well. Suddenly the gook saw us, and tried to bring his rifle up! I pulled the trigger and was surprised when a sudden ten-round burst of fire and subsequent upward jerk of the rifle told me that I had accidentally grabbed Stewart's rifle (which was an automatic, M-14 with selector). This fact barely had time to register in my brain when all Hell broke loose!

Suddenly the air around us was filled with bullets zinging through it. Pieces of trees, brush and dirt were flying in every direction. Bob and I both hit the bottom of that fighting hole at the same time. The enemy had been closing in around us, and we hadn't even noticed. I would jump up and fire a burst of rounds with the Bob's rifle, and drop back down as fast as I could. Over and over again. Each time firing at anything that moved. Each time, I'd send rounds in a different direction because everything around us was moving! The enemy was all over us. It was like we were in the middle of a terrible storm, like a tornado, with everything flying through the air around us. Several times I was hit by ricocheting, spent bullets. When they'd hit me, it felt like someone slugging me real hard, leaving welts under my utilities without breaking the skin.

The enemy was all over us, and I was going through ammunition fast. At one point, I tried to give Stewart his rifle back, but he wouldn't take it. There wasn't even time to trade arms. He would encourage me to keep on, that I was doing good, and then would warn me if I needed to slow down to prevent burning up the rifle. (Burning up a rifle is when the barrel warps from the heat of too much rapid fire.)

At this point, they were throwing everything they had at us, except grenades. The only reason they weren't throwing any of those was because the hill was steep and covered with dense vegetation. But we had an automatic - a lot of fire power - and they wanted to silence it.

I usually carried about one hundred loaded rounds of ammo on my cartridge belt - or five magazines, loaded with twenty rounds each, with one magazine in my rifle. Fortunately, I had another couple of loaded magazines in my pack that day. Same thing with Stewart. *(By a sheer stroke of luck, Stewart and I were also carrying several belts of machine gun ammo that day for our weapons platoon.)*

At first, Stewart would jump up, fire a few shots from his (my) rifle and duck back down into our hole, but after a few minutes into the fight - I heard him yell with pain. Without taking my eyes off the scene unraveling in front of me, I yelled to him to find out how badly he'd been hit. Fortunately, it wasn't a serious injury. He yelled, "Got my first Purple Heart!" I quickly glanced back at him to see a bullet had hit the trigger guard on his (my) rifle, and fragments had taken a chunk out of his forefinger. With a sigh with relief, I opened up again - catching movement out of my right eye.

Everything we were doing was in unison. I'd spend a magazine - pop it from the rifle, reach back without letting my eyes leave the terrain in front of me, and there would be a fresh one slapped into my hand. Without saying a word, Stewart was taking the magazines from both of our cartridge belts, to have them ready. He was saving me precious seconds. I noticed as we were getting to the end of our loaded magazines, that

he had taken my bayonet from its scabbard and stuck it into the side of the fighting hole – preparing, if necessary, for hand-to-hand combat if we were overrun. I still remember hearing Stewart repeatedly yelling for more ammo and for a machine gunner, but his yells were just a part of so many others, that they fell on deaf ears. Everyone was busy - trying to stay alive.

We really lucked out that day. We both happened to be carrying machine-gun belts, as support ammo for our weapons platoon. Those belts probably had an extra four hundred rounds apiece. *(I never complained about carrying ammo for weapons again.)*

As I reached back to grab one of our last loaded magazines, wondering why they were no longer just being slapped into my hand, I glanced back at Bob Stewart. He was using his bayonet and fingers - clawing rounds out of the machine-gun belts to re-load for me! He was literally tearing his fingernails apart in his frenzy.

I could hear the gooks swearing at us, both in Vietnamese and broken English. “U-DIE! U-DIE! MOLINE - U-DIE!” I swore back at them at the top of my lungs, while we fought for our very lives. I remember hearing a horn of some kind blowing from their direction and thinking to myself... ‘Custer’s revenge’ *(What happened then, even after all these years, still seems incredible. It’s like I was in one of the tall trees on the hill - looking down at our fighting hole. I was watching two Marines, me and Stewart, in some kind of strange ballet of survival. Every movement was choreographed into a dance with death. The memory is burned into my soul - only to resurface again and again over the years of my life. Sometimes the picture show will spring suddenly, and without provocation - from some hidden depth in my brain, and take me back...)*

Then it happened! I was just about to slap in another magazine, when there was a loud “BLAM”...and everything turned a dark green. There was no sound except for this bright fireball - like a comet - that flashed before my eyes. And then everything went black!

When the bullet struck me, the fact that I’d shoved my helmet back on my head to take aim at that first enemy soldier, probably saved my life. The bullet hit the edge of my steel pot on the left side and glanced off (leaving a small dent), and went through the upper portion of my neck just below the knowledge knot. The bullet exited the right side of my neck, and hit the other side of my helmet (blowing the right side completely apart). The bullet’s impact made me to bite my tongue...Hard. It knocked me out and I collapsed face-first into the bottom of our fighting hole. My shoulder came to rest on the sizzling hot barrel of the automatic rifle. When I came back to consciousness (after probably no more than a minute or so), my body jerked off of the searing hot barrel. Dazed, I got to my knees and grabbed at the burning sensation at the back of my head. My head was pounding, and seeing my helmet laying there all torn apart, I thought a grenade had gone off. I looked at Stewart who was sitting down with his back against the hole - his face ashen. When he saw the blood flowing from my mouth and down the back of my neck, he thought the bullet had entered through my mouth and exited the back of my head. We argued briefly about whether I’d been shot or whether there’d been a grenade involved. Both of us were relieved that the injury, at least for the moment, seemed to be less serious than it looked. But we were still in one hell of a bad place. Between a rock and a hard spot? Up a creek? Take your pick. *(Why we weren’t overrun during that brief period of time after I got shot is beyond me!)*

It's difficult to explain what happens to a person during combat of this nature. Some people respond differently than others. In my case, I know that at one point I was so scared that I almost pissed in my pants. But then, I remember an incredible rage take over. I realized that we were going to die. But despite that fact, I knew I was going to take as many of the enemy with us as I could, before going down. (I learned this attitude from Sgt Payne, my DI, back in boot camp.) It was like the bullets and everything else flying around, and whizzing by me - were not even relevant. Since they hadn't killed me yet, I focused my attention on the most immediate threat. My mind has stuffed the actual killings deep into my subconscious. *From what I've heard of the bodies that were found below our fighting hole the next day, I know that I must have looked into some of their eyes before wasting them...but I just don't remember it (yet).*

As this rage filled me, I picked up the automatic, slapped in a magazine, and yelled at Stuart, "*Where did it come from?!*" (meaning the bullet that had just hit me). He pointed to a thicket of bamboo (not more than a hundred feet away. I turned and used up the whole magazine blasting the bamboo into toothpicks. *(Bob Stewart told me that I cut that gook in half when I took him out, but I don't remember seeing him die.)*

Then I yelled for another magazine, as I went back to work with the automatic. I remember Stewart yelling for a corpsman. The battle was still raging on all around us. Up until then, I hadn't fired an automatic that much. *There was usually one man in every fire team that was the designated automatic weapons man. This strategy evolved from decades of Marine Corps tactical thinking. Three fire teams, consisting of four men each (when at full strength), per squad...and three squads to a platoon.* I was a pretty damn good shot, and learned quickly that by working my four and five round bursts in a diagonal slash pattern at anything that moved, I was doing some damage.

My skull was throbbing. As my senses continued to come back into focus, I became intensely aware of two things. Not only were we running out of ammunition (*rapidly*), but the enemy was trying to position snipers into my blind spots. Our fighting hole was in a good position because I could fire at the enemy with nearly a 180 degree field of fire without worrying about hitting any of our guys. But, I had a hard time trying to cover the whole area at any given time. I had to try to make every shot of every burst of fire count. The enemy was still swearing at us (and I back at them), but I think I was gaining on them. I didn't hear quite as much swearing, and the bushes weren't moving as much as before.

There were several times Stewart saved my life that day. Not just by tearing his fingernails literally apart to keep magazines loaded and coming to me, but by physically grabbing me and holding me back from rushing down that hill at the enemy. I was so mad, that I started taking foolish chances. At one point, I jumped out of the hole to get a better shot at the enemy, letting off a burst of fire from behind the tree that was in front of our hole. I jumped back into the hole to reload, and was about to jump back up and do it again when Stewart grabbed my arm and pointed at the tree starting to disintegrate! The enemy was probably hitting it with a fifty one-caliber machine-gun!

About this time, the corpsman that Bob had yelled for finally showed up. The corpsman had to stop about fifty feet from our fighting hole and take cover because of all the shit still hitting the area around us. He yelled that he couldn't get to us because of all the fire, so I yelled back that I was all right, even though blood was still streaming down my neck. He yelled out that our platoon commander, Lt. Anderson, told him to

check out my wounds. So I jumped out of the hole, bolted past the corpsman, and dove behind a log near him. The corpsman ran over, landing next to me, and began checking my head wound. Directly across the trail from us, behind some other logs, were Lt. Anderson, PFC. Gil Velasquez and LCpl. Galloway. *(I later learned the reason there were so many trees laying around was from the explosions during India Company's recent fight.)*

Looking back, I realize I could have been killed leaving our fighting hole just to get my wound checked, or Stu could have been overrun in my absence. I had taken the automatic rifle with me. But such was our command structure - you did what you were told and you didn't interpret it any other way. Obeying orders and absolute respect for authority were mandatory in these situations. *'Ours is not to question why - Ours is but to do or die'.*

Lt. Anderson (Andy) yelled from his position across the trail over the noise of intense fire to find out how bad my wound was. Before the corpsman could answer, I yelled back that it was just a scratch and we really needed ammo badly! The corpsman said my wound needed to be taken care of and I would have to be sent back. As soon as he said that, I noticed Anderson, Galloway and Velasquez, turn their attention down the trail and start firing their weapons. I looked in that direction in time to see two enemy soldiers, racing up the trail toward us, firing AK-47's. I struggled to bring my (Stewart's) rifle up to take aim, and the corpsman shoved me back down. He was still trying to look at my head wound, unaware of what was happening. I shoved him aside and again tried to point the weapon in the direction of our immediate peril. But, by then, the gooks had been dropped, not more than a hundred feet down the trail.

F*** THIS SHIT! Thinking my chances were better back in the hole with Bob Stewart, I jumped up and ran for it, diving in, head first. Stewart was visibly relieved to see me back, as I picked up where I had left off before - jumping up, releasing five-round bursts downhill and ducking back down.

By now, things started to quiet down a little. And then, the machine gunner that we had been screaming for, finally showed up. He positioned himself about 20 yards to the right of us, and then just sat there! I shouted for him to help us, not understanding what he was waiting for. I kept letting off five-round bursts of fire, and yelling at him to shoot. He didn't respond. He'd just put his hands up in a silent... *'I can't'* gesture, while shaking his head... *'No!'*

After fighting awhile longer (maybe five minutes, maybe fifteen), and just as suddenly as the battle had started, the enemy fire stopped! I was so angry at that machine-gunner who *(I thought)* never fired a shot to help, it stayed with me for years. I found out some 30 years later, that he had burned up one barrel on the trail fighting for the rest of the platoon. With only one good barrel left, and having used it until it was hot, this guy had been sent off to let it cool down...or lose it and the gun. *(Hell...for all I know, the poor guy may have run out of ammo, since Bob and I were carrying those extra belts!)* I hope some day we find out who that guy was. He saved a lot of lives.

Bob Stewart and I just looked at each other, unable to comprehend that the battle might be over. Although we were relieved for a moment's calm, Bob and I kept loading magazines (not knowing if, or when, the fight would continue).

We waited in that fighting hole for another ten minutes or so, nervously loading the rest of our magazines and waiting for the shit to hit the fan again. But it never did.

There was an occasional shot now and then. Probably from our guys from nerves that were still reacting. But the battle was actually over. We couldn't believe it... refusing to hope. *{For the rest of the time I spent in the war (about another two months), and through all of the fighting I would contend with later, none was as intense, profound and desperate, as that battle. That hour to hour and a half of fighting on Hill 362 was the most horrendous struggle, I ever faced.}*

Finally, I heard Lieutenant Anderson's voice call for me. I jumped out of the fighting hole and ran to where I had last seen him, near the trail where the logs were. The corpsman was still there. In response to his concern for my wound and whether Stewart and I were okay, I told him we were. It had been close, but we were all right. I let him know that we needed ammo real bad, but fatigue was once again starting to replace the adrenaline that had been pulsing through my body. He told me they had ammo on the way, and he was sending me back on a med-evac. I didn't want to go, and asked him to let me stay. Although my neck was swelling up and I couldn't really move my head in either direction, the pain seemed to have subsided a little. Lieutenant Anderson told me he didn't want to take a chance on the wound getting infected and maybe losing me. He said he might need me again, and reassured me that I had done a great job down there. Was there a choice?

I tried to change his mind, telling him that "Stu" might need help and still thinking the fighting might erupt again at any moment. Anderson interrupted my persistent request, with a firm order that I was going back...no further discussion. He said he would set someone in with Stewart, but my head wound needed attention. Looking at my torn helmet (that I had put back on), he said it looked like a pretty close call. He wanted the Doc to bandage the wound and me to head on up the trail to a place they were making into an LZ for the med-evac chopper. He said "You be on it...and I'll see you when I get back to the ship." At that point, he left to go check the rest of the men. I don't believe he was aware of our overall losses at this time.

I headed for the LZ that was about eight hundred yards further up the trail. *(India Company had started trying to clear one by chainsaws that had been dropped to them by chopper just before our battle erupted.)* We thought we'd heard chain saws buzzing during the fight we were just in... Now I realized why. Men from India Company were making a clearing (and still were) for an LZ. There were logs scattered all over, having just been felled with the chain saws.

When I got to that LZ, one med-evac helicopter had already removed some of our wounded, but I didn't know it at the time. I remember sitting down on one of the logs, taking my helmet off, and just looking at it. I think it was about this time that it dawned on me...how close to death I had come. I couldn't believe how one bullet could tear up a hard steel helmet like that. I sat there for a few minutes, my rifle straddled between my legs and my body sagging with fatigue, just looking at my helmet. Then it dawned on me that I still had Bob Stewart's automatic rifle.

I made my way back to our fighting hole. When I got back, Stewart's face lit up when he saw me. He still hadn't gotten a replacement in yet. I told him I was going back to the ship, and figured he might need his rifle. I tossed him the automatic as he tossed my rifle to me. Then he tossed over my pack and said "Thanks...See ya back at the ship!"

(That's all that was said between us before I turned back up the trail to the LZ.)

For years this would be one of the more memorable images I could recollect. Me tossing him his rifle as he tossed mine back. I remember the feeling of surviving one of the most horrendous events of my life, and the sorrow I felt leaving him there. Together, we had just gone through Hell. And, together we had survived. Without each other, there is no doubt in my mind we couldn't have lived through the battle for Hill 362. I wouldn't see Bob Stewart again until I was in the hospital in Chu Lai, after I stepped on a land mine on September 19, 1966. He had been wounded tripping a booby trap during the operation that immediately followed 'Hastings' (during Operation Colorado), which I missed because of my head wound. By then Bob was on 'no duty', and considered 'walking wounded'. He'd hitch rides down to Chu Lai to cheer me up. He told me he only did it because the food was better at the hospital than at our rear area (which was then based at Ahn Than), nearly twenty miles away. But I knew better. Although we would never fight together again, we had formed a bond during our battle on the Hill that day that would never be broken. It was Bob who filled in the details about the carnage we had survived. He was part of a special detail sent out the next day to count the bodies of the NVA dead, and to retrieve any bodies that were still there from India Company.

Shortly after getting back to the LZ, Corporal Troy stumbled up and sat down next to me. He was visibly shaking all over. I asked him what had happened to him. He indicated a huge furrowed dent on the top of his helmet, shaking his head and saying, "It was bad...really bad. They think I have a concussion." *(I remember being puzzled by his words, until later when I found out the way that SSgt. Koos had been blown away right in front of him.)*

As we waited for a med-evac chopper, I began to focus for the first time on the piles of stuff that earlier had registered in my mind as gear laying at the edge of the clearing. Probably India Company's gear. To my horror, I realized it was India Company's dead! All those men, laying side by side. Some of them with ponchos thrown over them. As the med-evac chopper hovered close to pick us up, I remember glancing back as I jumped aboard, and seeing the prop-wash blow the ponchos off of their dead bodies . . . and into the deepest recesses of my mind.

(NOTE: Along with some twenty-five men of India Company that perished while fighting this battle on Hill 362, five men from Lima Company of the Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment of the First Marine Division, United States Marine Corps, died within a heartbeat of each other on July 24, 1966. Their names were: PFC BRUCE A. BAKER; PFC. PRUITT H. CHEANEY; SSGT. NORMAN L. KOOS; PFC. JAMES R. NASH and PFC. PAUL J. STRAUSSER. They died, Sergeant Payne - like Marines.)

Next: HASTINGS AT 34, Part VII - THE AFTERMATH - (July 24, 1966 to the present)

HASTINGS AT 34, Part VII. (July 24, 1966 to the present)

AFTERWORD

A pair of hands grabbed my arms and pulled me up into the open hatchway of the Huey gunship. A Huey! It was like getting into a Cadillac compared to our old UH-34's.

I automatically positioned myself next to the opening on the starboard side. As with the 34, there were no doors or seats. Like all gunships used in the Vietnam war, they were stripped of anything considered unnecessary. Less weight meant capability to carry cargo (ordnance) and better maneuverability. In this case, more room for bodies - alive or dead.

With my back pushed up against the rear bulkhead, I pointed my weapon out the doorway. Troy was next to me. He had jumped on board first, and then taken a seat with his head cradled between his knees.

Corporal William Troy had suffered a pretty bad wallop from the bullet bouncing off the top of his "steel pot". It took him awhile to recover completely from the concussion he'd suffered. Neither of us was aware of our casualties (five dead - about seven wounded). But the graveness of our experience had started to sink in. Both of us were physically drained.

My eyes shifted on the scene below as the chopper gained altitude - swiftly ascending from the tropical canopy. The bodies of India Company began to blur into the foliage, and other figures below me became a part of the forest. I could vaguely see the trail winding along the top of the ridge. Damn! We were flying directly over my position of only a short time earlier!

I glanced over at the door gunner who had pulled me aboard. He was staring at me. Not knowing quite what to say. (After all, he'd gone in expecting a 'Hot LZ' and to pick up the dead... and here two 'live ones' jump aboard with their helmets all blown apart!) I nodded at him and winked (a habit that always seems to surface - during times of stress). He yelled "You're going to be all right man - we're blowing this place most ricky ticky!" through the prop noise of the chopper.

"They're down there! THEY'RE ALL DOWN THERE!", I yelled back jabbing my rifle in the direction of the draw, that now with altitude, nearly split the hill in two.

"Who?! Who's down there?!", he shouted.

"THE MOTHER F***ING GOOKS, DAMN IT! THEY'RE ALL DOWN THERE!", I yelled again pointing at the area that was becoming more and more clear the higher we got. My total focus - concentration - life! Was narrowed down to that one area where I KNEW THEY WERE AT. I hoped they were reeling from the punishment we'd just given them - maybe. But they were there. I WAS SURE OF IT! From the new vantage point in the air, I still couldn't see them, but knew they had to be down there.

In writing about this story I've had to bring to the surface a lot of stuff that may have been better left buried. But, as I have said - this has been knocking around in my brain for more than thirty years now. As I have addressed each facet of my involvement, it has been absolutely amazing to me how much just 'spills' out of the subconscious - while reliving the memories. I've had to deal honestly with my thoughts and feelings about what happened. What was I thinking at the time? How did I react? Is it possible to find a reason for the things that happened?

I can tell you this: Had it been a UH-34 that had picked Troy and I off the 'Hill' that day . . . I would have been thinking , 'Let's just get the hell out of here.' 'We'll be LUCKY to get the hell out of here alive!' But it wasn't that way. It was a HUEY. And, having witnessed in the past what these babies were capable of doing, I got excited about exacting vengeance on 'thine' enemy. The Huey, by 1966, had already gained the reputation of being 'one bad bird'. They were awesome. I'd never flown in one before, but there had been several times over the course of our battles when they had been called in as air support. They were bad news for the enemy - a lot of fire power and seemingly invincible. Just one minute of fire power directed into that area - rockets and guns - would have wreaked 'havoc' on the enemy! But then years later, I've had to analyze - WHERE exactly were we - down there? Where WERE our exact positions? Where WAS whatever was left of India Company? I now realize the captain of that gunship had to be thinking of all of this.

"YOU'VE GOT THE POWER - ROCKETS - GUNS! WE'VE GOTTA GET 'EM! THEY'RE ALL DOWN THERE...IN THAT DRAW!" I yelled at the door gunner, rage once again welling up in me.

I'm sure the door gunner knew what we had been through. He had to have been aware of the risks involved going in to get us. He relayed what I had just told him into the voice mike attached to his helmet. I looked anxiously to the cockpit at the Captain as he received it. There was a moment of hesitation as he thought about it. I could see him looking at the clusters of gauges on his instrument panels. Was he checking to see how much fuel...or fire power...he had?

After a moment the Captain, swiveling the mike away from his mouth and turning to look directly at me shouted, "Sorry Marine, we're almost out of fuel. We'll be lucky to make Dong Ha!" *That was certainly a comforting thought! We were in 'Indian territory' - there was 'nothing' between us and Dong Ha at this time. Dong Ha - was like an outpost/fort in the old west, on the fringe of the wilderness - with nothing in between.*

The door gunner leaned over and patted me on the shoulder. "Hey man - we'll get the little bastards, yet. You'll see" Sure, I thought to myself, as yet another opportunity to even the score - slipped away in the prop wash as the chopper continued to ascend, rapidly sliding sideways - away from the hill.

Although adrenaline was still pulsing through my body, I was just so tired. I can't remember much of the flight out of the high country and on to Dong Ha. *The Hill* became a blur after awhile. I may have passed out again - from the loss of blood. I just don't remember. I do remember thinking at some point, "Man! What a ride! Wish we had choppers like this. Smooth , and bad-to-the-bone."

The war had been changing in subtle ways just in the couple of months I had been 'in country'. Sometimes for the good - like the Huey - other times not. While in Okinawa, we had 'fam' (familiarization) fired the M-16 rifle, and were told we would be issued this weapon. The 'Old Corps' - particularly Gunny Dias - didn't like it. "How are you gonna butt stroke a gook with this little toy gun?!", I remember him growling. *As it turned out - he was right. If Stewart and I had had M-16's on the hill - we'd have been shit out of luck because the machine-gun belts we were carrying would have been useless. Wrong kind of ammo....*

We made it to Dong Ha. (On fumes, I was told later.)

While the Huey fueled up, I was taken to the medical facility, where a doctor told me that he was going to perform a "debridement" of my head wound. I don't know much

about it except whatever he did, hurt like hell before he poured on a bunch of antiseptic, bandaged the wound and sent me out the door. His last words to me were, "That sure was close Marine. A fraction of an inch more and you'd have been history... There's candy by the door on your way out - grab some Hershey bars." I remember thinking to myself as I walked out the door stuffing one pocket full of Hershey bars - "Who, does he think I am? A kid?" (*I was eighteen years old.*)

I was flown back to the USS Princeton, where I was operated on later that night. My head wound was cut open from the bullet's entry point to it's exit point so that it could be cleaned and dressed. There was quite a bit of concern for the severity of the wound, and how close it had come to my spinal chord. I was told later that I would have been sent on to Japan because of the nature of my injury, but I suddenly contracted malaria and was sent to the USS Repose (hospital ship) instead. There, my condition stabilized. After about three weeks, I was put back on active duty with L 3/5 in August of 1966.

Somewhere along the way, the music of Wagner fell silent . . .

When I first wrote about The Battle For Hill 362, it ended with listing our dead. A lot of people have since asked what happened to us after we were taken off of the *Hill*. And, what happened to India Company. "About thirty years..." I'd tell them quietly.

For those who wish to read the original ending, you can go to the Lima 3/5 Web site at www.members.tripod.com/Lima35. Then go to *Stories* and *Hastings* and the *The Battle For Hill 362*. It's about ten pages long and gives an idea of what it was liked to arrive on a hospital ship as a med-evac casualty. I'm planning to revise some of the old writings... There's more to be written and recent memories that I want to include.

Before I was released from the Hospital Ship, USS Repose, I learned of some other things that happened from the field about Hill 362. Shortly after getting there, I remember this guy strapped into a wheelchair being brought to my ward briefly. He had evidently crawled into our lines after the battle. He was in pretty bad shape, and didn't stay with us long before they sent him on (to Japan or somewhere). He was so badly wounded, they couldn't even lay him in a bed. His main wound ran from his groin to his chest. Big rubber-coated stitches held his body together like a zipper. There were other wounds but that one was the worst. There were tubes hanging from several bottles running into his nose and arms. I found out that he had been with India Company and that he was one of the wounded men that Lance Corporal Pittman had managed to hide in the brush before returning to try and get help. But the enemy found them. When the enemy overran their position, the wounded men were summarily executed. After being laid open with a bayonet and being left for dead, this guy had somehow managed to crawl back into our lines . . .

When I shared this information with John Olsen of India Company in 1994, and told him I thought that guy deserved a medal for surviving the ordeal - he knew right away who I was referring to. "It had to have been Bednars." He said, adding that Bednars not only survived, but later did a guard duty stint with him in Iceland. Amazing! Since that time, another friend from India Company told me he didn't think that Bednars had been on the Repose. I don't know what to think about that, other than I believe he was brought there briefly to stabilize before transporting him on out of the country. (*He did leave the*

country didn't he?) Anyway, it was one of those memories (snippets) that has stuck with me over the years. So I wonder, if it wasn't Bednars on board the Repose, then who was it I saw? My original story goes into a great deal more detail about my meeting this brave Marine.

Pfc. Bednars' story is an amazing tribute to a Marine's fighting spirit and strength of determination to survive. The best account is in Lt. Robert Williams' letter home to his wife after the battle. It is an excellent account of the Hill. I urge those who are following this to read it, as well as other attachments listed at the end.

What happened to India Company on Hill 362 had some influence on our way of fighting in Vietnam. When we learned about the enemy overrunning some positions, and summarily (hastily, unceremoniously, and arbitrarily) executing India's wounded, we vowed to exact vengeance. I feel sure that I wasn't alone. We already had a score to settle, and learning of what had happened made it easier. Upon realizing the enemy rarely if ever took prisoners, and in fact, often tortured their victims to death – well, that did it for many. Shoot first, and ask questions later. Very few prisoners were taken after that...although there were opportunities. You might be wondering about the Geneva Convention. Well, if the enemy wouldn't read what that was about and abide by those rules – then, I guess we wouldn't either.

These events made us start thinking about what we'd do if we were confronted with being taken by the enemy. It wasn't long before some of us made pacts that if the worst were to happen and there was no way out, whoever was the last alive – would be trusted to pull the trigger. I'm sure this will raise some eyebrows, but that's the way it was. I've discussed it with buddies who were there, and it was a very, very real possibility with us.

Another fact that I couldn't seem to shake, was that we had come real close to losing a Marine rifle company. I wonder (as I have so many times over the years), what would this country have done, if that had happened? Remembering what happened with the Army in the I Drang Valley the year before this, I think that the political impact would have been huge and there would have been a great outcry if we had, in fact, lost a Marine Corps rifle company in 1966.

I don't think that would have happened. I think India Company still had a lot of fight left in them, and I know we did. I don't think the gooks thought we'd get there when we did. From my position, the enemy was pretty determined to do a lot more damage. Of course now, after all of these years, it's all conjecture and hypothetical anyway. But still scary, when I think about it. What were that many enemy soldiers (NVA, as it turns out, not Viet Cong) – doing there? I'm sure they had come down from the north right across the DMZ, not more than a couple of miles away. They had a lot of cover in the hills and mountains, and make no mistake about it, these boys were living good. They were very well armed, and very well supplied.

Another thing that rang my bell (literally), was their skill with their weapons, shooting and accurately laying down fire with their mortars. Every one of our dead and wounded, suffered head and chest shots. I found out on board the USS Repose, when General Walt pinned on my first Purple Heart, that the enemy who had fought us so tenaciously were elements of the 324 B Division. At least that's the designation that has stuck with me, and seemed to be the consensus when I rejoined the company.

As determined as I was to kill as many of the enemy as I could, before leaving Vietnam, I grudgingly had to admit that they were good. I had learned long before joining the Marine Corps, to 'never underestimate the enemy'. The Marine Corps, of course,

reinforced that concept, and carried it one step further. Always try to *out think* the enemy. Anticipate him. I think we did that, at least as well as we could, under the circumstances.

One thing more than any other that comes to mind through all of this, was the mood of the world at that time. Our present day youth know little of that mood, even if they do know a little about the Vietnam War. The more invisible 'Cold War' was nonetheless an omnipresent threat. By 1966, it had reached a level of paranoia that is almost without equal in the history of mankind. Who would be the first to push the nuclear button, to end civilization? To me, it felt as if three big giants – the USSR, China, and us - were drawing lines in the sand. Prior to my involvement with Vietnam, I had not paid much attention to world affairs or politics. I had been the shy kid at the back of the room who never raised my hand and struggled to stay awake through Social Studies class. Daydreams of taking off on adventures would claim my thoughts. Unrealistically. When I found myself *in* the greatest adventure of my life, I began to take notes. The Marine Corps made it quite clear from the beginning, that their definition of men, meant smart well-informed men. As I gained rank, I was required to stay on top of my responsibilities...which included keeping current with news of world events. Education was always pushed either through MCI (Marine Corps Institute) courses or special schools. There was no room for the shy, and nonparticipating individual.

I did take advantage of college before I got out of the Marine Corps (something that I never dreamed of attempting when I was back in high school). I got a degree using the G.I. Bill. Going to school during active enlistment had some ups and downs, but we all had them. I've always maintained that the Marine Corps gave more, than it took away. Had it not been for the unfortunate episode with the land mine, I would have made a career of service to the Corps.

To this day I'm proud of being a Marine. Always, Semper Fidelis.

After my involvement with the war, I tried to adapt to civilian life, as so many of us did. For the most part, it was a successful transition...in spite of the attitudes of our nation then. To dwell any further on that, would be to admit some failures. Sure, I had my share of those. But, so did many others who had come home thinking they'd just trade their swords for plow shares, and get on with it. To cover *that* subject, could entail many more pages of writing, and I want to finish this up, as I've been *reliving* it for over a week now.

I'd like to conclude by saying that some of the concerns and frustrations that started to drift out of the smoke the Vietnam war produced, was our involvement with the war and the role we had in Hastings. As time passed, more and more books about the war surfaced, and I began to perceive what appeared to me to be a cover up. Very few histories even mentioned Operation Hastings, and when it was, it was usually to cite men who fought so bravely they were awarded this nation's highest award for valor–The Medal Of Honor.

One day back in 1980, I was reading a book about the Vietnam war. There were many I read, but I think this particular one was *And Brave Men Too*. I was reading about Richard Pittman, and remembering how things had been on the *Hill*, while unconsciously reaching back to massage my upper neck. How close I'd come to dying in that encounter with the enemy. I had only recently heard of Richard's incredible act of courage, and was proud to have been a part of that whole episode. But, wait a minute! The book didn't even mention the role Lima 3/5 had played on the Hill! We were there! And, the books don't even mention what it cost us ... Didn't they realize what had happened or how close it had been for all of us?

For me, it was like having been an eye-witness to a major catastrophe, and then to read a story about it in the newspaper, only to discover important facts to be missing or wrong. I became upset. I read other accounts of Hastings in other books. Same thing.

A friend of mine was still pretty close to things on the base at Camp Pendleton. He too had been a Marine grunt, but worked there as a civilian. When he found out how upset I was over this, he tried to arrange a lunch with me and Richard Pittman, who at the time was still serving the Corps (if I remember right) as a Gunnery Sergeant. For one reason or another, the lunch meeting never materialized, and not long after that I moved from the area. I want it understood, I never felt any animosity about the history of this operation being partially wrong. Just frustration that all we had attempted to do as a company, and as Marines trying to help other Marines was left out and that my friends from India would think I hadn't tried. Ridiculous huh? But those were my thoughts for many years. Even though, I'm sure most of the guys in India Company wouldn't remember me or what we went through at Boot Camp, or any of the other training. Everything that happened later, like Hill 362 – had a way of affecting memory.

About thirteen years later (in 1993), as I was kicking back next to the wood stove of my cabin high in the Trinity Alps of California on a snowy day, just thumbing through the latest DAV magazine, and noticed an ad in the *Reunion section*. It read:

L Co. 3/5 ('66 – '71, Vietnam) Contact so and so, etc., etc.

I just stared at it. You see, deep down I'd always thought that someday there might be some sort of "get together". I missed those guys and the incredible times we'd shared. There had been a hollow feeling of loss ever since the war. To this day, I can't explain it... except that when we get together at our company reunion every year there is a bond and a camaraderie we share, of which I have never known before. I haven't missed a reunion since – and don't ever expect to.

That was the year I found my old fighting hole buddy, Bob Stewart. Not long after that I came across John Olsen's add trying to make connections with the men he served with in India Company. When I saw his ad, I sat down and wrote him a long letter. He called me within days. Since then, a lot of things have been cleared up as far as who was where, and what happened from our stand point. I feel better now that any of my friends from way back when, will know that we did try to reach them. It doesn't change the war, we'll live with that until we die. I expect it will be discussed long after we die, like the Civil War is still being hashed out to this day – but, at least some things will be a little better understood.

It is my hope that those of our battalion who participated in Operation Hastings, including those men of Mike and Kilo Companies, will want to add to what I have written during this series. It is further hoped that those brave souls who took up our positions as the war progressed will add their histories too. So, that those who may want to look back at what we did and what our accomplishments were, during some incredible times in the history of our country, will have a better understanding of who we were. That, as long as we are able – we will tell of those brave warriors who fought next us - and gave all.

In closing, I'd like to thank everyone who has helped me during this project, either by passing on information, sharing memories, contributing their own stories, giving words of encouragement, advice or all of the above - because I could never have done it alone. This includes the following people:

*** Ed McCurry – who does an incredible job representing not only Mike and H&S companies but also India Company as well. His behind the scenes, and tireless efforts with getting my story out have not gone unnoticed.**

*** Debbe and Brad Reynolds – Thank-You so much, for all of your heartfelt support and correspondence while representing all of our Vietnam Veterans. Your day-by-day (sometimes hourly) encouragement helped me more then you can ever know.**

Friends and authors, George Neville and William Myers.

*** Author George Neville, has spent much of his time during the years since the war, compiling information for a book that will be released in the near future. It will address everything about Operation Hastings from it's conception and execution, to the 'shelving' of it afterwards. I'm including a copy of his web page as it applies to the book. I was initially a little apprehensive when I first learned of George's efforts to write about Hastings. But after talking with him on the phone, and with all of the subsequent encouragement and help he's provided me ever since, I can honestly say that his interests have been primarily with us that fought the battle.**

*** William (Billy) Myers, has just completed a book called *Honor The Warrior*, and although I haven't read it yet – I'm anxious too. I understand it is a very complete work about the Marines and particularly the 'grunt' through all of the Vietnam war, especially covering the operations and hardships of the later war years. It's a 'must read' for any Marine, who served in any capacity in Vietnam.**

*** Joe Holt has become a close internet tie to India Company - past and present. His candid remarks, as well as encouragement and advice have helped me through some difficult periods. I urge you to read his stories that are listed on the India Company web site. They're classics.**

***John Olsen is another who keeps me on top of the events relating to India Company, sending me newsletters and newsworthy information about India. Y'all have a GREAT Reunion this year in San Diego.**

Please note that along with all of the above, you will find many other great stories, poems and essays on all of the 3/5 web sites pertaining to our involvement in and with the Vietnam War. A lot of talent here, folks.

I'd like to encourage you to spend some time and take advantage of this wealth of material. I'll list them here again:

Lima Co. 3/5 Homepage www.members.tripod.com/Lima35

India Co. 3/5 Home Page <http://www.securenet.net/3rdbn5th/india35>

Mike Co. 3/5 Home Page <http://www.securenet.net/3rdbn5th/mike35/>

3rd Battalion, 5th Marines (all)

<http://beseen4.looksmart.com/boardroom/c/30679/View?n=00461a00475>

UCMC Combat Wife (Debbe Reynolds's page) <http://usmcwife.bizland.com/>

I want to thank my Brothers of the Sword, with whom I served so proudly while in the service of Lima Company, of the Third Battalion, Fifth Marines - and who I hope to always help to represent as a positive force. Your input is invaluable to me, and your friendship second to none. Love ya, and Semper Fi!

And, speaking of love, I would never have had the desire to approach this as I have, a little differently than I have in the past, if not for my soul mate and best friend, Tess. Her continual encouragement, and participation with all that I do, allows for a completeness in my life, of which I've never known. Let me say this to you, my dear lady,

- Companions that have chosen to remain for life
- that cherish one another through joy and strife
- by their own definition of love
- roam freely through a universe as yet to be defined ...
- as a special kind of energy – never altered, but always combined

Thanks Baby! (sorry that's the best I can do at poetry).

Thank you all for helping me to add a new dimension to this anniversary in my life.

Then, there is *YOU!* The reader . . . who can choose to read on... or push away. If you've managed to get this far with my story – then, thank-you for your participation. That alone has made this worth my time. Sincerely, ~ Yukon John Harris

THE FOLLOWING PAGES are testaments to those who have sought to put others before themselves.

1. Richard Pittmans' Medal Of Honor Citation
2. The Story Behind Pittman's Award
3. Lt. Robert Williams' Navy Cross Citation
4. Lt. Williams' Letter Home and Hill 362
5. India Company's Silver Star Citations
4. Lima Company's Silver Star Citations
5. George Nevilles web site, and Introduction to Operation Hastings
6. William Myers email address, and Introduction to Honor The Warrior

Medal of Honor

PITTMAN, RICHARD A.

Rank and organization: Sergeant (then L/Cpl.), U.S. Marine Corps, Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division (Rein) FMF

Place and date: near the demilitarized zone, Republic of Vietnam, 24 July 1966

Entered service at: Stockton, California

Born: 26 May 1945, French Camp, San Joaquin, California

Citation:

PITTMAN, RICHARD A.

Sergeant, United States Marine Corps. For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as a member of the First Platoon, Company I, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, First Marine Division, during combat operations near the Demilitarized Zone, Republic of Vietnam. On 24 July 1966, while Company I was conducting an operation along the axis of a narrow jungle trail, the leading company elements suffered numerous casualties when they suddenly came under heavy fire from a well concealed and numerically superior enemy force. Hearing the engaged Marine's calls for more firepower, Sergeant (then Lance Corporal) Pittman quickly exchanged his rifle for a machine gun and several belts of ammunition, left the relative safety of his platoon, and unhesitatingly rushed forward to aid his comrades. Taken under intense enemy small-arms fire at point blank range during his advance, he returned the fire, silencing the enemy positions. As Sergeant Pittman continued to forge forward to aid members of the leading platoon, he again came under heavy fire from two automatic weapons which he promptly destroyed. Learning that there were additional wounded Marines fifty yards further along the trail, he braved a withering hail of enemy mortar and small-arms fire to continue onward. As he reached the position where the leading Marines had fallen, he was suddenly confronted with a bold frontal attack by 30 to 40 enemy. Totally disregarding his own safety, he calmly established a position in the middle of the trail and raked the advancing enemy with devastating machine-gun fire. His weapon rendered ineffective, he picked up a submachine and, together with a pistol seized from a fallen comrade, continued his lethal fire until the enemy force had withdrawn. Having exhausted his ammunition except for a grenade which he hurled at the enemy, he then rejoined his own platoon. Sergeant Pittman's daring initiative, bold fighting spirit and selfless devotion to duty inflicted many enemy casualties, disrupted the enemy attack and saved the lives of many of his wounded comrades. His personal valor at grave risk to himself reflects the highest credit upon himself, the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

Lyndon B. Johnson
President of the United States

THE MEDAL OF HONOR..... AND HOW IT GOT TO PITTMAN

By: *Jim Sims*

You are all aware of the unbelievably heroic actions of Richard A. Pittman on July 24, 1966 and have seen his citation for the Medal of Honor. You might be interested in ... as Paul Harvey would say the rest of the story of how the Medal found its way from Chu Lai to President Johnson.

In October 1966 I became Company Commander of I-3-5, and was soon joined by Dennis Perkins as XO and First Sergeant Settle. Soon thereafter they brought to me a stack of paperwork and recommended awards that had been returned by Battalion because of format, the need for supporting statements, and other *admin stuff*. Included was a recommendation for the Bronze Star for Lance Corporal Pittman. The reaction of Art Perry, Company Gunny, was; "B__ S__ ! What an injustice! If it hadn't been for Pittman, many of us wouldn't be here."

With that, Perkins and Perry set to obtaining supporting statements from witnesses. Clarence Drake had returned to I-3-5 and his input was invaluable. Because I had written the after action reports and had been the Division Investigating Officer of the action, I was well aware of what had happened and was able to rewrite the award recommendation.

A new recommendation – for the f Honor – was submitted. When Rich left the Company in early 1967 I gave him a copy telling him I had no idea what would eventually happen. Later, Colonel Kenny Houghton, CO of 5th Marines made some editorial changes and had me resubmit the award.

In March 1967, I was transferred to III MAF and became an Aide to Lieutenant General Walt. In early May 1967, Colonel Neville, the Deputy Chief of Staff, called me into General Walt's office. They had in front of them the recommendation for the Medal of Honor, and quizzed me at length regarding the action and the preparation of the award. General Walt called Colonel Houghton and asked him about the award while I sat in the office. The issue was that Major General Nickerson, CG 1st Marine Division, had put as his endorsement a recommendation that the award be downgraded to a Silver Star.

After the interview and call to Colonel Houghton, General Walt called General Nickerson and pressured him to reconsider and change his endorsement to support a Medal of Honor. The following week Lieutenant General Krulak, CG FMFPAC, visited DaNang. He interviewed me for about 20 minutes regarding the Pittman award and spoke with Colonels Haynes and Houghton, former COs of 5th Marines. As in the previous meeting with General Walt, I noted that the missing piece of supporting evidence was a statement from Mike Bednar, wounded and abandoned on the hill. General Krulak directed his Aide Major John Grinalds to contact the VA and find Bednar.

General Krulak left DaNang with the recommendation and promised he would forward it to CMC recommending approval with enthusiasm. He promised he would do all that he could to have the medal awarded to Pittman.

The rest, as they say, is history. But for the chance reassignment of a Marine to be an Aide, the gallant actions of Richard A. Pittman might not have been recognized by a grateful nation. Regardless of whatever else may have happened, his actions will always be remembered by Art Perry, Clarence Drake, Bednar and all the others whose lives he saved.

NAVY CROSS CITATION

Williams, Robert S.

For extraordinary heroism as Platoon Commander, First Platoon, Company I, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, First Marine Division in the Cam Lo District, Republic of Vietnam on 24 and 25 July 1966. As Company I moved onto Hill 362, First Lieutenant (then Second Lieutenant) Williams' platoon overran the forward security elements of an estimated battalion of the North Vietnamese Army. While in conflict with the security elements the Second Platoon bypassed the First Platoon and came under devastating preplanned fire by the enemy's main force, suffering many casualties. Realizing the graveness of the situation and being constantly exposed to intense enemy fire, First Lieutenant Williams led his platoon in the same frontal assault. Inspired by his courageous leadership and apparent calm in the face of overwhelming odds, the First Platoon gained the time and terrain to cover the rescue of the Second Platoon's wounded. When the numerically stronger force counterattacked, First Lieutenant Williams took command of the two platoons and formed them into a right perimeter for a better defense. Fearing that wounded had been left behind, he went out of the perimeter alone to search for them. There were bursts of automatic weapons fire, and the covering force began receiving withering assault fire from the advancing enemy. Artillery fire was called in to within seventy-five yards of the forward positions to avoid being completely overrun. Returning to the perimeter, First Lieutenant Williams emerged from the tall grass and reported he could not find any more wounded. Throughout the remainder of that day and the next, First Lieutenant Williams, constantly exposed to enemy fire, moved from position to position encouraging his men and the next, First Lieutenant Williams, constantly exposed to enemy fire, moved from position to position encouraging his men and directing their fire. Then early in the evening of 24 July, being too engrossed in his duties to seek cover, he was painfully wounded in the leg by a mortar attack; but he refused treatment until his troops had been cared for and continuing moving from position to position bolstering morale and the fighting efficiency of his unit. First Lieutenant Williams' extreme valor, undying devotion to duty, and initiative at the risk of his own life, saved the lives of many Marines and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

Sunday 7 Aug. '66
Chu Lai, Vietnam

Dear Sally,

We have been in Chu Lai for about 4 or 5 days, and have been taking it easy. Yesterday the whole 5th Marine Regiment started on "Operation Colorado". "I" Co. is acting as security for the regimental C.P area and probably won't see any action in this operation. Now to explain what happened on Operation "Hastings". To start with, "I" Co. is still a fighting unit.

We were in the valley to the south of the ridge line I have drawn. The Company was ordered to occupy hill 362. My platoon, (1st Plt) led the way up the side of the ridge. When we got to the top, we spotted the trail running E & W. We turned east (or right) and started heading toward hill 362. About the time my trailing rear squad reached the trail, 3 North Vietnamese walked up the trail from the left. Fire was exchanged. I was near the head of the platoon (to the right) and went back to the firing after leaving the point squad with orders to watch towards hill 362. After joining the rear squad (1st Sqd. Under Sgt. Possio) we proceeded to pursue the enemy down the trail to the left. We killed 1 and captured 2. One of those who was captured was wounded and died later on. They were a 3 man detail carrying mortar ammunition.

By this time the C.O. had reached the trail, so I took the prisoner back to him. The P.O.W. told us (one of my men can speak a little Vietnamese) there were more enemy along the ridge to our right. I wasn't sure he was telling the truth and I figured there might have been a translation mix-up. I knew we had enemy contact to the left, so I suggested Woody's plt. Go right and I go left. I figured my platoon would have the best chance for enemy contact.

A little after Woody's plt. (2nd Plt.) passed hill 362, they made contact with small groups of North Vietnamese and pursued them along the trail. At about Point A they were hit heavily by machine gun fire from their front and flank and immediately started to take heavy casualties. The 2nd Plt. Needed help so the 1st Plt. (mine) turned around and moved along the ridge to help them. As we passed the top of Hill 362 I dropped off a fire team to start making a clearing so the wounded could be lifted out by helicopter.

I didn't take the Plt. all the way forward but left them a little to the rear while I went up to see Woody and find out what we could do to help. By this time Woody's casualties were quite heavy. You see, they had the trail zeroed in with heavy machine guns. They were firing through the brush, (I'm sure they had registered on them previously) and we couldn't locate them. We decided to pull back and call in an air strike. I then called down a squad to help pull out the dead and wounded and went back to get another. About this time, I got a call over the radio. (We need Help! We need help!) so I turned around and ran back down the trail. I didn't know it but those up at the very front had just been overrun and without knowing it, I ran past the last live marine and smack into a North Vietnamese who caught me by surprise and started shooting at me with his automatic rifle from about 25 feet away. I dove into the brush and set a new world's record for crawling. I got back to where our people were and found Woody wounded. He seemed to be all right so I got 2 men and tried to work down the left flank of the trail to see if we could knock out the enemy or see if there were any wounded Marines there. The brush was so thick we could hardly move. We were very close to the enemy but couldn't see for the brush. We would yell, "Is that a Marine firing, Is that a Marine?" Answer up or we will throw a grenade." We kept this up for 15 or 20 minutes then headed back to our own positions. We brought Woody along with us.

When we got back with our troops we tried to drag 2 bodies up the trail with us. The enemy fire was coming in quite heavy and we were having to drag the bodies up hill. Finally, I gave the order to leave the bodies and withdraw to where Mike had set up a covering for us. We (the Sergeants with me) practically had to kick the men up the trail. They didn't want to leave the 2 dead bodies. I hated to leave them myself, but the fire was so heavy I'm sure we would have lost several more if we hadn't left the dead.

We got back to where Mike was (Position B) and set up a blocking force across the ridge. The brush and trees thinned out enough so we could move off the trail. By this time we had moved most of our dead and wounded to the HLZ and also started organizing a perimeter defense. I had the section from C through B to D, Mike had the section from D clockwise to C. By this time we started to receive a few rounds of mortar fire. They didn't do much damage at this time. The perimeter was made up by grabbing anyone available and putting him in place. We had received enough casualties by this time to disorganize the various units. In one portion of my perimeter we dug a trench. It was manned by about 20 men, 75% of whom were wounded. The man I put in charge was a L/Cpl. Who couldn't walk. He used a PFC as his legs to see that orders were carried out.

We now started to receive heavier and more accurate mortar fire. Some of the wounded were hit again. Some were hit a couple of times more. We also had several people killed. We started to dig holes for the wounded, who could move at Point E. For those who were hit too critically to move, we dug holes on the HLZ. This was done while under fire. These Marines were magnificent. We had tried to get choppers in to lift out the wounded, but they got shot full of holes by machine gun fire.

All through the night we were probed by small groups. One North Vietnamese got within 6 feet of a Marine. The Marine tried to shoot him and his rifle jammed. (It had started raining and everything was caked with mud.) The enemy tried to fire, but his rifle also jammed. Needless to say, I think both men probably aged 10 years when they heard the other's rifle click. The enemy promptly made a high speed exit. We finally got the mortar knocked out with artillery fire.

The next morning we started enlarging the landing zone so choppers could evacuate the wounded. The terrain was too rough to evacuate most of the wounded overland. We finally got chain saws in to help in the clearing but most of it was done with machetes. We had to run the walking wounded off. They were trying to chop on the trees. That included some with wounds in both arms.

By this time the North Vietnamese had withdrawn. At least they had stopped shooting. A little after it got light, some of my men heard someone calling for help. They immediately formed a small patrol and went out. (I was at the other end of the perimeter and didn't hear the man yell.) It turned out to be my radioman, Pfc. Bednar, I didn't know he had followed me down the trail and when I ran into the North Vietnamese, he evidently got shot and knocked unconscious as I dove into the brush. As I said before, we had tried to see if there were any Marines alive in this area. Evidently there was one other man who had been hit and knocked out but was still alive in the same area.

Anyway, after the shooting was over, the enemy started bayoneting the dead. This other man groaned when struck and was immediately shot. Bednar heard this and managed not to move or make any noise when they bayoneted him. He did such a good job that they thought he was dead and took his watch, cigarettes, pistol and radio. When it got dark, he started crawling up the trail toward us. Thank goodness it was an extremely dark night. Everytime one would pass him, he would play dead or crawl off the trail. During the night he crawled about 150 yards with a gunshot wound and three or four bayonet wounds. One of the bayonet wounds opened up his intestines and they were hanging

out. The amazing thing about it was that when he was picked up, he didn't ask for first aid or complain about his wounds. He must have thought I got hit when he did. The first thing he said was, "Is Lt. Williams O.K.?" Everytime I think of him and what he went through I almost cry. I know Marines aren't supposed to do that sort of thing, but after seeing these kids die trying to save a wounded buddy, and digging holes for the wounded while they were under fire and watching them comfort the hurt, I can't help it and don't feel a bit ashamed about crying.

The total dead was around 25 and the wounded that had to be evacuated was in the neighborhood of 70. As you know, a man who is wounded or killed, receives the Purple Heart. About two nights before, Mike's platoon had 8 killed and 4 wounded in an ambush. During a period of 3 days, our Company earned 116 Purple Hearts. Some of the wounds were minor but most were serious.

If anyone ever tells you today's Marine isn't as good as those in World War II and Korea, you set them straight. They fought like real pros. They sacrificed themselves so their friends would live. They held out when they should have run, and I consider it a privilege and honor to be able to lead these men and number them among my friends.

I miss both of you very much.

Love,

Sam

(Lt. R. S. Williams)

P.S. The boys' names I like best are, Timothy Robert and Samuel Patrick.

For girls, how about Kelly Ann or Sandra Lea?

**India's Silver Star Awards
Hastings – July 1966**

SILVER STAR Citations

Brickey

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
HEADQUARTERS. FLEET MARINE FORCE. PACIFIC
FPO. SAN FRANCISCO. 96602

In the name of the President of the United States, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific takes pleasure in presenting the SILVER STAR MEDAL to

STAFF SERGEANT BILLY J. BRICKEY
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following
CITATION:

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as Squad Leader with Company I, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. On 22 July 1966, Staff Sergeant BRICKEY's squad was serving as point for a company column, moving down a wide streambed, when the point fire team was ambushed at close range from enemy positions along the steep banks of the streambed. The fire team immediately sustained several casualties and was pinned down by heavy and accurate enemy automatic rifle fire. Maneuvering his remaining teams into positions to neutralize the enemy fire, Staff Sergeant BRICKEY left his place of relative safety to render aid to the wounded Marines. Continually and with complete disregard for his own safety, he crossed the exposed area under withering enemy fire to carry the wounded to safety. During one of his rescue attempts, Staff Sergeant BRICKEY was wounded by enemy fire and suffered wounds in his right arm and hand. Selflessly, he continued to direct fire on the enemy and to care for the wounded until they had all been moved to a safe position. After routing the enemy, Staff Sergeant BRICKEY directed the remainder of his squad in clearing a zone for the medical evacuation helicopter. His outstanding leadership and compassion for his fellow Marines inspired all who observed him and were instrumental in saving the lives of several of his companions. By his extraordinary courage, bold initiative, and selfless devotion to duty, Staff Sergeant BRICKEY upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service."

FOR THE PRESIDENT,
A. R. KIER
MAJOR GENERAL, U. S. MARINE CORPS
ACTING

TEMPORARY CITATION

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
HEADQUARTERS. FLEET MARINE FORCE, PACIFIC
FPO, SAN FRANCISCO, 96602

In the name of the President of the United States, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific takes pleasure in presenting the SILVER STAR MEDAL to

FIRST LIEUTENANT MICHAEL DAVID CAREY

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS RESERVE

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Platoon Commander with Company I, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, Third Marine Division on 22 July 1966, in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. During Operation Hastings, First Lieutenant CAREY's platoon was acting as the point element for his company as it moved down a stream bed in the Quan Cam Lo District of Quang Tri Province. Suddenly, the first squad was taken under intense automatic weapons fire by a North Vietnamese ambush force. In the initial burst of fire, four Marines were killed and the remainder of the squad was pinned down by hand grenades and rifle fire. Realizing the seriousness of the situation, First Lieutenant CAREY unhesitatingly advanced to the front of his platoon and killed two enemy soldiers. Simultaneously, he skillfully directed the remaining squads into position in order to gain fire superiority. Observing two of his men, seriously wounded and exposed to enemy fire, he courageously dashed through the intense fire and moved the Marines to safety. After the casualties were evacuated, First Lieutenant CAREY returned to the ambush site and effectively maneuvered the remainder of the platoon in an attack on the enemy positions which routed the enemy forces. His selfless disregard for his own safety and valiant leadership preserved the integrity of his unit and undoubtedly saved the lives of his men. By his courage and exceptional fortitude in the face of enemy fire, keen professional ability and unfaltering dedication to duty at great personal risk, First Lieutenant CAREY upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service."

FOR THE PRESIDENT,
V. H. KRULAK
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U. S. MARINE CORPS
COMMANDING

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
HEADQUARTERS. FLEET MARINE FORCE. PACIFIC
FPO. SAN FRANCISCO. 96602

In the name of the President of the United States, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific takes pleasure in presenting a gold star in lieu of the second SILVER STAR MEDAL to

FIRST LIEUTENANT MICHAEL DAVID CAREY

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS RESERVE

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Platoon Commander with Company I, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, Third Marine Division on 24 July 1966,, in connection with operations against the enemy. During the attack and subsequent defense of Hill 362, First Lieutenant CAREY repeatedly exposed himself to hostile fire to inspire and direct the efforts of his platoon against a numerically superior North Vietnamese Army force. While the First and Second Platoons were bitterly engaged with the enemy, he courageously led the Third Platoon forward to prevent an encirclement of his company by the enemy. Moving his squads forward, First Lieutenant CAREY, with complete disregard for his own safety, personally assaulted the advancing enemy unit with hand grenades. 'His aggressive and determined actions were so unexpected that he thoroughly disorganized the enemy and enabled his men to maneuver through the thick underbrush and launch an assault against the determined enemy. After the hill had been partially secured, he consolidated his men to form a strong defensive position. Simultaneously, he made-provisions to have the wounded evacuated to a secure area. Although his position was under continuous heavy enemy mortar and small arms fire, First Lieutenant CAREY fearlessly moved among his men, directing their fire and encouraging them to hold their positions. His inspiring leadership, despite a painful wound sustained during the fire fight, was instrumental in the success of his unit in accomplishing its mission. By his exceptional fortitude in the face of intense enemy fire, selfless and heroic actions, keen professional skill and unfaltering dedication to duty, First Lieutenant CAREY upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service."

FOR THE PRESIDENT,
V. H. KRULAK
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U. S. MARINE CORPS
COMMANDING

2nd Lt. Lee Anderson

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
HEADQUARTERS, FLEET MARINE FORCE, PACIFIC

FPO, SAN FRANCISCO, 96602

In the name of the President of the United States, the Commanding General,
Fleet Marine Force, Pacific takes pleasure in presenting the SILVER STAR
MEDAL to

SECOND LIEUTENANT LEE H. ANDERSON
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Platoon Commander with Company L, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, First Marine Division on 24 July 1966 in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. During Operation Hastings in Quang Tri Province, Second Lieutenant ANDERSON led his platoon to the position of a Company which had been attacked by a North Vietnamese battalion. Subsequently, the position was again attacked by the determined enemy force and a vicious fire fight ensued. Braving intense hostile fire, he courageously moved among his men, directing their fire and offering them words of encouragement. Under his inspiring leadership, his platoon gained fire superiority, which resulted in seven enemy killed, one of which he killed himself. Although five additional deaths were estimated to have been inflicted on the enemy and other casualties were observed being dragged away by the remainder of the enemy unit, Second Lieutenant ANDERSON's platoon sustained only light casualties. Exhibiting uncommon initiative and sound judgment, he called in air strikes to insure the complete destruction of the enemy, but the dense jungle canopy prevented the pilots from locating the North Vietnamese position. With complete disregard for his own safety, Second Lieutenant ANDERSON ran forward of his own lines on four separate occasions to throw smoke grenades into enemy positions, marking them for the aircraft overhead. His heroic and selfless actions insured the success of the close air support mission and the ultimate destruction of the North Vietnamese force. By his outstanding leadership, fearless determination in the face of enemy fire and loyal devotion to duty, Second Lieutenant ANDERSON upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service."

FOR THE PRESIDENT

A. R. KIER, MAJOR GENERAL, U. S. MARINE CORPS ACTING

TEMPORARY CITATION

Operation Hastings

15 July – 03 August 1966

In the summer of 1966, the United States Marine Corps began a combat operation on the northeastern border of The Republic of South Vietnam.

Seven Marine infantry battalions deployed from Dong Ha, a small village south of the Demilitarized Zone, the boundary between North and South Vietnam. In support were elements of the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The deployment of the Marine battalions was the largest and deepest penetration into South Vietnam since their arrival the previous year. The brushy hill country and tangled jungles in the mountains bordering the eastern DMZ was unexplored territory for American Infantry forces. The Marines moved north to engage forces of the North Vietnamese Army infiltrating south through this difficult terrain.

As a nineteen year old Reconnaissance Marine, I along with a handful of other men, were sent with a task organized Marine recon mission to pinpoint the location and activities of the North Vietnamese. Combined U.S. intelligence assets determined that a well equipped, superbly trained North Vietnamese force had massed in large numbers west of Dong Ha and south of the DMZ. Our mission was successful.

Over the next ten days, the Marine Corps encountered its most bloody and bitter combat since the Korean War, fighting a jungle war that matched WWII in difficulty and savagery. Upon its conclusion, six of the seven Marine battalions were re-deployed, and the Operation was declared a success. Press releases and "official sources" declared victory, reporting that the North Vietnamese Army fled back across the DMZ to sanctuaries in the north. The Marines fighting in blazing heat, steep jungles, and unforgiving brush and scrub country that summer, may remember things differently, though. I am among them. I recall that operation as one of the bloodiest, most difficult and historically significant battles of the war in Vietnam.

The operation was code named "Hastings." Within Operation Hastings, there is a story to tell. It is a story of individual heroism, but also a story of American military and political arrogance and ignorance. It is a story that provokes questions and requires answers. It is a story known best, in part, by the men who fought there, but never told in its whole truth. It is a story that is a paradigm of America's war in Vietnam. It is a story that moves from the rarefied and abstract world of a U.S. President to the grim reality of the Marine rifleman. The story of Operation Hastings is both a complex and simple story, and it is a story that demands to be told.

Years after my tour in Vietnam, I became perplexed by the "official" histories of Operation Hastings. What I read conflicted with my recollection of events. Intrigued by that conflict, my curiosity compelled me to dig deeper into the archives. When confronted with resistance from military and civilian authorities to reveal classified documents, my curiosity transformed to an investigation of

Operation Hastings. It began a ten-year investigative odyssey, searching through the archives of the four service branches, and numerous agencies of the Federal Government. My research yielded two salient points. The first was that I would meet official resistance at every turn. The second was that as I found material and conducted hundreds of interviews with participants on "Hastings" a pattern of deceit and distortion was emerging. The "histories" were distorted to endorse the purported "victory" of Operation Hastings, but my research and interviews were unearthing a very different story. Each interview and document expanded a pattern of self-serving historical scholarship designed to withhold the actual facts about the intelligence data, execution and aftermath of "Hastings."

My research became a quest for fact, and my curiosity resolved into a relentless search for documented facts that contradicted the calculated optimism of published research. As I began to discover the extent of the significance of "Hastings," to the National Command Authority and senior military officers prosecuting the Vietnam War, my resolve hardened.

As I shared some of my information with several mentors and friends, they encouraged, cajoled, and in some cases, berated me to begin a narrative of the pieces of the puzzle that were forming. To accomplish this, I had to ask and answer some fundamental questions based on my research.

Marine Reconnaissance, and other intelligence gathering and analysis agencies had knowledge of well armed, well equipped North Vietnamese Forces in strength occupying fortified positions south of the DMZ before the conduct of Hastings. Why wasn't that information disseminated to the Operation task force and maneuver battalion commanders?

Why was every aspect of Operation Hastings under continued scrutiny by MACV, CINCPAC, JCS, and the National Command Center? The operation received ambassadorial and presidential attention, yet the ground commanders had no real time intelligence.

Why was the operation abruptly terminated and declared a success when existing intelligence data confirmed that North Vietnamese units remained south of the DMZ ?

Why were 80,000 pages of documents captured by the Marines during "Hastings" retained by the intelligence community until I discovered them in 1999? These documents depicted the North Vietnamese Army realistically as a highly trained, dedicated, motivated Light Infantry Army. They also contained tables of organization, tables of equipment and strategic and tactical plans for the North Vietnamese prosecution of the war along the DMZ. Why were these documents never shared with the Marine commanders who began conducting extended operations in Northern I Corps shortly after the termination of "Hastings."

These are only a few of the questions I pose in my narrative. There are many more. I also have answers. The answers support my contention that "Operation Hastings" was a multi-service operation, a battle in which the Marines engaged a superior force without adequate intelligence or support. It was a battle that marked a fundamental shift in the nature of ground combat and disposition of North Vietnamese forces and strategy in the war. U. S. Marine casualties were horrendous and far greater than ever admitted to in the historical record. It was also a battle that was a historical pivot point for the American war in Vietnam, one that both Hanoi and Washington attempt to shroud in secrecy to this day. Finally,

it was a battle in which Marine units at the individual, squad and platoon level endured and performed "above and beyond the call of duty," in a terrible climate, brutal terrain and "against all odds."

It is my intention to reduce the complex chain of events surrounding Operation Hastings to its true historical perspective, and to honor the men who fought that terrible battle with the "truth" as best as I can write it. You deserve no less. It is also my intent to apply standards of documented "truth" to the standing histories of Operation Hastings for the general readership. It will inform not only the conduct of the Vietnam War, but also the nature of American political, social and military leadership of the era. It is often said, "In war, truth is the first casualty." In this instance, the truth will prevail.

For those of you who have provided me so much assistance and support, know that my commitment and diligence has not wavered, and I continue to work hard on this extremely complex and difficult material. I will not cease until it is a manuscript as factual and thorough as can be written.

George G. Neville, Jr.

May 2000

Honor The Warrior

Yukon -

My name is William Myers and I have just completed the book, Honor the Warrior. It is a collection of mostly first person accounts of Marines in combat in Vietnam.

The book includes a chapter that is concerned with Operation Swift. It is entitled The Valley of the Shadow. This Operation involved most units of the Fifth Marines and included Lima Co.3/5. You will also recognize the names of many Marines from I-3-5 in the text and on the medals lists. Among them are Clarence Barrett, Garry Boeck, Vincent Capodanno, Daniel Hayes, Donald Justis, Lester Konrady, Burdett Loucks, Robert McMullin, John Niotis, Harold Pettingill, Benjamin Richardson, Jose Rivera and Robert Zimmerman.

I will inscribe each book, as you desire if you desire. It is my hope that everyone whose name appears in the book will have a chance to read it. This book was written for Marines by a Marine. When you see it you will immediately understand.

The books published about the Vietnam War now number in the thousands, and they keep coming because they are popular, they generate revenue for publishing houses, and they enable fledgling writers to express their feelings. Based on the number of publications alone, the Vietnam conflict is indisputably the most controversial war in our Nation's history. Some of these books are historically or politically educational, others tactically informative, and some are intended simply to tell a story and express an opinion. Honor the Warrior scrupulously avoids the political arena and therefore falls solidly into the latter category.

This is a series of stories about the Marines who fought the war and had very little idea who or where the generals or colonels were. In a series of 17 short stories-historical renditions really this book offers an exceptional selection reflecting the combat experiences of the junior officers and enlisted Marines who fought primarily because that's what they were trained to do. A few of the selections are republished from other sources, and recognized as such, but most are original renditions of events and experiences that occurred in combat in Vietnam. Unlike some collections I've seen, these tales are interesting, well written, and very well documented. Myers apparently edited them somewhat, but not to the extent that the reader fails to ascertain that they are written by different people about experiences that are unique in their lives. At the end of each story/chapter is appended a list of the names of every individual mentioned in the chapter (including the military service number and the hometown), an interesting touch reinforcing the legitimacy and historical accuracy of the work.

Myers is not a professional writer, but he does not lack talent. He entered the Corps at the age of 17, served a 4-year tour, then went on to obtain multiple degrees and a career as a teacher and a coach. I-Es stated purpose in writing this book is to honor the warrior, rather than the war. This is an appealing distinction. What the reader gets from this book is a recording of a microscopic few of the countless acts of bravery and tactical skill displayed by ordinary men who did so much to demonstrate the traits that make Marines special

Obviously, some stories are better than others, but I defy any reader to confess that the saga of "Howard's Hill," the story of Medal of Honor recipient SSgt Jimmie Howard's platoons heroic stand, isn't among the most moving and emotional combat stories

written about one of the most intense small unit operations in Vietnam. It can't be told enough. Also, any person who is a leader, or hopes to become one, can learn some practical lessons associated with the challenge of assuming command of an under motivated company in the midst of a combat operation by reading "Troubleshooter," written by then-Capt George Navadel. "3165" and "Door Gunner" reveal a tense firefight from the perspective of several helicopter crews out for routine missions that spin into a deadly demonstration of bravery and flying skill. "The Worst Day of My Life" contains a moving saga of an intense and sustained exchange of fire under severe circumstances where no Marine senior to a corporal is involved, and intense fear is a constant companion.

The appendices are useful and interesting. The author, with the acknowledged assistance of the Medals and Awards Branch at Headquarters, Marine Corps, has appended a complete list of all Marine Medal of Honor, Navy Cross, and Silver Star recipients from the Vietnam War. The index is replete with names of Marines we all know, have heard about, or wish we had, including several who moved on to very senior positions in the Corps. However, the majority left the Corps and lived a life of a typical American, with one distinct difference-they were intimately involved in an event that caused them to be in this book, and for that experience, they are special.

To order send a check or money order to:

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