

LIMA COMPANY IN THE ARIZONA TERRITORY ON 11, 12 MAY, 1969

The following is a description of my personal recollections of Lima Company during the two days of fighting, which focuses primarily on our Company activities on May 12, 1969, which those of us who were there, refer to as, THE MOTHERS DAY MASSACRE.

This account is taken from a narrative, which I wrote in 2003 about my Vietnam tour of duty in 1969. Lima Company veterans who survived that day each have personal recollections of that horrific day and I encourage others who were there to submit their written accounts of the day, if they would want to do that.

Semper Fi

Pat Normanly

As I recall, we were in An Hoa for only a few days when Capt. Palchak met with Chris, Roy and me to discuss our next assignment. He told us that we (Lima Company), were being "chopped" (put under the operational control of 2/5, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment) for an ongoing search and destroy operation in the "Arizona Territory, a massive area of rice paddies and small villages, west of An Hoa. We would be choppered out to a designated location the following day and proceed on a two day company sweep to an area in which we would set in as a "blocking force", which was essentially our company spread out on a single line. We would remain in the blocking force, while other grunt companies in 2/5: Echo, Fox, Gulf and Hotel, would sweep towards us, forcing the enemy to retreat, as the sweep advanced towards our blocking force. When the enemy units would get close enough to us, we would engage them. We knew from intelligence reports that several elements of NVA were operating in the Arizona and if the operation would go as planned, we should be able to register a high number of kills. Captain Palchak was very enthusiastic about us joining 2/5 for this op. He said it would be like a "turkey shoot". Chris, Roy and I had never operated in the Arizona, but we had heard countless reports of other Marine units, which had sustained heavy casualties operating

there. We were somewhat skeptical of the whole operation, but we returned to our platoons to inform them of the op and get ready to move out the next day.

I remember the choppers dropping us off in an open area, surrounded by rice paddies, late in the afternoon on our first day in the Arizona. I was relieved that we did not take any fire from distant tree lines as we came off the choppers. Our three platoons spread out immediately and proceeded to our first objective. We humped for only an hour or so, when we set in for the night. During our move, we captured a VC suspect and brought him along with us. He was a very muscular young man and of course protested that he was "No VC! No VC!" Our Company Gunny, Gunnery Sergeant Richmond, hog tied the VC suspect in communication wire and covered his mouth. Gunny Richmond did a very thorough job of securing him and for sure, he would remain with us throughout the night. The next morning we tagged the suspect and called in a chopper to take him to the rear to be interrogated.

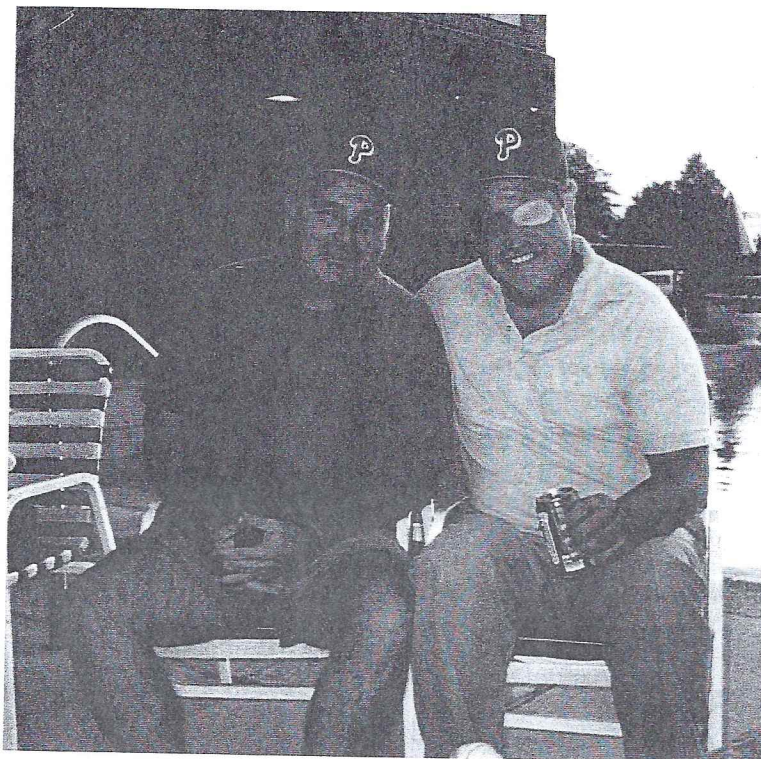
My only recollection of day two in the Arizona was that we conducted a company size sweep all day, across those miserable rice paddies and paddy dikes, in the direction of our objective. I don't recall any contact with the enemy on day two. Day three, May 11, 1969 would be much worse. We continued to move in our sweep formation across the rice paddies and were making pretty steady progress until the afternoon, when we started receiving sniper fire from several different locations. Three Marines from our company were killed during the multiple skirmishes we had with the NVA that afternoon and several more were wounded. We were able to medevac our dead and wounded (none of whom were from my platoon) and proceeded on to an area where we chose to set in for the night. Morale was very low among the troops as we set in. At around midnight that night, I was scoping out the area to my platoon's front on our section of the company perimeter. I was using a night vision starlight scope, which uses available light from the moon and stars, to illuminate objects well enough to be recognized. I observed approximately fifteen to twenty people, who appeared to be villagers, leaving their village, which was approximately seventy-five meters to the front of our perimeter. They were all moving left to right, to a location which I could not determine as it was beyond a tree line on my right. I reported the movement to Capt. Palchak. We really didn't know what to make of the movement and we certainly weren't going to send a squad to check it out. I think we all felt both a sense of security and uneasiness in our company perimeter that night. We knew from the casualties we had taken that day, we were definitely in NVA territory.

The next day, May 12, 1969, was by far, the worst day of my life. I am becoming very emotional now even thinking about it. At first light, when everyone was up and about, getting ready to move on to our next objective, we took several rounds of sniper fire from a tree line approximately forty meters from our perimeter. There were no casualties, which was a tremendous relief. Capt. Palchak told me to take one of my squads and move into the tree line, where the sniper rounds appeared to be coming from and "check it out". I told Frank Reichert to get his squad ready to move into the tree line. For readers who have read some of my earlier accounts of 1st Platoon activities, it will be obvious that I called on Frank's squad very often to take the lead, walk point, etc. Each of my three squad leaders was a veteran of several months of combat and very dependable, but quite honestly, Frank was the best. He was aggressive, yet cautious, depending on the situation and circumstances. I took an M-16 rifle from one of my troops in one of the other squads as we left our company perimeter to move across the open area and into the tree line. Officers did not carry M-16's, but I wanted to have more firepower with me than my Colt 45 pistol would provide, if I needed it. Almost immediately as we entered the tree line, we were hit by enemy fire. There were several

distinctive CRACK, CRACK, CRACK bursts of the Russian made AK-47 assault rifle, which was the weapon used by the NVA. We returned fire immediately in the direction in which we thought we heard the AK shots coming from. Simultaneously as the firing ceased, I heard the screams of "Corpsman up!! Corpsman Up!!" which meant that one, or more of my men had been wounded in the firefight about ten meters from where I was. I ran to where the two wounded men were lying on the ground. Doc Jones, my platoon Corpsman was already attending to the more severely wounded man. It was Frank Reichert. He had been shot in his left eye and his wound was horrible. Doc Jones was working furiously to bandage the wound and stop the massive bleeding. Shorty Renosa was the other wounded man. He had been shot in his front right side, with the bullet exiting his back. When Doc Jones completed his work on Frank and Shorty, which was amazingly only a couple of minutes, I had the other Marines in the squad lay down a base of fire in the direction of the snipers and we quickly, but gently as possible, carried Frank and Shorty back to the company CP. I kept my cool outwardly, when we got back to the company area, but I was devastated that we had lost Frank and Shorty. I was also very pissed that we probably did not kill the bastards that got our guys. Shorty was in pain obviously, but it looked like he would make it, once he was medevac'd and received emergency medical treatment at First Med in Danang. I knew that head wounds were nearly always fatal and I had little hope, realistically that Frank would live. I didn't want the troops to see me crying, but I was, as Frank was carried aboard the CH-46 medevac helicopter and it took off that morning. I cannot begin to describe how miserable I felt at that point.

Just a few weeks before he was wounded, Frank and I sat on top of the bunker, just outside of the Lima Company office in An Hoa and talked about funny recollections of high school and college. We shot the bull well passed midnight and had some good laughs. The officer-enlisted distinction took a backseat to two Pennsylvania guys, about the same age, BS ing about home. It was a simple thing, but a very pleasant memory.

One summer in the late 80's Frank came to our house in Jacksonville and had dinner with us. He was in the area, having spent some time with an old high school friend of his, who was stationed at Camp Lejeune. I remember meeting him as he got out of his car in front of our house. We gave each other quite a bear hug, laughed and got a little emotional. It was the first time I had seen him since Vietnam. We both kidded each other about the weight each of us had put on since Nam and reminisced about different guys in first Platoon, good times and bad times. When we finally got around to the events of May, 12th, I was surprised that Frank had absolutely no recollection at all of the day, or him getting hit. Like other individuals who have survived an extremely traumatic event, his mind will not allow him to recall the event. Following his return to the States, doctors removed portions of Frank's lower ribs and used them to partially reconstruct his forehead, which had been shot away. He wore a patch over his eye and all in all, he looked pretty good. Frank and several of his friends appeared in Bruce Springsteen's popular video, "Born in the USA". The Vietnam Veterans portion of the video was shot at a VFW club near Philadelphia and appears at the end. Frank is the guy, with the patch over his left eye (obviously) sitting on a barstool, smiling. I have seen Frank at a few of our Lima Company annual reunions and it is always great to see him.



Me & Frank Reichert – Philadelphia Reunion

Later that morning, after Frank and Shorty were medevac'd, Capt. Palchak sent Roy Carter's 2nd Platoon on a patrol not far from our company perimeter. I think they were operating probably within two hundred meters of our perimeter, when they were hit with small arms fire from NVA units. The ensuing firefight lasted for over an hour and 2nd Platoon took several casualties. Capt. Palchak sent Chris Gibson's 3rd Platoon out to assist 2nd Platoon and they too suffered several casualties. Chris's radioman, Richard Miller was shot and killed instantly standing right next to Chris. My platoon was providing most of the perimeter security, while the other two platoons were trying to end the firefight, recover their dead and wounded and return to our company area. It was obvious that we (Lima Company) were in a real "shit sandwich" and we didn't know if it would all end soon, or possibly even get worse in terms of casualties. It got worse!

It was now mid-afternoon and as I recall it, 2nd and 3rd Platoons had broken contact with the NVA units, which had them pinned down and they were returning to our perimeter. In addition to having several men killed and seriously wounded during the fighting that day, we were all becoming dehydrated in the extreme heat. We had not received food, or water re-supply from 2/5 in two days as I recall it. All of our canteens were empty and the only water available to us was dark, rancid, muddy water lying in the bottom of a five hundred pound bomb crater, which was located inside of our perimeter. I think we were all bordering on delirium, due to the heat, exhaustion, and lack of water. Finally, several of the troops climbed down into the bomb crater, scooped up the muddy water with their helmets and drank it. I can't remember if I drank any of the bomb crater water.

Not long after some of the troops had drunk the bomb crater water, Capt. Palchak assigned approximately twelve to fifteen troops to gather up as many canteens as they could carry, walk to the small village, which was located approximately seventy five meters in front of my

platoon's sector of the perimeter. The troops were instructed to fill the canteens with water from the village well and return to the company area. The water detail included Marines from the company CP, my platoon and possibly 2nd and 3rd Platoons also. I remember clearly the men in the water detail, with several canteens slung over their shoulders, walking across the open field in the direction of the village. As they neared the village, a heavy barrage of AK-47 automatic weapons fire opened up on them from the tree line just in front of the village. They and all of us in the company area hit the deck immediately, as the firing continued for probably a minute, or so. I was lying just inside our perimeter and could hear the desperate screams of several of the men who had been shot in the ambush. I remember standing up in a low crouching position to look out to where the wounded men were lying. As I was surveying the field of our wounded, two very distinct AK-47 "CRACK, CRACK" rounds were fired from the village tree line and whizzed just a few feet above and to the left of my head. I can recall to this very moment the "whiiiiissssss, whiiiiissssss" sounds made by the two rounds, which just missed hitting me. It is impossible to describe how your nervous system reacts, when you are actually being shot at. You feel an unbelievable strong rush throughout your body and your hair probably does stand on end. I was so pissed that that son of a bitch was actually trying to kill ME!

At about that same time, I had my machine gunner, who already had his M-60 set up on the perimeter; return fire on the tree line, where we had been taking fire. I said, "Let's go Drew" to my radioman and I ran in a zigzag pattern across the field where our dead and wounded were lying. Drew was following right behind me. I was actually surprised that we were not being shot at as we ran across the open field. I wasn't looking for any one particular wounded Marine to assist. I ran to the side of the point man (lead man, approximately twenty-five meters from the tree line) and dove down beside him. He wasn't moving and I carefully turned him over on his back. I recognized that it was Allan Prentice, one of the Marines in my platoon. I could tell immediately from his dark grayish skin color that he was dead. As I was beginning to turn his body around and grab the collar of his flack jacket to drag him back to our perimeter, a Marine jet fighter flew directly over us, at an elevation of only a few hundred feet and dropped his heavy ordinance on the tree line. The deafening roar of the jet, making his run so close to us scared the hell out of me. The ground actually shook, as he made his pass. I was able to drag Allan Prentice back to our company area and we eventually recovered all of our dead and wounded from the field. We were all numb at this point.

It is very important for me to set the record straight concerning my actions during the rescue attempt following the ambush of our water detail that day. I really don't know why I made a decision to run across the open field to attempt to assist our wounded troops. I honestly think it was more of a reaction, than a conscious decision. As I indicated earlier, I really think that we were semi-delirious due to dehydration and exhaustion that day. I was written up for a Silver Star for heroic achievement for my actions. The award was reduced to a Bronze Star with Valor and I received it a few months later in a small battalion ceremony in An Hoa. The point I want to clarify for the record is that according to the citation, "Lt. Normanly ran to the side of the wounded point man and dragged him to cover". This has bothered me for the past thirty-four years, because as I have indicated above, the point man, Allan Prentice was dead when I got to him. The language in the Bronze Star citation implies that I saved his life, but I did not. I wish to God that I could have saved him and the two other men in my platoon, who were also killed during the ambush: Ernest Pinamonti and Roger Vandergrif. I certainly have never considered myself to be a hero, but I am proud of the fact that on that terrible day, I,

along with several other men, carried on the time honored Marine Corps tradition, that Marines will NEVER leave their dead on the battlefield.

We eventually recovered the bodies of the Marines who were killed in the ambush and they along with several seriously wounded Marines were heli-lifted to the rear. Our company strength had been reduced to approximately sixty men and Capt. Palchak decided that we should move to a small piece of higher ground, which was located approximately three hundred meters from where our company had been located throughout the day. We would be in the Arizona for one more night and it would be easier to defend our company position against an NVA attack if we occupied the high ground. As we were setting in our defenses for the night, there was a loud explosion on 2nd Platoon's section of the perimeter. A Marine had tripped a booby-trapped grenade, while setting up his position. He was blinded as a result of the explosion and was medevac'd. We were all pretty much in shock at this point, having lost so many of our troops during the day. We all carefully checked for other booby trap trip wires, where we were setting in and prepared to spend the night. My last recollection of that night, was lying on the ground and reflecting on all the death and suffering we had experienced that day and it began to rain. The rain felt wonderful and I just lied there, catching raindrops in my mouth, until I was soaked. It was almost as if God was providing us with water after being dehydrated most of that day and losing several of our brothers in an attempt to get water from the village. This terrible day had come to an end. It was Mothers Day and back in the States, seventeen Mothers would receive the horrible news that their Marine son, serving with Lima Company had been killed that day in Vietnam. Those of us, who survived that day, refer to it as, "The Mothers Day massacre" I have had a wonderful life since returning from the war in Vietnam. I have been blessed with a wonderful wife, three terrific children and a rewarding career. I don't dwell on my experiences in Vietnam, as many other Vietnam veterans do, but every May 12th, I go back there and relive the horrors of that day in my mind from morning till night. We were exactly where 2/5 directed us to be during the operation. Right or wrong, I have always believed that we would not have suffered the losses we did that day if we had been operating with our own battalion, 3/5.

Thankfully, we were not hit that night by the NVA. Tanks were sent out from An Hoa to assist us in recovering the bodies of a few Marines who were killed in 2nd and 3rd Platoons during the previous days fighting. Once the bodies were recovered, helicopters were sent to pick us up from the small hill, where we had spent the night and fly us to An Hoa. As we were boarding the choppers, we realized that we were receiving enemy mortar fire. The initial rounds were approximately one hundred meters from our position, but they were "walking up" (getting closer) to us, as the mortar crew adjusted their distance. We could see the two, or three NVA soldiers firing the mortars and we returned fire for only a few seconds as the last troops boarded the choppers. We were very glad and relieved to be getting the hell out of there.

Names of Lima Company 3/5 Marines killed in action on May 11, 1969: Terry Adkins, Arturo Gutierrez and Carlisle Wark.

Names of Lima Company 3/5 Marines killed in action on May 12, 1969: Roy Baldwin, Charles Ford, Robert Kleinsmith, Jerome Menter, Richard Miller, Carl Packard, Ernest Pinamonti, Marion Powell, Alan Prentice, Thomas Stratton, Edward Tolley, Esteban Trevino, Roger Vandergriff and Dennis Wright.

Word had spread throughout our battalion in An Hoa, that we had taken heavy casualties while we were in the Arizona with 2/5. We lost seventeen killed and thirty plus wounded. As we

walked from the LZ in An Hoa to our Lima Company area, many Marines were there to shake our hands and welcome us back. Gary Johnson, a friend of mine from high school, who I played football with, was a Navy Corpsman with our Battalion Aid Station. He came up to me and shook my hand and said something to the effect that he was sorry about what had happened to the company and that he was glad that I was not hit. Gary had been a corpsman with Lima Company before I got to the Company and it was really good to see someone from home.

We got word that Frank Reichert was still alive and that he was in the intensive care unit at First Med Naval Hospital in Danang. I was surprised and very pleased to hear that he had survived his terrible head wound. I asked Capt. Palchak if I could catch a chopper to Danang to see Frank. I also asked him if I could take Jerry Vakulic, a member of Frank's first squad and a very good friend of his. Capt Palchak approved my request and Jerry and I flew to Danang the next day. I am a little emotional now as I recall walking into the ICU with Jerry to see Frank. He was heavily sedated of course and did not know we were at his bedside. His entire head was bandaged and he had a small slit for his good eye and a hole for him to breathe. He had several tubes attached to his body and it was extremely sad for both Jerry and myself to see him in that condition. I tried to whisper in Frank's ear to let him know that we were there and that he was going to be all right and that he would be going back to the world. Jerry didn't attempt to whisper to him. He put his hand on Frank's hand and just stared at him. We were both wiping tears at that point. We were both so glad that Frank was alive, but what would be the long-term effects of the brain damage he had suffered as a result of his wounds? After we left Frank, it was late in the day. Jerry went straight to the EM (Enlisted Men's) Club, where he got drunk and I went to the Officer's Club at our Division Headquarters, where I got drunk. It had been one hell of a week.



Frank Reichert & Jerry Vakulic

A few days after we returned from the Arizona, our entire company (what was left of it), attended a memorial service near the airstrip in An Hoa for our seventeen KIA's. It was an emotional service, but I really don't remember much about what was actually said. As we returned to our company area following the memorial service, we were hit by several incoming

rockets. One of the rounds landed directly on the tent area where our troops were returning to get ready to go to chow. Unbelievably, shrapnel from the rockets killed Lance Corporal George Thomas, a squad radioman in my platoon instantly. I was devastated. I could not believe that this had happened to him after just returning from the memorial service. George Thomas was a great kid and a super Marine. He looked like one of the Marines you see on recruiting posters.



George Thomas