



# Sponson BOX

*Voice of  
the USMC  
Vietnam Tankers  
Association*

Ensuring Our Legacy Through Reunion, Renewal & Remembrance™



**Pete Ritch**  
Rest in Peace

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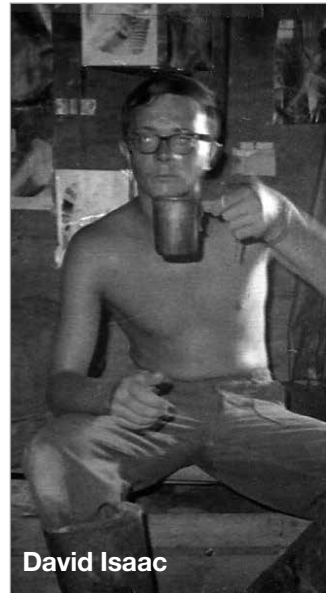
# Reply to the Ben Cole “Bastards Bridge” Story

By Howard Blum

It was a very good article about the “Bastards Bridge” by Ben Cole in the most recent issue of our magazine. I too spent time at the “Washout” with our flame tank “Cremator” for security at southern gate in the fall / winter of 1967. We had a good view of the area / road and it was generally quiet until artillery and 122mm rockets started coming. Here’s a few photos with some of the guys.



Charlie Coggins and me (in back)



David Isaac



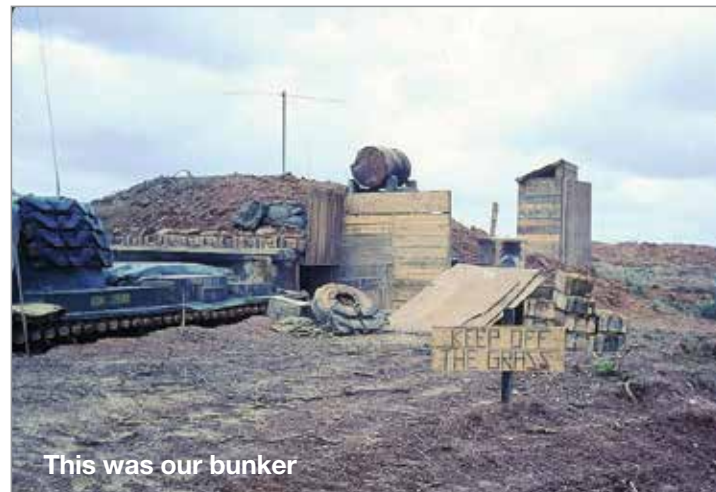
William McConnell



Hot Shower



The Cremator



This was our bunker



Incoming!!!



View out the south gate toward C-2

## Letter from the President

**2022:** Wow! It’s another new year! Already? I don’t know about the rest of you-all but I past an ignoble personal milestone last month. I turned ¾ of a century old. I vividly remember being a 19 – 20 year old Marine and thinking that 30 year olds were ancient. Go figure!!!

**YOUR STORIES:** We have come to a new year and we are now facing a dilemma. For whatever reason, the personal stories that have been faithfully submitted by the membership have begun to dry up. And if this drought of stories continues, we may be forced to cut back on the frequency of our magazine. It was just a few years ago that we increased the frequency from three magazines per year to four. It is unfortunate that we may have to go back to just three Sponson Box magazines per year. And/or we may have to cut back from 48 pages each issue to 32 pages. Please either dig up some already written stories and email them to me ... or get yourself in gear and write a few. Virtually every one of us spent over a year in-country. Something happened to each of us every single day...that is 365+ events that are sitting in your memory bank that you have not shared with us.

I recently spoke to one member who after he got out of the USMC, he went to work for a local university in their Security Dept. He said that it was just after the Kent State killings and he was assigned to guard the university’s main flag pole. His instructions were to take his police baton and knock the heads of any student trying to remove the American flag from the school’s flag pole. IMHO that is a great story to share with us!!!

**2022 Mini-Reunion:** We originally planned to have the gathering in Wyoming last just three days. Then when we pre-announced this event during the 2021 reunion in Providence, several of the members commented that to travel across country to only spend three days was a bit excessive...so we added a day to the mini reunion. We will plan to arrive in **Jackson Hole** (not Lander or Riverton) on **Saturday, Sept 17th**. Then the next day (Sept. 18th) after spending the day visiting the National Museum of Military Vehicles, we will then have a “chill” day on Monday Sept. 19th where we can meet and greet in the hotel hospitality room. Then on **Tuesday, Sept 20th** we can travel home ... or you can go out on our own as tourist. We changed the host city to Jackson Hole because it is a larger, more accommodating city and it is the gateway to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons National Park. You may want to drive from your home to get there or you can rent a car at the airport so you are able to spend some time on your own visiting other sites in the amazing and remote state.

The next issue of our magazine that comes out in April will have complete information on the 2022 Wyoming gathering. One note: There will be no registration form or reunion fee.

### USMC VTA 2022 MINI-REUNION Dubois, Wyoming September 17 – 20, 2022

**COMMENT:** We really need a head count. If you are remotely interested in attending this event then please call or email:

**John Wear** at 719.495.5998 or email [Johnwear2@verizon.net](mailto:Johnwear2@verizon.net)

Or **Rick Lewis** at 858.735.1772 or email [RICKLENT@aol.com](mailto:RICKLENT@aol.com) and let us know your plans.

**Please call today!!!**



“We had to live up to the obligations of the equal citizenship to which we were entitled by birth.”

—Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas



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## New Members

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C Co, 1st Tanks, 1968  
MOS: 1811  
DOB: 01/07/48  
Wife: Judy

Recruited by: Welcome Back!!!

#### Everest, Gerald

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Monroe Township, NJ 08331  
Cell Phone: 908.463.0986  
Email: ???

Brother of VTA member G  
uy Everest

#### Fleischmann, William J

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Brother of VTA member  
Carl Fleischmann

#### Knox, Adrian C

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Son of VTA member Clyde Knox

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Vietnam Seabee

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#### Rick Beirne

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#### Hal Miller

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ON THE COVER: We lost Pete Riitch in Sept. 2021

## Our Readers Write

(Formally known as "Letters to the Editor")

### Rest in Peace

Clyde Hoch writes: I was at Charlie Company, 1st Tanks Headquarters. There was a Staff Sergeant in Amtracs who hung out with us at times. He was a decent guy. I cannot remember his name.

One day I was told I was going to the Mud Flats. The SSgt said to me, "That is a really bad place. You will never come back from there alive."

Every time I saw him, he mentioned this morbid fact. One day he came and got me and told me to follow him. I went with him and into the tank park. On the back of my tank was a tombstone, a real one, with "RIP Sgt Hoch" drawn on it with large black letters. The Staff Sgt was sent home after his 3rd purple heart. No one seems to remember him.

### Laud and Honor

Craig Newberry writes: I just wanted to send a quick note of congratulatory praise for the Providence reunion. I thought you and your team did a GREAT job. Having been a primary functionary in putting together many State of Michigan Lions Club conventions, I am well aware of all of the preparatory leg work involved in making the reunion come off as expected. On that note you did very well. My line was always "If the audience isn't aware of anything that didn't happen as it was supposed to then we did good". You did well!

Best wishes, I look forward to Wyoming!

Don Scott writes: I have only been a member of USMC VTA for a few years. During that time, I have enjoyed and been enlightened by the Sponson Box articles and the professionalism that goes into each issue. As the Editor & Publisher, Proofreading, and Layout and Design, you, Craig Newberry and Tuyen Pham are all to be commended for the hard work and dedication put into the publication of each issue. The results speak for themselves, and represent a first class effort worthy of the USMC values and ethos. I also want to say that your personal leadership as President of VTA along with your platoon members all deserve acknowledgement. Personally, Gloria and I have been one of the 10% in various clubs and organizations in the past that "keep the show going." In this case I am definitely one of the 90% at the lower level.

This is not about me. It is about you and your team. You all are superb in the execution of a mission that is so important to the memory of the Corps. I promise to get "My" half written story submitted soon. Keep up the great work!

Virgil Melton: Got our reunion shirts, thank you so much. Family is slowly recovering from COVID. How did reunion go? I hope it was good. We look forward to our next

one in two years, family will be there. Any hints on where it might be. Take care my friend and appreciate all you do.

Editor's Reply: We are contracted with a really nice hotel in Colorado Springs, Colorado for the 2023 gathering.

Marcia Falk: Before the memory of the weekend dims, I just want to say thank you for everything you did (and do) to make the Providence reunion a success. I was so grateful to be there. I know what the reunions meant to my husband, Steve and I witnessed the comradeship among all of you who served in Vietnam; a healing balm. The Fallen Heroes presentation was excellent. I hope you will pass that along to Bob.

Hope your trip back home was easy and you were able to catch some sleep.

Thanks again. I had a wonderful weekend with good friends.

Harris Himes: I thought the reunion was well-done, start to finish. You used your limited funds wisely, putting the bulk into tours even if it meant chicken instead of steaks. Also, the business meeting is always informative and worth it. And it was nice having Dick Carey there.

Bob Bonderud: We'd like to thank you for organizing the USMC VTA Reunion last month! We had a great time and realize this is due to all of the work you and the others put in over the last several months. We also enjoyed our two-week vacation in New England which we probably wouldn't have taken had the reunion not been in Providence.

Thanks again, and we're looking forward to seeing everyone in Colorado Springs!

Lee Dill: The #4 - 2021 Sponson Box arrived today and I have read most of it already - you do produce a "Page Turner" - Imagine my surprise to see my story actually got past the censors and is in print! Not sure how you did it! I did notice a bit of editorial changes but no sweat the story made it. I like the idea of the mini reunion but I will be in Dubois, Wyoming in mid-July - My sister, my niece and me are going to the Lazy L&B Dude Ranch for a week (military discount for me - really). Before we head home, I'll stop by and check out the tanks - I totally enjoyed my time as TC and God! They were a ball to drive.

Hal Miller: Great Job on the Sponson Box! The photos of the tank museum came out Great! See you in Wyoming!!!

More from Marcia Falk: Well, well! What a pleasant surprise to open the current issue of the Sponson Box and find a familiar "note" that I written to you not so long ago. And this is why the Sponson Box has such meaning to its readers; you don't miss an opportunity to share their thoughts, musings and experiences. Thank you for considering mine worthy of such a fine publication which holds the countless memories of the tankers and their families. Kudos to >>



you, John! It is an honor to know you. I love and appreciate all you do for your brothers and sisters.

More from Don Scott: With regard to the most recent reunion. The venue and purpose for choosing Rhode Island was great. The tank museum we visited in MA was certainly the highlight of our visit. This would not apply to 99.9% of attendees, but having Elsa, my sweet German shepherd dog, accepted so well by the hotel, their guests, and our own Marines and family was really neat and meant a lot to me.

The "First Time Attendee" red ribbon for the name tag that I was issued this at check-in, I chose not to wear it the first two days, then I did the 2nd two days, all as an experiment testing in reverse order. Not much reaction either way, but I did get a few "hits" when the tag was visible. I would say that is a good method to try and get new attendees into the group a bit sooner.

Overall, I am glad that I took the initiative to attend the reunion. The trip to the East Coast was interesting. I also had a chance to visit some old acquaintances along the way in MD and CT, as well as spending time in a RI State Park. I also hooked up with Bob Embesi via telephone while at the museum. He and I shared a special relationship during my '68-'69 tour. He was one hell of a tanker!

Will I do this again? Depends on a lot of things. Cost is always an issue; is it money well spent compared to other monetary considerations as we get older. I am now 79, but still relatively fit, Thank God! Right now I can only say that this is not a passion for me, but it was one hell of a first time experience. Tight with the bond of the US Marines brotherhood, but not the tight bond of the tankers inside the M48 each and every day back in 'Nam.

The last thing I want to convey is my respect and recognition for the work that you and the 10% of the membership that put in each and every day to make the USMCVTA a viable organization.

### Aussies in Vietnam



### Seabees Comment

To Rick Lewis: Just wanted to drop you a line, expressing our appreciation for introducing us to Gunny "Tiny" Kilgore at the Providence Crown Plaza Hotel during both of our reunions. It was a pleasure meeting both of you Marines, as well as all your group. Great bunch of guys.

As well, it was great that you addressed our battalion on Saturday night at our yearly banquet. Many of us who served during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and more importantly Vietnam, really appreciate your acknowledging how we Seabees and Marines are truly Brothers in Arms.

Semper Fi and Can Do  
Dick Pelissier  
CE2-MCB7 1961-1963

### Russian Car Tank



### USMC VTA History Project Podcast Update

I have some relatively exciting news. Episode 18-Part I has been released. Please make sure that you get a chance to listen to it. Hot on the heels is Episode 18-Part II, it will be ready in about two days. With some luck we should have Episode 19 ready for broadcast just prior to the Providence reunion. To date, we have done 20 podcasts in less than one year. Not bad for a beginner. I thank both those who have participated and those on the list to participate. I am anxious to get to everyone and record you as fast as I can.

The following are the various applications one can use to listen to the episodes in Tracking Our History: the www.usmcvta.org website ... as well as Anchor, Google Podcast, Apple Podcast, Spotify, Breaker, Overcast, Pocketcast, and RadioPublic. Choose your favorite and let everyone else know these applications work for our podcasts.

More news: The current top three podcasts are #1, Welcome to Tracking Our History; #2, Driving with Blues; and #3, The Wunsch Family. We are very near 600 listens and growing.

Growing. . . Our audience comes mainly from the US, Germany and the Ukraine but we have listeners in: Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, Singapore, Netherlands, Finland, Iran, Israel, Colombia, Denmark, and India.

The USMCVTA is beginning to accomplish our task of recording our legacy and it is apparently worldwide!

Semper Fi!

"Tree" - Francis L Remkiewicz

### Vietnam War Hero Honored



Mike Giovinazzo sent this photo to us from Staten Island, NY.

### Tungsten Carbide Armor Piercing Rounds

John Wear writes: This past September I received an email from a younger Marine friend telling me about a WW2 German 7.62 mm sniper round that had a tungsten carbide projectile and that could penetrate 1" of steel or their enemy's helmets. It was pretty deadly.

The mention of an "AP round" reminded me that back in the day, our tank's 90 mm cannons had an AP round whose projectile was made of solid tungsten carbide. For the most part, it could penetrate the turret of a tank and then spin around inside of the turret, mashing everything inside. On occasion it would then fly out of one of the hatches.

In 1967 at 5th Tanks on Camp Pendleton we ended up not shooting the AP rounds on the practice range because often in the past, a gunner who shoot at rock outcroppings ... in an attempt to split the rocks into pieces ... but often there would be a ricochet and the solid tungsten carbide projectile would fly up in the air...where it would often fly over the mountain and land in the ITR camp causing a near-miss to the Marines attending ITR.

### Memories of Sue Thompson

Thank you for taking my call today and providing the information about submitting a small article for publication in the Sponson Box. I have attached some photos and hope you will be able to use one or more of them with the article. Below is the text of my article:

Sometime in the late spring or early summer of 1966 I had the opportunity to attend a USO Show near Da Nang, Vietnam. The entertainer who traveled thousands of miles to give us a little taste of home was Sue Thompson. She had famous hits in the 1960's including Sad Movies (Make Me Cry), Norman, and Never Love Again. Sadly, Sue passed away on 23 September 2021 of Alzheimer's disease at the age of 96.

THANK YOU, Sue for bringing some joy to a Marine who was fortunate enough to meet you and get your autograph. May you rest in God's loving arms for Eternity.



This is me (all smiles) and Sue

Sue Thompson



The last photo is of Sue, me (PFC Ralph W. Beck) and two other Marines. To my right is Corporal Richard Murdie and to my left is one of our Platoon Commanders, a Lieutenant, but I cannot recall his name.

Thank you again for your help with this. Looking forward to Sept. 2022 and a reunion in Wyoming. Semper Fidelis.

Ralph Waring Beck  
United States Marine Corps 1965-1969  
Vietnam Veteran 1965-1966  
Ontos Crewman

(Continued on page 11)





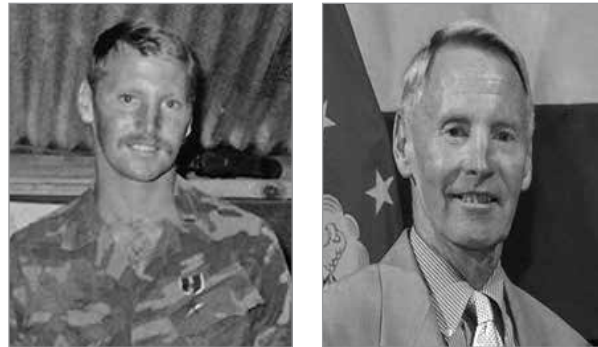
# To the Great Tank Park in the Sky

“How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes...!”

Maya Angelou, American poet and author



**Peter J Ritch**  
1945–2021



Peter Joseph Ritch, 76, passed away on Sunday, September 12, 2021, at Ascension Sacred Heart Bay Medical Center in Panama City, FL.

Peter was born on March 16, 1945 in Syracuse, New York, to the late Harry and Margaret Ritch. After high school, Pete attended Kings College in Wilkes Barre, PA, where he played football. Pete joined the Marine Corps after college, serving from 1967–1970. His experiences as a Tank Platoon Leader in Vietnam earned him the rank of Captain. Later in life, Pete assisted in authoring four books about the Vietnam War and helped create and reunite a group of US Marine Vietnam Veteran tanker crewmen who now get together at biennial reunions. Pete enjoyed the comradery of these men and spoke to them often.

John Wear adds: Pete was a steadfast and dedicated leader of the VTA History Project and a longtime member of the USMC VTA. He will be greatly missed not only for his deep seated passion and commitment but also for his undying and unconditional friendship to everyone.

**Ira “Buck” McQuade**  
1950–2021



Ira “Buck” McQuade, 71, of Lillian, Alabama, formerly Indianapolis, passed away August 11, 2021. He was born May 13, 1950, in Brown County, IN to Harry and Lucy (Washburn) McQuade. Buck was as a member IBEW Local #1395 and the Foley, Alabama American Legion Post 99.

Buck was a U.S. Marine.

He joined the Marines at the age of 17 and served in Vietnam as a tank crewman. After serving in the Marines Buck returned to Indianapolis where he worked for Indianapolis Power and Light for 30 years.

Buck enjoyed woodworking and building beautiful furniture and wood projects. He loved the beach, traveling, antiques, casinos and riding bikes. Buck was a long time member of the USMC VTA.

**David C Turner**  
June 17, 1950–October 23, 2021



David was born on June 17, 1950 to Eugene and Lucille Turner in Warroad, Minnesota. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1968. Served in Vietnam as a tank crewman with Alfa Co, 3rd Tanks and was discharged in 1976. He married his wife Gayle on December 8, 1968. Together they raised their sons, Christopher, Ronald, David and Terrance and their daughter Robyn.

He was a beloved grandfather to 14 wonderful grandchildren and he was a shining light for his 13 great grandchildren. He was also a loyal member of the USMC VTA and relished attending the biennial reunions. ■

## Tanks & Medals of Valor

### Joseph C. Brown

Date of Birth: 14-Mar-45  
Place of Birth: Baltimore, Maryland  
Home of Record: Pasadena, Maryland

#### Silver Star

AWARDED FOR ACTIONS DURING Vietnam War  
Service: Marine Corps  
Rank: Corporal  
Battalion: 3d Tank Battalion  
Division: 3d Marine Division (Rein.), FMF

#### CITATION:

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to Corporal Joseph C. Brown, United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving with Company B, 3d Tank Battalion, THIRD Marine Division (Rein.), FMF, in connection with combat operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam on 30 July 1966. Corporal Brown was serving as the driver of one of two tanks assigned to support elements of Company B, First Battalion, Ninth Marines, on outpost duty at Bao Tran on the song Thu Bon River near Da Nang. At 0445 on 30 July 1966, while he was standing turret watch on his tank, one Viet Cong opened a vicious assault on the defensive positions, preceded by intense anti-tank, grenade and heavy automatic weapons fire and Corporal Brown immediately engaged the enemy. When another crewman, while boarding the tank, was critically wounded by an enemy anti-tank rocket which partially severed his left arm and inflicted severe abdominal wounds,



Corporal Brown unhesitatingly dismounted during the unabating barrage, aided his comrade to a secure position, and applied a tourniquet to the remains of his arm. Displaying a continued disregard for his own personal safety, he re-mounted his vehicle, procured a morphine syrette and again dismounted to aid his fellow Marine by easing the pain of the wound. When a Corpsman reached the site of the wounded Marine, Corporal Brown again braved lethal fire, resumed his battle position, and assisted in repelling the attack which annihilated the majority of the enemy force of twenty communist insurgents.

Subsequent investigation disclosed that his comrade’s left arm required amputation, and that Corporal Brown’s timely and efficient actions undoubtedly prevented the death of that Marine. His marked courage, daring initiative and selfless efforts in behalf of another were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.. ■



## GUESS WHO Photo Contest

Can you guess who the Marine is in this photo? The first person to contact John Wear at 719-495-5998 with the right answer will have his name entered in a contest for a chance to win a yet un-named mediocre prize.



## **Last Issue Winner**

Last issue's winner was **Monte Cramer** who called on Monday, October 11 at 11:00 AM (Mountain Time) from Laramie, WY, to correctly identify **Ken Zebal**.

Monte also told me that our telephone conversation was one of the first times that he discussed his tour in Vietnam since he returned from WESPAC. OOO-RAH!!!



## What Members Are Doing

### **Greg Found a New Toy**



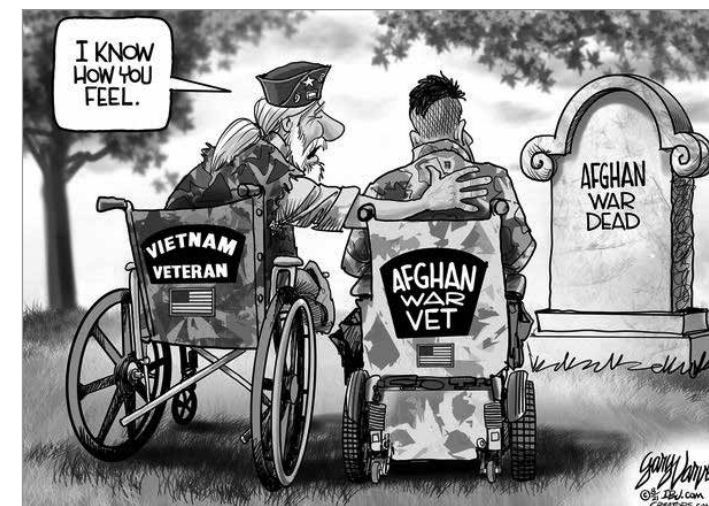
Greg Kelly: "My wife took this pic the other day. Happened across this M60 in great condition at a VFW outside Whitefield, New Hampshire."

### **Richard Attends a Vets' Day Parade**



Richard Carmer: We just had a great Veterans Day Parade in Phoenix and I got quite a few high fives from the crowds as I rode by. It must have been because of my big smile. ■

### *Our Readers Write* (Continued from page 7)



### **When Ted Williams was asked about the greatest team that he was ever on, He answered, The United States Marine Corps**





## V. A. News & Updates

For more VA information please go to our website  
[www.USMCVTA.org](http://www.USMCVTA.org)

### VA Community Care Program Update 01: To Be Phased Out by MAR 2022

Veterans Affairs leaders are phasing out the department's office in charge of community care programs, a move that some advocates are decrying as unfairly limiting veterans' medical options but officials insist is only about efficiency and not sweeping policy changes. Last week, VA officials said they would begin a multi-month process of "designing a new integrated access and care coordination model to better deliver seamless care." Connected to that, lawmakers on Capitol Hill received letters from VA Secretary Denis McDonough announcing that the Office of Community Care would be decommissioned in the coming months, with its responsibilities shifted to a yet-to-be-established Office for Integrated Veterans Care.

"Implementation of these changes allows the Veterans Health Administration to continue its modernization journey and transformation to operate as a high reliability, veteran-centric organization," the letter stated. The issue of community care — where veterans can see private sector doctors paid for by department funds — has been a contentious one within VA for years. Former President Donald Trump made expanding outside medical access a key point of his 2016 campaign and presidency, pushing for more "choice" for veterans in where they received their health care.

But Democratic lawmakers — including President Joe Biden — have cautioned that too much use of private-sector doctors for core VA medical responsibilities could drain finances from the VA health care system and lead to "privatization" of the department. In a statement to Military Times, Donald Koenig, special advisor to VA's acting Under Secretary for Health for Integrated Veteran Care, said the goal of the new changes is not to hamper or dismantle the community care program. "Nothing we are doing will change any appointments scheduled now or in the future," he said. "We're working to simplify, coordinate better, and make scheduling faster for veterans, whether for a VA provider or a community care provider. Our goal is to deliver the right care at the right time that best meets our veteran's health needs."

Officials at Concerned Veterans of America — longtime advocates of

increased community care programs and critics of the VA health care system — see it differently. They noted that VA also recently took down a web page devoted to explaining veterans' options under the community care program, effectively limiting public information about how to enroll or schedule outside appointments. "The administration does not like community care," said Darin Selnick, senior advisor to the group and former Veterans Affairs advisor for the Trump White House. "If they are renaming and neutering offices and moving around access to the revenue, it feels like it is part of a campaign to get rid of it completely."

Koenig said the Office of Community Care won't be fully shut down until next spring, with a target now of March 2022. About 3,600 employees will be transferred to the new integrated care office, while another 4,300 will be reassigned to the Veterans Health Administration's finance office. No jobs will be terminated or physically relocated. But Selnick said CVA has heard from numerous veterans and congressional offices about increased problems accessing the program and getting outside medical appointments. He said the decision to separate the financial and operational functions of the program could cause even more delays and confusion.

VA officials say that's not true, noting that community care referrals were up about 12 percent last month compared to 2019 levels (September 2020 levels were down about 6 percent, but VA leaders say that's because of reduced demand related to the coronavirus pandemic.) Lawmakers received a briefing on the looming changes this week. House Veterans' Affairs Committee ranking member Mike Bost, R-Ill., said he supports efforts to improve the community care program, but said he is leery of the moves so far. "I am hearing more and more often from veterans who are not being given the choices they are entitled to under the law," he told Military Times. "I am very concerned that this will divert much-needed focus from community care and make it that much easier for wait times to creep back up and veterans to suffer for it, just like they did in 2014. "It's on Secretary McDonough to make sure that doesn't happen, and I will be a keeping very close watch."

[Source: Military Times | Leo Shane III | October 13, 2021 ++]

### Covid-19 Misinformation Update 07: VA will not withhold Benefits for Those Refusing Shots

A Department of Veterans Affairs hospital in Georgia sent an emergency email alert 22 OCT about a false news story on a satirical site that veterans are misconstruing as true. The false article—20—states President Joe Biden ordered the VA to withhold health care benefits from veterans who refuse to receive coronavirus vaccines. The story was published by DelawareOhioNews.com, which describes itself as a satire and parody entertainment website.

The Carl Vinson VA Medical Center in Dublin, Ga., issued the email alert to inform veterans that the article is not true. "It's sick," the email reads. "There is nothing funny about spreading false stories of stripping our heroes of their hard-earned benefits." The false article was posted online in September. It was shared widely after a Republican lawmaker from Iowa, Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, tweeted about it. Along with a link to the story, she tweeted: "If true, this is insane!" As of 22 OCT, Miller-Meeks' tweet had not been deleted, despite the story being marked as satire.

In a legal statement on its website, DelawareOhioNews.com states "all stories herein are parodies (satire, fiction, fake, not real) of people and/or actual events." The VA urged people to stop sharing the false article. "The president has not and will not withhold benefits to veterans who choose not to be vaccinated," said Terrence Hayes, the VA press secretary. "The spread of this misinformation is extremely detrimental to our veterans and their families and should cease immediately." [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | October 22, 2021 ++]

### VA Elderly Benefits Special Benefits for Elderly Wartime Veteran Population

As a follow up to the 14 AUG National Financial Awareness Day, the Department of Veterans Affairs is launching an awareness campaign to inform elderly wartime Veterans and their families of their lesser known pension, funeral, burial and survivor benefits. "VA's pension benefit helps Veterans and their families cope with financial challenges by providing supplemental income," said Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Thomas Murphy. "Currently, only 189,800 wartime Veterans and 139,800 surviving spouses are using their needs-based pension benefits that are meant to ease the burden on them, their families and caregivers. We need to ensure all of our wartime Veterans and their survivors are aware of their benefits." The following benefits are available through VA's Pension and Fiduciary Service as noted in the guide at

[https://benefits.va.gov/FIDUCIARY/docs/VA\\_Fiduciary\\_Guide\\_Apr2020.pdf](https://benefits.va.gov/FIDUCIARY/docs/VA_Fiduciary_Guide_Apr2020.pdf) for use in planning and preparing for the future.

- VA pension is payable to wartime Veterans who are permanently and totally disabled due to nonservice connected disability, or who are age 65 years old or older, and who meet certain income and net worth limits. Refer to <https://www.va.gov/pension>.

- Special monthly pension is an additional benefit for Veterans in receipt of pension who are housebound, require the aid and attendance of another person to help them with daily activities (such as eating, bathing and dressing), have very limited eyesight or require nursing home care. See <https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/>

[factsheets/limitedincome/EnhancedorSpecialPension.pdf](https://www.va.gov/benefits/factsheets/limitedincome/EnhancedorSpecialPension.pdf).

- For surviving spouses, there are two types of benefits P&F Service offers. Survivors Pension (<https://www.va.gov/pension/survivors-pension>) provides monthly payments to qualified surviving spouses and unmarried dependent children of wartime Veterans who meet certain income and net worth limits. Special monthly pension is also available to surviving spouses who are housebound or require the aid and attendance of another person.

- Dependency and Indemnity Compensation is available to dependents and parents and generally is not based on income and assets (except the income limits apply to parents). DIC is a monthly monetary benefit paid to a surviving spouse, child or parent of a Veteran who died from a service related injury or illness, or when an active duty service member dies in the line of duty. Special monthly DIC is also available to surviving spouses who are housebound or require the aid and attendance of another person. See [www.va.gov/disability/dependency-indemnity-compensation](https://www.va.gov/disability/dependency-indemnity-compensation).

- A surviving spouse of a Veteran who served on a Blue Water Navy vessel offshore of the Republic of Vietnam, or on another U.S. Navy or Coast Guard ship operating in the coastal waterways of Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975, may be eligible for DIC benefits — even if they were previously denied. See <https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materialsexposure/agent-orange>.

- VA's funeral and burial benefits are available for both service-related and non-service-related deaths. New regulations allow a flat-rate burial and plot or interment allowance with decreased paperwork and maximum payment permitted by law. See <https://www.va.gov/burials-memorials>.

- For those interested in burial benefits such as a Presidential Memorial Certificate, burial flag, headstone or marker, the National Cemetery Administration has information about pre-need eligibility. See [https://www.cem.va.gov/burial\\_benefits/index.asp](https://www.cem.va.gov/burial_benefits/index.asp).

Many vulnerable senior wartime Veterans are targeted with misinformation. In many cases, this is because they are not fully aware of their benefits, which increases the chances of them being taken advantage of and/or defrauded. VA encourages elderly wartime Veterans and their family members to consult a VA accredited representative (<https://www.benefits.va.gov/vso/index.asp>) if they want or need help filing a claim. They are reminded to beware of individuals or companies that promise benefits or ask for money upfront, as only VA can make final determinations on eligibility. Factsheets at <https://benefits.va.gov/benefits/factsheets.asp#BM3> are available to assist Veterans with limited resources. Pension eligibility information with details on how Veterans and their families can get help filing their claim for free can be found at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/limitedincome/pensionprogram-and-representation.pdf>.

[Source: VA News Release | August 17, 2021 ++]

### Vet Death Preps Update:

Keeping Records for Our Significant Others Veterans need to be well organized when it comes to keeping records for our significant others. They will be stressed out enough dealing with our passing. They >>

do not need the added chore of trying to find critical items necessary for planning funerals and other issues. What follows is a list of documents that are necessary to ensure that things get taken care of in a timely manner when we die.

The first item is a copy of your DD-214. This is the most important document relating to your military service. It shows a funeral director that you are a veteran and, in some cases, determines the level of services you are eligible for. If you are drawing benefits from the VA and you do not have a copy of your DD-214, log on to [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov) where you will be able to find and print a copy, as well as review your disability rating.

The second item is a copy of your award letter from the VA. This document shows what your disabilities are and their percentages. If you are a 100 percent permanent and totally disabled veteran, the letter will save your significant other a lot of headaches when it comes to filing for Dependent Indemnity Compensation. It also gives the physician who fills out the death certificate a list of conditions that should be named as contributing factors to the veteran's death.

During the pandemic the primary cause of death listed for many veterans has been COVID-19. But the veteran's service-connected conditions in most cases were contributing factors. COPD and diabetes, for example, often are contributing factors. By having the doctor list a service-connected condition as a contributing factor on the death certificate, the widow will not have any difficulty getting the DIC claim approved. As a 100 percent permanent and totally disabled veteran, you are authorized a free death insurance policy providing you filed for that benefit within two years after you received your rating award letter. Locate the phone number for the insurance agency and keep it with the policy.

Then you need to compile all the documents listed below. The items and all pertinent information should be kept in a folder.

- Will
- Do Not Resuscitate statement
- Obituary
- Funeral wishes
- Passwords for computers and other items
- List of people to contact other than family (old military buddies, etc.)

It's also important to contact your nearest Casualty Assistance Office, which can help you file whatever documents are necessary for retirement pay and other issues. If your significant other is not a member of a Veterans Service Organization, locate the nearest VSO that helps with filing DIC claims and performs graveside honors.

This list is by no means complete. However, it will give you a starting point and provide critical information necessary to take care of the most time-sensitive items. AVVA offers a Paper Safe. Most funeral homes have guides, and will provide additional guidance. Please take the time and make this one of your priorities. As Vietnam veterans, we are all living on borrowed time. For more information, see "Navigating the VA Widow's Benefits Maze: Get the Facts and Don't Give Up," by Claudia Gary, in the July/August 2019 issue of The VVA Veteran (<http://vaveteran.org>). [Source: VVA | John A Miterko | May 2021 ++]

### VA Survivors Update:

Survivors and Burial Benefits Kit Access After the passing of a loved one who has served this country, many survivors do not know what to do or where to begin to obtain VA assistance. VA has prepared a Survivors and Burial Benefits kit to help guide Veterans, service members and their families after the loss of a loved one. The Kit gives a description of each burial benefit, instructions on how to apply, and where to go to get assistance. It covers:

- Pre-need eligibility for National Cemetery burial or memorialization
- Memorial or burial flags
- Government headstones or markers
- Medallions
- Presidential Memorial Certificates (PMC)
- Burial benefits and burial automatic payments
- Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC)
- Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (DEA)
- Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship
- Survivor's pension
- Special monthly pension benefits
- The Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMP-VA)
- Home loan guaranty
- Veterans Month of Death benefits
- VA life insurance

Other features include tips on how to fill out applications with examples of completed forms. These tips examples give applicants a better understanding of how to properly fill out applications. VA encourages Veterans and service members to discuss their military service with their dependents, as well as planning their legacy. Families and survivors should know where to locate service medical records, discharge documents, VA disability ratings, and other information. These details will be beneficial to survivors as they prepare to apply for VA benefits. Families and survivors should keep this kit in storage so that it will be available when needed. The Planning Your Legacy VA Survivors and Burial Benefits Kit is available for download at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/docs/VASurvivorsKit.pdf>

[Source: Vantage Point Blog Update | March 2, 2021 ++]

### VA Handbook:

All new enrollees will receive a personalized Veterans Health Benefits Handbook, generally two weeks after enrollment has been confirmed. The handbooks are tailored specifically for each Veteran and provide detailed, updated information about the VA health care benefits the Veteran may be eligible to receive, such as medications, prosthetics and dental care. Click Handbook to view a sample. For information about the Handbook or to request an updated replacement, contact call 1-877.222.8387. ■

## Above & Beyond

*Recognizing those members that have made financial contributions in the past year that were above and beyond their normal membership dues to help our organization prosper and grow. This list includes Life Members who have taken it upon themselves to see past their initial investment and have donated to help carry their weight. These generous members are the life blood of our brotherhood. Thank you.*

Aitken Lee	English Richard	Kozak Nicholas	Roth Jack
Anderegg Michael	Farrell Danny	Langlitz Harlan	Ruby Jr. Chester
Arena John	Ferguson Sid	Larsen James	Sanders Donald
Barnhouse Robert	Fleischmann Carl	Lewis Richard	Sanders Joe
Barry Thomas	Goodin Bradford	Lorance Richard	Sausoman James
Beirne IV Richard	Griffith Jeffrey	Luli Roger	Schossow Harold
Bisbee William	Gulbranson Robert	Mackenzie James	Scott Donald
Blum Howard	Gulledge James	Manson James	Scrivner Douglas
Blythe Bobby	Hackemack Aubrey	Martin Gregory	Shapiro Myron
Bolick Reed	Hackett Timothy	Martinez Freddy	Shollenbarger David
Bonderud Robert	Hambright Rhea	Mastrangelo Giuseppe	Sims Charles
Brightwell Hank	Hamilka Richard	Maxwell John	Singer Robert
Buning Richard	Hancock Jr. John	McDaniel Gary	Stayton James
Byrne John	Harrigan Joseph	McNight James	Stokes Robert
Byrnes Raymond	Henderson Rodney	Mefford Gary	Thompson Ky
Carmer Richard	Hildabrand Theodore	Melton Jr. Virgil	Tierney Edward
Carroll William	Himes Harris	Moad Thomas	Traiser Richard
Castillo Michale	Hobbs Gary	Moreno Armando	Traynot Jr. Andrew
Chassereau Joseph	Hokanson Carl	Nagle Richard	Trower John
Christy Charles	Hollingshead Glen	New James	Tunget Everett
Clavan Robert	Hughes Merritt	Newberry Craig	Turner David
Cole Ben	Hunter Dana	Nicholas Timothy	Turner Gayle
Collier Mike	Hunter Terrance	Nicodemus David	Ullmer Leland
Colucci Ronald	Hutchins Glen	Owen David	Valdez Steve
Coulter Richard	Jewell James	Owens Gary	Van Dusen Dyrck
Cowman James	Jiron Michael	Parshall Larry	Vaughn Michael
Cramer Monty	Jugenheimer Richard	Peavey Robert	Venturi Sandino
Cross Kenneth	Kalanick Ronald	Pellowski Terry	Wahl Jerry
Curti Stephen	Kelley Gregory	Pronnette Anthony	Walters Rick
Dale Irvin	Kellogg Fred	Raasch James	Waters Michael
Danner David	Kelly Thomas	Rasner William	Wear John
Davis William	Kirik Jr Michael	Reish Thomas	Wiley Cliff
Deroma III Florindo	Knight Ronald	Riensch Harold	Anonymous
Diggs A	Kopf Francis	Ritch Pete	

\*\*\*If we have inadvertently left off a name of a donor, please forgive our oversight\*\*\*



## Looking For...

### DETLEV "JOE" WILKERSON

My name is Scott and my dad was a US Marine 1811 tanker in Vietnam. I'm reaching out to your community to see if there is anyone who knows anything about my father, specifically his Vietnam service. His name is Detlev Wilkerson but typically went by "Joe." He originally came from Germany but grew up in Lawton, OK with a father in the Army. I believe he was in Vietnam late in the war, probably around 1971. I think when I was younger, he told me he did some dismounted patrols and spent some time on a ship off coast but I'm not totally sure. He has his Combat Action Ribbon but I don't know if that was from Vietnam or from Operation Sharp Edge / Mamba Station. He also later supported "Desert Storm," though I believe those later operations were after he transferred to the air wing. He is still alive but his memory is not as good as it used to be. He never talks about his service in Vietnam and tends to become upset if I push the subject. I am currently in the Army and even after I returned from my own deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan as a member of the SF regiment, he would still not share his stories. He always told me he did nothing ... but I'm not so sure. My father ended up switching over to aviation in the 80's and he retired in 1993. Any help that I could get would be greatly appreciated.

V/R

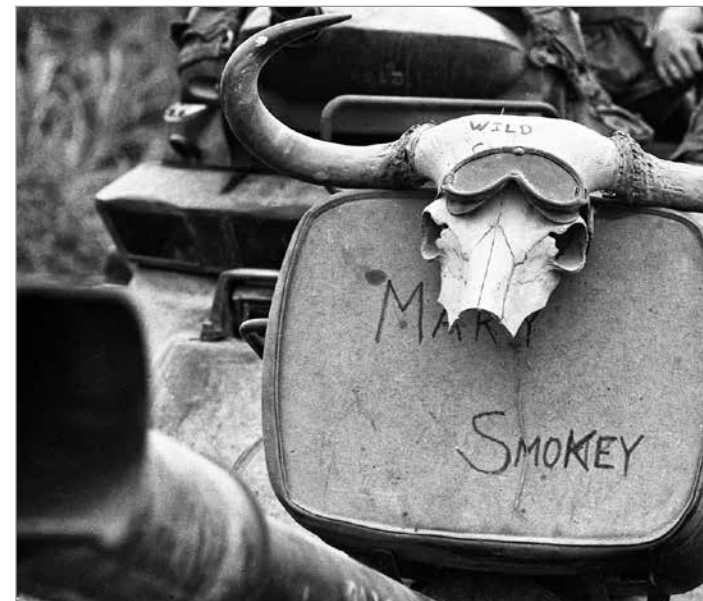
Scott Wilkerson

Email: [Scottyw82@yahoo.com](mailto:Scottyw82@yahoo.com)

Phone: 813.729.9333

Editor's Note: We got an email message from a US Marine Vietnam combat photographer who was going through his archives of the hundreds of photos that he took while in-country. He has a number of photos of US Marine tanks that were supporting the grunts of the 5th Marines in 1968. He would love to be able to put some names to the faces and/or identify the tanks in the following photos. If you have any ideas, please call John Wear at 719.495.5998 so we can help the photographer and so that we can ID and post the photos on the VTA website.

He says that these were taken south of Phu Bai during "Operation Baxter Garden" in April 1968





## FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH

BY ADRIAN KNOX—SON OF CLYDE KNOX

Charlie Company 1st Tanks 68–69

I would like to begin by stating how proud I am of my father. Throughout my entire life, and still to this very day; I take a great interest in the Marine Corps. This is especially true as I think about my Father's time in Vietnam, and the way that I look at all of his scrap books with great pride. I fondly recall numerous conversations over the years learning about the various parts of a tank. Although I am an "outsider," at a young age I knew that an M48 was 52 tons off by heart. It was hard to not be fascinated, as I learned more about sprockets to road wheels—to the 90mm and the end connectors—I soaked it all in. Growing up I tried to understand Vietnam as much as I could. I knew I could not understand from a personal standpoint then, and even today it is incomprehensible; but I still try.

As I came to the closing of my fourth VTA reunion, I have realized even more to appreciate life. I learned to apply the following: "Don't sweat the small stuff," but to always work to value the things we take for granted in life. The reunions always bring me back to square one. I knew I needed to get even more out of this time, so I tried something different—I sat quietly with my ears open. Like a fly on the wall, I tried to soak in everything.

I began to further understand that each conversation, as well as every story; is sacred to you all. As an outsider, all I can do is appreciate your legacy. During this reunion the biggest thing I made efforts to zero in on was time. Always appreciate your time.

Time. One of the most valuable thing in Life. A lot goes on in life. As I sat there with my Dad I thought to myself, "Be present, and apply his timeline to your life in some way." "Ok," I thought to myself. My youngest son turned 15 months around the time of the reunion. In that time frame, I got to see him take his first steps, see him say "Mama," and "Dada." I got to take my family to the beach, and also enjoy weekend trips to camp with my Mother and Father. As I was reflecting on this time it hit me— my dad, as well as many of you; had been in country even longer than the length of time I was reminiscing about. That's a hell of a long time. Maybe not in months or years, but in memories gained and lost. I try to think in that perspective. Thinking of the impact, that's how long my Grandma and Grandpa hadn't seen their son. Just the thought not seeing my own Mother and Father for that long makes my heart hurt. The sacrifice of time is ultimate. There is no doubt in that.

## Memorable Characters

BY CLYDE HOCH

There are many people I served with and do not remember their names. One name that sticks in my mind was Ralph Schwartz. I was transferred

from 1st platoon to 3rd platoon and that is where I met Ralph. He was very friendly and had a good heart. He was the kind of guy who got big care pack-

As my Dad tells me stories, I get the notion that it's not my place to understand. I can respectfully accept this, but it means a lot more to me than just a story that I cannot fully comprehend. I understand that these are not just stories, but that these stories are actual life experiences. At face value, it's not just a two year time frame that happened 50+ years ago like he explains. It's not. It is a lot more than that. I will never comprehend how terrifying it was to be in an unknown territory for that long, I try to fathom sleepless nights on the back of the gypsy rack covered with a poncho liner, or creating unbreakable bonds with the tank crew. I will never really know, but what I do know is that I must pay homage to this.

For what it's worth, I would like to say I appreciate you all. Thank you for accepting me into your association, and including me in all of the activities. It is an honor to meet everyone, and will continue to be an honor as I meet even more of you all in future reunions. I just would like to say with my whole heart that I am very proud of my father, and all of you USMC Vietnam Tankers.

Thank you!

ages as we called them from his mother. He always shared it with the guys. We got along well. Ralph was never on my tank and at the time I was a section

leader, in charge of 2 or 3 tanks. I saw much potential in Ralph and when I needed a new tank commander, I promoted Ralph to tank commander.

Ralph was on another tank while we were supporting Korean Marines, before he became a tank commander. A rocket propelled grenade penetrated Ralph's tank. When an RPG hit, it sometimes ricochets off the tank; one bounced off. When it bounced off it hit the driver in the back, and he was medevacked. Ralph was wounded by

the second RPG, the one that penetrated. When an RPG penetrates there is much molten iron flying around inside the tank.

The tank lost the ability to traverse the turret electrically, and Ralph being the gunner at that time had to traverse the turret by hand. This is not an easy job. Ralph had a piece of shrapnel in his knee but managed to hang in there for the rest of the day. Many years later I told Ralph I was very annoyed with the tank commander he had at this in-

## The China Caper

BY CRAIG NEWBERRY

I have a sister who graduated from high school 2 years before I did. She got married the April after she graduated from high school. Being a good brother I felt bad that I didn't have the financial resources to give her and my new brother-in-law a wedding gift. Fast forward now to my trip to 'Nam. We stopped on the way to 'Nam in Okinawa. We spent about a month there preparing our tanks for our amphibious landing in 'Nam in the very near future. We would PM the tanks every day until about 1600 and then they would cut us loose so we could go out into the ville outside Camp Hanson. One day I went into a china shop; you know, that place where they sell dinner ware. The store was probably 20' X 15' in size with shelves running along the three interior walls from knee height up almost to the ceiling. Along each shelf was a sample place setting of all of the different styles of Sakura China that the store sold. The salesman asked me if I knew how to determine if I was buying fine China or not. Like a good Lance Corporal, I shook my head sideways and he could apparently hear the rocks hitting each other inside my brain group so he proceeded to show me.

He told me to choose a tea cup pattern I liked from all of those displayed, so I did. Next, he put a napkin on the floor, placed the tea cup right side up on top of the napkin and then placed

another napkin on top of the tea cup. I was watching this in fascination wondering what in the hell he was going to do to try and convince me to buy anything with this ploy. He then told me to stand on the cup...all 165 lbs. of me on this cup. At this point I figure this guy had lost it but I figure what the hell, it's not MY cup, so I gingerly stood on it. With his less than perfect English language skills he mimics him wanting me to stand with my one foot on this cup and shift my weight up and down on it. Not quite jumping on it but clearly shifting my weight so as to stress the endurance of the cup. To my utter amazement it doesn't shatter! He lets me do this until I am convinced that this cup that I chose, not him, wasn't a steel plant on the shelf painted up to look like a china tea cup and then says, "Lesson number one of three in learning how to pick out fine china,"

He then took the same cup and held it up to the light and said, "Fine china is always translucent." You cannot see through it but almost can see through it. Wow, I'm starting to be impressed! Then with this same cup he moved on to the final step in determining whether or not you are picking out fine china or not. He took his fingernail and flicked the rim. It gave off the same ring you would expect to hear from doing the same thing with a crystal class, a nice "ping."

By now, I was a thoroughly educated

cident. He said you were not the only one.

Ralph stayed in the Marines and became a recruiter. When he got out, he became a deputy sheriff and became the senior sniper for the special weapons team.

Ralph's service to his country while in the Marines and afterwards should always be remembered. He spent his life humbly serving.

Ralph retired to Kentucky. We stay in touch.

Marine Lance Corporal in the process of determining how to buy fine china. On pay day I went back and bought a 12 place setting of china and a matching 12 place setting of a tea set, always knowing that my sister would be the one to entertain and use all of this fine china!

And as Paul Harvey always famously said,..and now for the rest of the story: I borrowed a two wheel dolly and got these boxes from the store and back to our hooch and stored safely beneath my bunk. There they sat for most of a week until...we were told that in three hours we were shipping out to 'Nam! None of us had time to do anything! I asked a bunk mate whose first name evades me after 55 years but whose last name was Castro. I asked him if he would ship the china home for me to my sister. Like a good Marine brother, of course he said "Sure!" Fast forward many months later and Castro bumps into me in 'Nam. He opens up with, "Hey, remember that china?" Of course I remembered the china and I said, "Yeah..." To which he responded, "You never told me where to send it. So I sent it home to my mother in California." I communicated the necessary information and I really don't remember now whether his mother or I wound up paying the shipping costs but my sister actually got her wedding gift almost 9 months after I purchased it. >>



## Mongoose!

BY GREG KELLEY

It was early '67. I had come up as part of the "advanced party" charged with the initial move of 3rd Tanks up from Hill 34 to just west of Hue. Hank Brightwell was a part of the same "party". We were "new guys", a part of H&S. I had been in country for only several weeks, and had yet to be ordered up to Alpha Company. Our job was to prepare the area for the rest of the battalion, and that meant filling sand-bags, setting up tents, rolling out concertina wire, setting up claymores and other wonderful and various tasks as ordered. We also had to occasionally play grunt which meant running patrols during the day, and lying out as

LP/OP positions at night.

One moonless, and therefor pitch black night, (remember those?) I was hunkered down in a shallow swale as part of an LP a click or so out from the half-built compound when I heard a rustling which seemed to be coming from just a few feet from me. My heart was pounding so hard I thought I would give away my position. Whoever was out there was not part of our team. My right index finger was pressed against the trigger-guard of my M14 as I lifted my head as slowly as I possibly could. Adrenaline was pumping and I was on "full alert". Should I look up? Now was the time, damn it!

## FRAGGING?

John Wear wrote: A grunt from the 7th Marines in Vietnam and I were exchanging emails the other day. In our discussion, he mentioned "fragging." For me, that word was something that the Doggies did to their "mean" officers and SNCO's when they could not take any more of their BS. I do not recall ever hearing of US Marines (at least not in the bush) ever fragging their leaders. My point of view was that the hapless Marine grunts needed all of the trigger pullers that they could muster and that they'd never intentionally "get rid" of anyone.

The reply came back: Here is what

happened: This second lieutenant came over with his Guide Book for Marines in hand. We squad leaders tried to explain that we could not use that reference book in jungle warfare. But the LT knew it all. On the other hand he did not know map reading or how to call in air strikes, etc. He wanted to put the machineguns in the wrong place on ambushes. He moved squads around at night after they had set in for ambush. He made us place the extra M-60 ammo in ammo boxes rather than carry around our necks like bandoliers. It goes on and on.

He never got wounded, what hap-

## You learn as you age!

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

I've learned that I like my teacher because she cries when we sing "Silent Night." Age 5

I've learned that our dog doesn't want to eat my broccoli either. Age 7

I've learned that when I wave to people in the country, they stop what they are doing and wave back. Age 9

I've learned that just when I get my

room the way I like it, Mom makes me clean it up again. Age 12

I've learned that if you want to cheer yourself up, you should try cheering someone else up. Age 14

I've learned that although it's hard to admit it, I'm secretly glad my parents are strict with me. Age 15

I've learned that silent company is

I rose up slowly and when I forced my eyes clear of the slight embankment, terror froze me for a split second as another pair of eyes pierced into my own from only a foot away!

"Damn!" I thought, as the animal slowly slunk away into the night blackness, "a mongoose!" The release of adrenaline I felt as that mongoose slipped away would be experienced again and again over the next ten months at the culmination of various firefights and incoming artillery. But, this is the only experience I can look back on and grin at the memory.

pened was a frag had its cotter pin pulled, a note saying "Next time you will not be able to read this." It was more of a scare tactic. No explosion, no wounds; just a warning. It got back to the Captain and he skipper moved the LT elsewhere. This man was going to get Marines killed and we were not going to let it happen. The lowest private knew more about the bush from OJT. All of our second Louie's learned and did well. He would not listen to the old salts. It was a different war in the bush.

often more healing than words of advice. Age 24

I've learned that brushing my child's hair is one of life's great pleasures. Age 26

I've learned that wherever I go, the world's worst drivers have followed me there. Age 29

I've learned that if someone says something unkind about me, I must live

so that no one will believe it. Age 30

I've learned that there are people who love you dearly but just don't know how to show it. Age 42

I've learned that you can make someone's day by simply sending them a little note. Age 44

I've learned that the greater a person's sense of guilt, the greater his or her need to cast blame on others. Age 46

I've learned that children and grandparents are natural allies. Age 47

I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on and it will be better tomorrow. Age 48

I've learned that singing "Amazing Grace" can lift my spirits for hours. Age 49

I've learned that motel mattresses are better on the side away from the

phone. Age 50

I've learned that you can tell a lot about a man by the way he handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights. Age 51

I've learned that keeping a vegetable garden is worth a medicine cabinet full of pills. Age 52

I've learned that regardless of your relationship with your parents, you miss them terribly after they die. Age 53

I've learned that making a living is not the same thing as making a life. Age 58

I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance. Age 62

I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands. You need to be able to throw something back. Age 64

## Will you give this to my Daddy?

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Last week I was in Atlanta, Georgia to attend a conference. While I was at the airport, returning home, I heard several people behind me beginning to clap and cheer. I immediately turned around and witnessed one of the greatest acts of patriotism I have ever seen.

Moving thru the terminal was a group of soldiers in their camos. As they began heading to their gate, everyone (well almost everyone) abruptly got to their feet with their hands waving and cheering.

When I saw the soldiers, probably 30-40 of them, being applauded and cheered for, it hit me. I'm not alone. I'm not the only red-blooded American who still loves this country and supports our troops and their families.

Of course I immediately stopped and began clapping for these young unsung heroes who are putting their lives on the line every day for us so we can go to school, work and home without fear of reprisal.

Just when I thought I could not be more proud of my country or of our service men and women, a young girl, not more than 6 or 7 years old, ran up

to one of the male soldiers. He kneeled down and said 'Hi.'

The little girl then asked him if he would give something to her daddy for her. The young soldier, who didn't look any older than maybe 22 himself, said he would try and what did she want to give to her daddy. Then suddenly the little girl grabbed the neck of this soldier, gave him the biggest hug she could muster, and then kissed him on the cheek.

The mother of the little girl, who said her daughter's name was Courtney, told the young soldier that her husband was a Marine and had been in Iraq for 11 months now. As the mom was explaining how much her daughter, Courtney, missed her father, the young soldier began to tear up.

When this temporarily single mom was done explaining her situation, all of the soldiers huddled together for a brief second. Then one of the other servicemen pulled out a military-looking walkie-talkie. They started playing with the device and talking back and forth on it.

After about 10-15 seconds of this,

I've learned that if you pursue happiness, it will elude you. But if you focus on your family, the needs of others, your work, meeting new people, and doing the very best you can, happiness will find you Age 65

I've learned that whenever I decide something with kindness, I usually make the right decision. Age 66

I've learned that everyone can use a prayer. Age 72

I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one. Age 74

I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone. People love that human touch—holding hands, a warm hug, or just a friendly pat on the back. Age 76

I've learned that I still have a lot to learn. Age 78

the young soldier walked back over to Courtney, bent down and said this to her, 'I spoke to your daddy and he told me to give this to you.' He then hugged this little girl that he had just met and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He finished by saying 'your daddy told me to tell you that he loves you more than anything and he is coming home very soon.'

The mom at this point was crying almost uncontrollably, and as the young soldier stood to his feet, he saluted Courtney and her mom. I was standing no more than 6 feet away from this entire event.

As the soldiers began to leave, heading toward their gate, people resumed their applause. As I stood there applauding, I looked around, and there were very few dry eyes, including my own. That young soldier in one last act of selflessness, turned around and blew a kiss to Courtney with a tear rolling down his cheek.

We need to remember every day all of our military members and their families and thank God for them and their sacrifices. >>



# 2021 PROVIDENCE REUNION RECAP

## You never know when the moment will choose you...

SUBMITTED BY BOB SKEELS

Mary and I were seated in the 1 A&B bulkhead seats for our flight to Salt Lake City (connecting to SEAT-AC) as the plane loaded in Philly. Just a regular flight like any other. Mary and I were talking and over her shoulder I noticed a guy in line, coyote brown day pack with a MARPAT poncho liner rolled up and lashed to the side, khaki vertex cargo pants, crocks and a 2/5 Marines T-shirt. What stood out to me was that he was carrying a folded American Flag. My blood turned cold. "Mary", and I gestured towards him as he moved down the aisle somewhere in the rear of the plane. She turned around and then she looked back at my face and she knew too.

"You think"? Asked Mary

"Philly is the closest airport to Dover AFB", I replied.

Mary and I sat in silence staring at each other for a few seconds and then she said "I'm going to take his seat and send him up here, he needs YOU, Chuck".

Before I could even reply she was out of her seat and moving to the rear. A couple minutes later this Marine is standing next to me and he says "I was told to report to the bulkhead".

"Hey man, I'm Chuck have a seat". We shook hands.

Long story short, this Marine was a Company Gunny in 2-1 Marines and had just escorted 10 of his men to Dover AFB. He was on his way to Pendleton after being relieved by other es-

corts to take his fallen Marines to their various places of internment.

We talked and I listened. This was his 6th deployment and he had worked Abby gate with his Marines for the past couple weeks. The things he saw at that gate are indescribable. He called it playing God, as they plucked At Risk Afghans out of the crowd.

He was the Marine captured in a meme giving children drinks of his bottled water. He was still in shock, his hands were still stained from the MASCAL. The weight of that flag in his lap was almost overwhelming to me as I sat next to him. I struggled with my own emotions as I got him fed and a cold beer and some water. And then I let him rest, he was so impossibly tired. Misha and I looked after him while he slept. After we had been flying for a couple of hours he woke up to go to the bathroom. He got up still clutching the flag, then he turned and looked back at his seat and then at me.... questioning. I nodded that it was safe for him to leave it. He set the flag on his seat and went to the bathroom. Now I was alone with the flag that had been over a coffin in a C-17 hours earlier. This symbol of it all, the whole damn 20 years sat there next to me and I couldn't hold the tears back anymore. I texted my Marines, Jake, and Paul others and told them that fate had made me a Ranger Buddy of Marines tonight.

My thoughts were with the Gun-

ny, it hadn't hit him yet. Mary and I could see it in his eyes, he was running on auto pilot. Where do we find such men????

I checked with Delta to see if there was a late flight from San Diego to Seattle but the last flight of the night had gone, so going the rest of the way to San Diego so he wouldn't be alone was out of the question as I would be stuck there until tomorrow. I made sure that his unit had transportation waiting for him when he arrived there, and we parted company in Salt Lake to head to our connecting flights.

I'm writing this not to virtue signal but to remind everyone that outside of their life and its problems, there are men holding the line, doing what must be done no matter what. While my family stands down a hurricane and there is nothing I can do to help them tonight, God put me on a plane with a lone Marine carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, and Mary Pressburg made sure that for at least a couple of hours of his journey, that he wouldn't have to bear the weight of that flag alone, and I love her for it. Misha showed the love that only an animal trained to serve could and I'm grateful for both.

Sitting in 1A wasn't the mission I deserved, but it was the mission that I needed tonight.

Semper Fidelis

## The Last Combat Soldier to Leave Vietnam Was Killed in the 9/11 Attacks

FROM WE ARE THE MIGHTY | BY BLAKE STILWELL

Max Beilke was in the Army for 20 years already by the time he deployed to Vietnam in 1972. His time there would be much shorter than the many others who did tours in the Vietnam War. His last day in Vietnam was the U.S. military's last day in Vietnam. What made his last footstep on Viet-

namese soil so unique was that it was captured on tape for the world to see.

On March 29, 1973, Master Sgt. Beilke was given a rattan mat before he boarded a C-130 bound for home. The giver of the gift was Bui Tin, a North Vietnamese observer, there to ensure the last hundred troops at Saigon's

Tan Son Nhut Airport left as agreed. Back home, his family watched live as the man they loved, drafted to fight in Korea in 1952, headed for home from the next American war.

His service didn't stop when he land-

(Continued on page 27)



USMC VTA 2021 Reunion Providence, RI



Ron Knight and Rick Lewis



Tom Reisch



Bruce Van Apeldoorn and John Wear



John Hunter and buddies



Wally Young with his family



Don Scott and Rea Hambricht



Rick and Greg can't decide on lunch



Outside Seating



Small sample of Silent Auction





Dave Nicodemus



Watching an interesting video



(L to R) Guy, Everest, Blues,



USS Constitution Tour



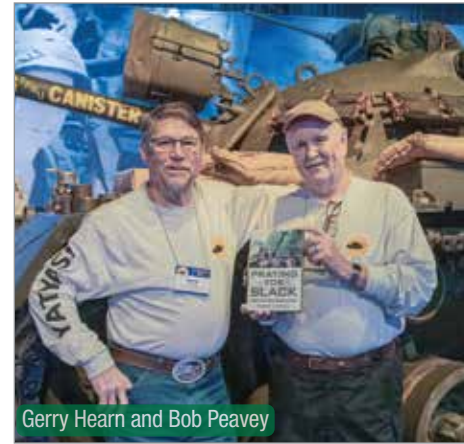
USS Constitution Gun Battery



"Tiger" Tank



M-48A3



Gerry Hearn and Bob Peavey



Racing cars at Museum



Live Auction Quilt



USS Constitution Sleeping Qtrs



The American Heritage Museum



Rick find a goodie



Girder from the World Trade Center



Pontiac Car Show at the hotel



Tom Kelly and Tiny Kilgore



Live Auction Tank Models



USS Massachusetts



Jim Raasch with 16" Projectile



Cliff Wiley

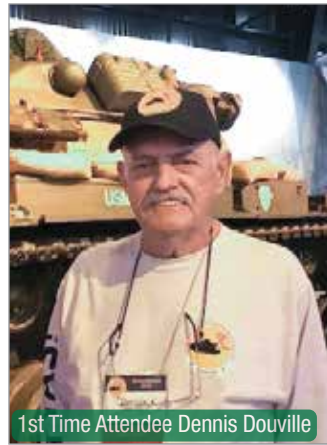


Blues gets his Good Conduct



Mr and Mrs Tony Sims





1st Time Attendee Dennis Douville



Dave Turner passed away right after the reunion



Officer Territory



Guy Everest's son, Gerald



Clyde Knox, Rich Zytte, Bruce and Jim McKnight



Ron Colucci and Hokey



Farewell Dinner Welcome



Listening Intently



Bob Peavey's Fallen Heroes



VTA Founder Dick Carey



Guest Speakers



Rick Lewis' presentation

### Short Stories (Continued from page 22)

ed back in the United States. Beilke retired from the Army and, in the next phase of his life, he worked to support American veterans. Eventually, he became the deputy chief of the Retirement Services Division, with an office in Virginia. But it was part of his duties that brought him to the Pentagon on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

Beilke was meeting with Lt. Gen. Timothy Maude and retired Lt. Col. Gary Smith. Just as they were sitting down to begin talking, United Airlines flight 77 hit the outer ring of the Pentagon. The three men never knew what hit them.

They were all killed instantly. Traces of their remains could only be found through DNA tests on the disaster site, according to the Beilke family.

Max Beilke was 69 years old. Three months later, his remains were interred at Arlington National Cemetery. The

man who had survived the ends of two American wars was one of the first casualties of a new one, the longest one in American history. He left behind a legacy of gentleness and fondness for everyone who met him – including the North Vietnamese colonel sent to

ensure he and the other Americans left Vietnam. According to his biography on the Pentagon's 9/11 Memorial site, he traveled extensively for his work and ended every presentation with the same Irish blessing,

“May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face, the rain fall soft upon your fields and, until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.”



An aerial view of the damage at the Pentagon two days after Sept. 11, 2001. On that day, five members of al-Qaida, a group of fundamentalist Islamic Muslims, hijacked American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757-200, from Dulles International Airport just outside Washington and flew the aircraft and its 64 passengers into the side of the Pentagon.

FROM THE DUFFLE BLOG ... (IT IS JUST A JOKE)

## Army to name new 200-ton tank after General Milley

BUT WILL IT PASS THE TAPE TEST?

BY WHISKEY FUELED TIRADE

PENTAGON — The Army will name its new 200-ton main battle tank after Gen. Mark A. Milley, the former Army Chief and current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, according to a press release this morning.

“We’re calling this sturdy little fella the Mk20 Milley,” Army Chief of Staff, Gen. James McConville told reporters. “One of our majors suggested the name and it just kind of stuck. I’m not too sure where he got the idea, it’s probably just a respectful nod to Gen. Milley’s

efforts to modernize the Army.”

As the Chief of Staff prior to McConville, Milley was known for prioritizing modernization investments,

championing the new “pinks and greens” uniform, and being the first soldier to earn a perfect score on the Army’s new combat fitness test.

As for the tank’s functionality, McConville said he is pleased with the Mk20’s performance in milestone testing. The tank’s shorter height profile makes it more difficult to target and its lower center of gravity makes it less prone to roll-overs. Moreover, more than 100 tons of additional armor provides greater protection for the >>





crew. Nonetheless, some critics suggest the tank may be too heavy for the modern battlefield.

“Sure the ‘Milley’ has a lot more armored padding,” said Dr. Jonathan Northfield, an operations research analyst for the Pentagon. “But at 200 tons it is almost completely immobile, and we may need the manufacturer to assemble it on the battlefield. The [M1] Abrams was only around 75 tons and we were worried it might ruin host-nation infrastructure.

“It’s basically a micro-FOB,” Northfield added.

In addition to weight concerns, critics point to the tank’s soft underbelly as a potential vulnerability, but the manufacturer has already agreed to outfit the Milley with its patented ‘tank spanx’ system at no additional cost.

Functionality aside, even Milley’s former teammates agree that the Army made the right choice for the new tank’s name.

## Marine Arrogance

*A Marine Sergeant Wrote This In Response To An Army Soldier Who Posted A Comment On A Marine Corps Site That He Was Sick And Tired Of “Marine Arrogance.”*

“I think that’s what makes Marines special, if only in our own minds, is that elusive Quality of Esprit de Corps. It’s the fact that we, as individual Marines, don’t feel that we are individual Marines. When we wear our uniform, when we hear our Hymn, when we go into battle, we are going with every other Marine who ever wore the uniform.

Standing behind us are the Marines who fought during the birth of our nation. We’re standing with the Marines who fought in WWI and gave birth to the legend of the “Teufel Hunden,” or “Devil Dogs.” We are standing with the Marines who took Iwo and Tarawa and countless other blood soaked islands throughout the Pacific.

We are standing with the “Frozen Chosin” and our beloved Chesty Puller. We are standing with the Marines who battled at Hue City and Khe Sanh and the muddy rice paddies of South East Asia. We are standing with the Marines who fought in Desert

Storm and Iraqi Freedom and now are fighting in Afghanistan.

Like real brothers, their blood courses through our veins, and when we go into battle, we would rather lay down our lives than be a disappointment to them. We carry on our backs their legacy, their deaths, and their honor. We carry that for the rest of our lives.

The Marine Corps uniform doesn’t come off when our active duty is over. We wear it daily in our attitude and our love of Corps and country. We wear it on our tattoos and our bumper stickers. We wear it on our hearts.

It is why, no matter where we are in the world, on November 10th, every Marine celebrates the Marine Corps birthday. It’s why we’ll never be an army of 1 It’s why we never stop being Marines. It is why, for most of us, being a Marine isn’t something we were. It’s something we are.

It’s the most important part of who and what we are. Some say we’re arrogant. We say we’re proud. We have a

## C-Rats

TAKEN FROM “C K’S JOURNAL”

Here’s some interesting stuff on what was in the C-Rations that we had in Vietnam. My favorites were Beans & Wieners, Meatballs & Beans and Boned Chicken, though I ate a lot of Eggs (water added) with Ham because

I could tolerate it while a lot of Marines would just give it away, so I could use other stuff to trade for the coveted Fruit Cocktail, Pears (mmmmmm, pears) and Pecan Roll. Sometimes you could get together some pears and

“I can definitely see why someone would be inspired to name this tank after Gen. Milley.” Retired Sgt. Major of the Army Dan Daily said of his former boss. “They both have a certain—ahem, presence.”

Whiskey Fueled Tirade is an Army guy, small time strategy grifter, and command climate change denier. He’s a trailer park ex-pat living large in a house without wheels. Follow him on Twitter @FueledTirade.

right to be proud. We are the United States Marines, the most feared and ferocious group of warriors to walk the face of this earth.

When America’s enemies formulate their battle plans, they plan on going around Marine units because they know damn well that they can’t go through them. We are what other branches wish they were.

We are the modern day Spartans. This isn’t bragging. It’s written in the battle history of our country. When there’s a parade and the Marines march by, everyone pays a little more attention. Some say, “Arrogance.” We call it “pride” It is why, in a crowd of servicemen, you can always spot the Marine. Why are Marines special? I don’t know. We just are.

Saepius Exertus, Semper Fidelis, Frater Infinitas, Often Tested, Always Faithful, Brothers Forever,

-Semper Fidelis!

Submitted by Rick Beirne

pound cake for a true feast. Crackers with peanut butter were okay, but even I wouldn’t eat the “Candy Disc, Chocolate”—or the Ham & Lima Beans

*(Continued on page 38)*

## COVER STORY

*Editor’s note: In September 2021, our world lost Pete Ritch, a true inspiration and a rock of dedicated devotion to the VTA. Many years ago he voluntarily assumed the role of Chairman of the VTA History Project. He then oversaw over 75 hour-long video recorded personal histories that are available for viewing on our website. Pete also collected and cataloged stories that fill the four volumes of the books “Forgotten Tracks.” He will be sorely missed. We felt it appropriate to feature a few of his own personal stories that over the years have been published in our magazine.*

## My Story

BY PETE RITCH

I graduated from college on Saturday June 5, 1967 and on Monday, June 7, 1967 received my draft notice. That afternoon, I beat the draft and joined the Marine Corps. Why did I enlist in the Corps? It was simple. If I was going to go to Vietnam, as my recruiter had assured me I would, I wanted to part of the best trained branch of the US military service. My recruiter advised me that there was a 100 percent chance that I’d be going to Vietnam.

After OCS, TBS and Tank school, I left for Vietnam (as promised) In September 1968. After two days in Okinawa, I boarded a C-130 for Da Nang. When we landed In Da Nang, I was informed that all Marine 2nd LTs, regardless of MOS, would spend their first ninety days in-country in a Marine Infantry Unit. I was issued the standard 782 gear and boarded a C-130 for Dong Ha. My first operation was as a platoon commander providing perimeter security for a fire support base on the Laotian border.

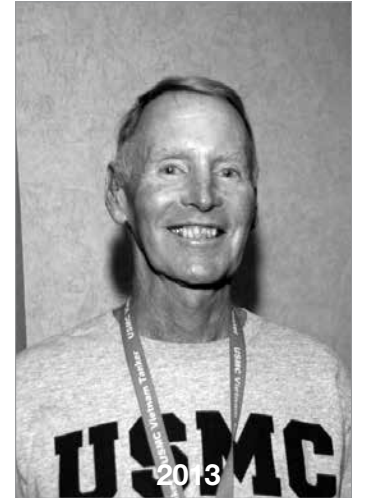
One night my CO radioed me and told me to bring all my gear to the LZ and be prepared to board a chopper as soon as the clouds broke. When I got to the LZ my CO told me that I was going on emergency leave due to the death of my mother.

The Marine Corps, in spite of its “hurry up and wait” reputation can be extremely efficient. I left the fire support base, changed choppers at LZ Vandergrift; boarded a C-130 at Dong Ha; landed for a “shit, shower, shave” and new uniform in Okinawa; flew to Untied States and was standing on my front porch in Syracuse, New York, 28 hours after leaving the fire support base in southeast Asia.

I returned to Viet Nam, completed my infantry assignment and on January 1, 1969, I reported to Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion Headquarters, at Vinh Dia (the rock crusher), east of Dong Ha on Rt. 9.

My first tank operation was with the heavy section of tanks, providing road sweep and daytime patrol support for a Marine infantry platoon located in the highlands two clicks (kilometers) south of Cam Lo Village. I can’t remember all of my crew members’ names...but some of them were tank commanders Sgt Jerry Solano (B-33) & Sgt. Smith “Smitty” (B-32) and Cpl. Bob Mendez (the driver of B-33).

During my ten months as the platoon commander of the 3rd Herd, we never operated with a full complement of



tanks. We were always divided into heavy sections and light sections. We also never experienced a mechanical breakdown on any of our tanks. We hit several mines and ran over some civilian gear (a couple of bicycles) but never had an engine failure, linkage snap, a broken oil line, an electrical short or any other type of mechanical breakdown. Our shit fisters were awesome and always kept us running.

We operated from LZ Vandergrift to the West and Ocean View to the East. We spent time at all the places in between: The Rock Pile, the Wash Out, Cam Lo, Gia Linh, Vinh Dia and all along the Trace (DMZ). We travelled east and west on Rt. 9 when it was a dirt road and later when it was fully paved. We provided security for Sea Bee bulldozers that cleared heavy brush across the Trace between Rt. 9 and the DMZ. I delivered mail and MPC to my platoon that was spread out across Leatherneck Square. And more importantly we delivered Falstaff and Black Label (beer) to the troops as often as we could get it. The tankers did not care that it was warm or that it was not that great of a quality, it was beer!

My platoon was comprised of salty tankers who were at Khe Sanh and FNGs who were as green as me. I can’t remember all their names but there was Gunny Barnes; Staff Sgt’s. Jewel & Tapula (sp?); Sergeants Soto, Solano, Smith; Corporals Riggs, Sandifer, Marelli, Steel, Mendez, Anderson; Lance Corporals Vargo, Eaves, Devaney, Haley, Jan-nick & Vasko and PFC Jennings.

In September 1969, I was ordered back to Bravo Company Headquarters and told that several of us were going to Da Nang and then back to the World. We would be part of the first Marine Units of the 3rd Marine Di- >>



vision, leaving Vietnam and that we were turning Leather Neck Square over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

When we landed at El Toro, there were maybe 100 people there to welcome us home (I think we outnumbered the spectators) and no press. It pretty much reflected the mood of the nation at that time. A little more than a year later I was discharged from the Marine Corps.

I spent the next 39 years working and raising a family and grandkids. I retired and moved to St. George Island Florida in 2009.

I joined the USMCVTA in 2005 after learning about it

## Button it up and Move Out

BY PETE RITCH

While looking through photographs from my tour in Vietnam in preparation for our 2009 reunion in Charleston, I was surprised by the number of shots that included tanks with damaged track. It got me thinking about instances during my tour in Vietnam where we either hit a land mine or slipped a track and had to button it up and move out.

In mid-January 1969, B-32, B-33 and B-35 were providing road sweep security and day light patrols in support of F Co., 2nd BN, 3rd Marine Regiment, south of Rt. 9 between Dong Ha and Camp Carol. The rainy season was just ending and the dirt roads and trails were pretty slick. While on patrol with a Marine Infantry Platoon, we took small arms fire from a tree line across an open field. B-32, B-33 and B-35 rushed the tree line and opened fire. When the firing ceased, we found 5 NVA KIA's. The infantry platoon commander was ordered to bring the NVA bodies to a small village just outside our base camp. We loaded the bodies on the fenders of B33. As we worked our way back to the village on a steep and slick foot path, B-33 "slipped" the track on the right side of the tank. The crew repaired the track and we buttoned it up and moved out. Repairing the track was the easy part. Repairing the track with bodies on the fender and blood running down the hull of the tank, was the hard part.

In February 1969, while supporting a land clearing operation just east of Con Thien, B-33, B-35 and two APC's loaded with grunts from K Co., 3rd BN, 3rd Marine Regiment, were ambushed by an NVA platoon firing machine guns and small arms. In the lead tank, B-33, I accelerated through the ambush, spun around 180 degrees and opened fire. It wasn't until we



**BRAVO Co. Tank Retriever assisting BRAVO 33 with track lost due to a land mine, April 1969.**

from Chris Vargo, one of my tank commanders in Vietnam. Chris tracked me down (he's very good at research) and in spite of the rumors of my death, found me in Huntsville, Alabama. We talk and e-mail monthly and both of us have had several articles published in the Sponson Box and Chris has had a book published entitled "Beyond My Horizon". Through Chris's contacts, I have spoken to 3rd Herd members, Andy Anderson, Bob Mendez and Sal Soto, over the last couple of years. At the VTA reunion in 2011 in San Diego, Bravo Co. 3rd Tanks had eight (8) members of the Company who were in-country, in the 1968-1969 years.

quelled the ambush that we discovered that we "slipped" a track. With several Marines wounded we decided to "limp" back to a safer locale to repair the track. As soon as we were clear, the ambush site was hit with artillery fire from a nearby fire support base. We buttoned up the slipped track and returned to our base camp. A search of the ambush site found 9 NVA, KIA's.

Hitting land mines became part of my Vietnam experience while supporting the 2nd ARVN Regiment in the April 1969. In a 75 minute span, B-33, B-35 and the Bravo Company Tank Retriever each hit a land mine. We were returning to Gio Linh, just south of the DMZ, when B-35 hit a mine. We radioed the Army Major in charge of the joint Army, Marine and ARVN operation and requested that the ARVN set up a security perimeter around the damaged tank. In spite of his affirmative response, the ARVN infantry kept moving right by us toward the Gio Linh. With B-33 providing the only security, the crew of B-35 set a world record for repairing track. We moved out and could see the ARVN ahead of us moving in the same direction. In less than half a click, B-33 hit a mine and again we requested ARVN perimeter security while we repaired the damage. Again, an ARVN security perimeter was nowhere to be found. It was nearing dusk and I radioed for the B Company Tank Retriever to come to our assistance, in case we could not repair the damage and drive out on our own. The B-33 crew worked on the track with B-35 providing the only security. The Retriever was headed toward us. Just as we finished the repairs on B-33, the Retriever, less than 200 yards from our location, hit a mine and was ambushed. I dispatched B-35 to assist the Retriever. We buttoned up

B-33 and hooked up with the other two damaged vehicles as darkness fell. The three of us, B-33, B-35 and the Bravo Retriever spent the night buttoned up with no perimeter security, ready to shoot at anything that moved. We had flare ships up all night keeping us in "daylight" and making an enemy attack less likely. At first light, a Marine infantry platoon, who had humped all night to get to us, set up perimeter security and we repaired the Retriever. The Retriever Commander, SSgt. Harold Riensche fired every weapon at his disposal to protect the exposed crew, resulting in seven NVA KIA's, one of them, on top of the Retriever, near the Commanders hatch. SSgt. Riensche was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions. By noon all three vehicles were operational and we moved out.

In May 1969, while supporting an infantry platoon from

3/3 at Ocean View, the northeastern most base in I-Core, B-31 was crossing the dunes and approaching the hard-pack shore line. We hit a land mine. Several grunts riding on the tank were injured and one required a tourniquet (my web belt) to stem the bleeding from his right leg. As we medevac'd the injured, the tank crew repaired the track. Once again we buttoned it up and moved out. Tank crews were well trained in the repair of our Iron Horses but their resourcefulness in repairing damaged tanks under threat of attack was awesome. Driving the damaged vehicle out of the situation was a matter of pride. And being towed was not an option. So, we buttoned them up and moved out.

Pete Ritch was platoon leader of 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Mar. Div. 1968 - 1969

## Beat Your Doggie

BY ANDY ANDERSON AND LT. PETE RITCH

In April, 1969, our tank B-34, nicknamed Nomad, under the command of Cpl. Chris Vargo, 3rd Platoon, B Company, 3rd Tank Battalion, was on a hunt with a hungry crew. We were operating out of the company's forward positions of Camp J.J. Carroll and Vandergrift Combat Base. Our platoon of five tanks were primary operation-conned and assigned to Marine grunt operations in northern I Corps, providing quick react capability, road sweep support, and convoy escort in the area. In addition, our tanks provided perimeter security for Vandergrift when not in the bush or manning designated reverts from dusk to dawn.

In addition to the contingency of approximately a thousand Marines at Vandergrift, there were several other military units there including Navy CB's, Air Force forward observers, and a platoon of five Army M-42 "Dusters."

The M-42 is a self-propelled, tracked anti-aircraft weapon which has twin 40mm guns mounted on Korean War era tank hulls with an open turret. They were touted to be the fastest firing vehicles in the Army's fleet of tracked gun units, due to its primary mission of air defense. Our night defense was usually anchored on either end by the Dusters or our lightly armored personnel carriers.

One night, our beer bunker closed up shop after an ini-

tial round of two-beer-per-Jarhead, and we headed to our assignments early as usual. Vargo's tank was scheduled for



**Bravo 34 - "Nomad"**  
**(L to R) Andy Anderson (gunner); Bob Mendez (driver);**  
**Claude "Chris" Vargo (TC); and under the road wheels, Fred Morale (loader).**

perimeter security with crew members Cpl. Andy Anderson, LCpl. Fred Morale, and PFC Bob Mendez, who checked out their designated tank slot. The guys noticed that there was an Army Duster parked approximately fifty meters to our right in another firing slot on the perimeter and another equidistant to the left. Because no crew member was familiar with the Duster, the tankers sashayed over to one and introduced themselves. We asked the doggies about the capability of their vehicle,

such as top speed, repair mine damage time and general reliability, eventually getting around to its nomenclature, including the crown jewel, the cyclical rate of fire. The Duster crew couldn't wait to brag on their vehicle and their skills to fire not only on fully automatic, but also on single-fire mode. Vargo grinned at Anderson and immediately challenged the Duster dogs to a shoot off. The doggies immediately took the bait and agreed to a case of beer wager where the first vehicle to fire ten rounds, single fire, won a case of beer from the other crew.

Anderson quickly pulled Vargo aside and noted two small problems. Who could out-load a Duster on either automatic or >>



manual, and, no one had any beer except the doggies. Also, Anderson was worried, because Vargo immediately volunteered to load, but no one had ever seen him, since he was always a commander.

Chris said he would load and told Andy, "Let her rip as soon as the barrel recoiled and the breech block slammed shut"; this sequence was to be repeated until all ten rounds were spent. Vargo said, "Don't worry about the loading, just fire, no 'Gun up' or 'On the way,' just squeeze like hell as soon as you hear a "kachunk."

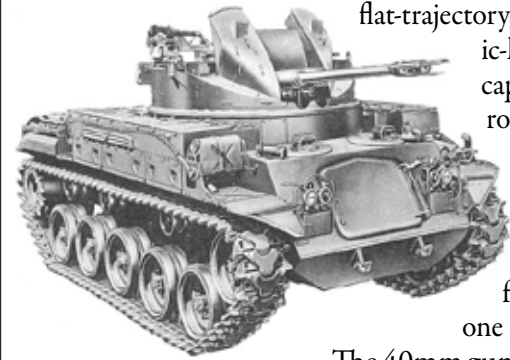
Shortly before dusk, the crew parked B-34 into an adjacent slot and nodded to the Duster crew that they were ready for show time. As soon as they were given the H&I fire order, the contest would begin. When the order came, both vehicles let loose and, eight seconds later, it was over. Ten rounds from Bravo-34 versus eight rounds by the Duster, who fired two belated rounds. Chris placed one HE round in the breech and cradled three more in his long, lanky arms with six more rounds in the ready rack. The perfectly choreographed sound from our tank was a smooth, even-sounding staccato boom, boom, boom, boom, boom...

The doggies could not believe it (and neither could we!). They were in such disbelief that they counted and recounted the hot brass littering the ground next to the tank three times. Asked how they did it, Vargo and Anderson replied, "We had a definite height advantage," standing 6'6" and 6'3", respectively. Vargo and Anderson were two of the tallest tankers in the battalion and definitely had some 'rock

monkey' arm leverage. The Duster crew begrudgingly delivered a case of hot beer the next day. Truth be told, the case of beer was secondary to an opportunity to beat the doggies, which really motivated Chris and Andy's rapid fire moment and, hopefully, hit something on those steep mountains that surrounded the firebase. And, we had the honor of our Corps at stake.

### M2A1 40 MM GUN

Main armament is the M2A1 dual 40mm automatic gun (Swedish Bofors L/60). The 40mm gun is a high-velocity, flat-trajectory, clip-fed, automatic-loading weapon capable of firing 240 rounds per minute (120 per barrel).



The cyclic functioning of each gun is automatic from the firing of one round to the next.

The 40mm gun may be either fully automatic or semi-automatic. It is air-cooled and, if fired at maximum rate, will over-heat after about 100 rounds are fired. When over-heated, firing must be suspended and the barrel changed, which takes approximately 3 minutes. Gun tube life can vary from 4,000 to 16,000 rounds, depending on the amount of overheating due to continuous firing.

### MK2 High Explosive with Tracer, Self Destroying (HE-T SD)

Used against aerial targets, personnel, and light materiel. The HE-T shells have a supersensitive fuze which bursts on contact. If no contact is made as the tracer burns out, the relay ignition charge is ignited detonating the bursting charge of the shell.

Length:	17.60 in (447 mm)
Weight	4.75 lb (2.15 kg)
Projectile Weight	1.985 lb (0.9 kg)
Color Identification	Olive drab with yellow markings
Muzzle Velocity	2,870 fps (875 mps)
Vertical Range	5,100 yds (4,663 m)
Horizontal Range	5,200 yds (4,755 m)
Tracer Burn Time	7-12 seconds

### M48A3 90 MM GUN TANK

Length (without main gun):	6870 mm
Length (over main gun):	8680 mm
Height:	3280 mm
Width:	3630 mm
Service weight:	48500 kg
Main armament:	90mm gun M41 (mount M87A1 in turret)
Auxiliary armament:	M2HB 12.7 mm machine gun & 7.62 mm M73 machine gun coaxial with 90mm main gun
Armour hull:	from 30mm (rear) to 110mm (front)
Armour turret:	from 25mm (top) to 180mm (front)
Propulsion:	Continental AVDS-1790-2A; 12 cylinder, 4 cycle, 90° vee, super-charged diesel

Power (gross/net):	559 kW/ 479 kW @ 2400 rpm
Torque:	2318 Nm @ 1800rpm / 2135 Nm @ 1710 rpm
Fuel capacity:	1460 L
Transmission:	General Motors CD-850-6A, 2 ranges forward, 1 reverse
Suspension:	Torsion bars
Speed (on road):	48 km/h
Range:	480 km
Fording:	1.2 m
Trench crossing:	2.59 m
Vertical obstacle:	0.91 m
Crew:	4

# The Vandegrift – Con Thien Road Trip

BY PETE RITCH

(With input from Bill Davis, Mike Boris Bolenbaugh, Chris Vargo and Andy Anderson)

During the spring of 1969, most 18 to 25 year old American males were taking exciting trips to venues like Galveston, Tijuana and Woodstock. For the young and experienced Marines of Bravo Company, 3rd Tanks, the spring of 1969 included a road trip but it was not to any exotic locale. It was a road trip from Vandegrift Combat Base (VCB) to the Fire Base at Con Thien, aka "The Hill of Angels."

In June 1969, Vandegrift Combat Base was the Forward Operating Position of Bravo Company, 3rd Tanks, under the command of 1st. Lt. Bill Davis. The Company located at Vandegrift was composed of thirteen (13) gun tanks, a flame tank, and several support vehicles.

Vandegrift Combat Base was the largest base in north-west I Corps, and was the launching point for many operations including Scotland, Scotland II, and as a staging area in Lancaster I and II. The area surrounding Vandegrift was used by NVA regulars to infiltrate south. To say that Vandegrift was in the heart of "Indian Country", may be an understatement.

Con Thien, together with bases at Gio Linh, Dong Ha and Cam Lo, were situated in the area known as Leatherneck Square. It was located on the highest elevation in eastern I Corps, and overlooked the primary NVA troop and supply routes, heading into South Viet Nam. The Hill was also in range of NVA artillery, fired from across the DMZ. In September 1967 it had come under intense enemy rocket, artillery and mortar attacks with over three thousand rounds hitting the base in one day.

The distance between Vandegrift and Con Thien, as the crow flies, is approximately 15 kilometers (9.3 miles). However, the "road system" between the two bases, with its switch backs and twists and turns, made the actual distance 40 kilometers (25 miles). The only paved portion of the road was a stretch of Route 9 north and east from Vandegrift to Cam Lo. After Cam Lo there were a series of dirt roads and trails heading north past the Rock Pile, through the Wash Out, across "the Trace," and finally arriving at Con Thien.

Around mid-day on 17

June 1969, Lt. Davis ordered all thirteen gun tanks, including his command tank, B-41, and a flame tank to "saddle up". It was one of the largest USMC armored units ever assembled at a forward position in I Corps. Davis met with his platoon leaders; Gunnery Sgt. Burr, Staff Sgt. Williams and Staff Sgt. Jewel, and advised them that the entire company was moving north and east to Con Thien in support of Marine units from 1/3 and 2/3. All of the tanks were to have maximum ammunition for the 90 MM cannon and the .30 and .50 caliber machine guns. All crew members were to be armed with their .45 caliber pistols. In addition, most of the tanks had at least one M79 grenade launcher on board and, my personal favorite, the M3A1 grease gun.

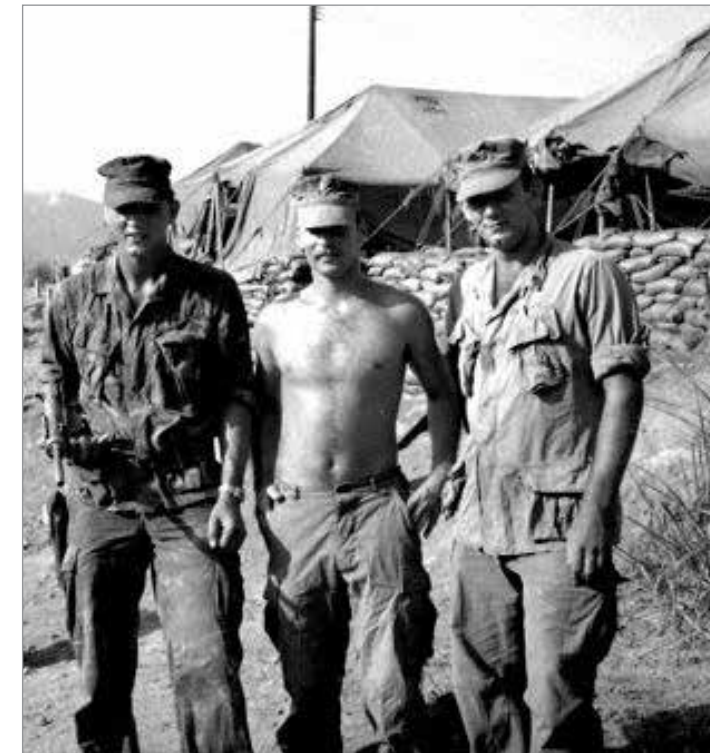
Spare track sections were fastened to the turrets. All gear in and outside of each vehicle was to be tightly secured. With this level of preparation, it was obvious that Lt. Davis was going to make this road trip in record time and that Bravo Company would be "loaded for bear".

At 1615 hours on 17 June 1969, Davis ordered the entire unit to move out. The late afternoon departure meant that a segment would be made in the dark and headlights would not be utilized. The noise alone would be enough to wake the dead.

Due to the size and importance of this armored movement, Lt. Davis took command of B-41 and the loader, Corporal Mike "Boris" Bolenbaugh, ended up making the

trip to Con Thien, riding on the back of the tank. Boris started out holding on to the gypsy rack as the convoy roared up Route 9. When the convoy left the paved surface and hit the dirt roads, Boris was bounced into the gypsy rack and made the rest the trip crammed between cases of C-rations and spare track. He described his ride as follows: "it was like riding a bucking bronco, in the dark of night, while being sand blasted with red dust."

He figured that B-41 did not draw any sniper fire because the enemy snipers were too busy laughing at "the poor SOB on the back of a tank, hanging on for dear life." Lt. Davis remembers seeing Mike "cradled in >>



Corporal Riggs, Lt. Pete Ritch, Staff Sgt. Jim Jewel Vandegrift 1969



the gypsy rack, smiling.” It must have sounded like rolling thunder to anyone along the route. I can just imagine, some NVA trooper curled up in his underground bunker or spider hole, trying to get some sleep, and suddenly the earth starts shaking, dirt is collapsing in on him and he thinks it’s the end of the world. And minutes later, it’s deathly quiet and whatever it was has disappeared into the night.

The convoy slowed to a crawl across the Cam Lo Bridge and to maneuver through the Wash Out. Other than those two slowdown points, the average speed was estimated to be over 20 kilometers per hour. It was rumored that the motor

governors had been removed or modified for the trip. At 2015 hours, exactly four hours after leaving Vandegrift, the entire convoy drove through the south gate of Con Thien Combat Base.

Flawlessly executed, and due to Lt. Davis and his tankers’ preparation, the convoy experienced no enemy resistance, no injuries (not counting Boris’s bruises) and no mechanical problems. It was one of the largest Marine armored vehicle movements in the war and reflected Bravo Company’s ability to get from point A to point B, on time and without incident. This was one hell of a road trip.

## Thirteen Months and a Wake Up

BY PETE RITCH 2006

In 1967, two days after graduating from college and having just received my draft notice in the mail, I beat the draft and joined the Marines. And just as my Marine Recruiter had promised, seven months later I was headed for “my thirteen months and a wake-up” in Vietnam.

The flight into Da Nang was fairly routine but the C-130 “touch and go” landing in Dong Ha, was a shock. We rolled out of the cargo door, hit the tarmac and were told get off the air strip as fast as possible as we were within rocket range of the DMZ.

As with all Marine 2nd Lieutenants, arriving in country, regardless of MOS, my first assignment was as an infantry platoon leader. You had to be a grunt to understand the value that a Marine infantryman provided on a daily basis. Man, did serving with an infantry platoon make being a tanker look good.

On my first operation, our platoon was assigned to secure an “arty” fire support base near the border of Laos. The only day during the entire operation that it did not rain was the day we were choppered onto the mountain top. We’d run foot patrols by day and provide perimeter security by night. One night during the operation I received a radio message to report to the LZ, at day break, with all my gear. My mother had passed away. The next morning I went to the LZ and with three other Marines waited for a chopper. It was so foggy that we could hardly see each other. I think we sat on the LZ for about 10 hours, when all of sudden the clouds broke and a chopper dropped in. We took off just as the clouds socked the mountain back in.

I noticed series of band aids on the ceiling of the chopper. The Machine Gunner saw me staring and said, “Shrapnel holes”.

We landed at Stud and I was taken by another chopper to the Dong Ha airstrip where I boarded a C-130 to Da Nang; where I boarded a C-5 for Okinawa, where I showered and shaved. Dressed in “Greens”, I left for the U.S. via Hawaii, San Francisco and New York. Twenty-six hours after I was choppered off a mountain top near Laos, I was back in the World, on emergency leave, standing on my front porch in

Syracuse, New York. The Marine Corps efficiency and professionalism was amazing.

A week or so later, I returned to Quang Tri Province, where I was assigned to Bravo Company, Third Tank Battalion, Third Marine Division. Bravo Company was headquartered, at a small base camp on Rt. 9 between Quang Tri and Khe Sanh.

As Bravo 3, Third Platoon Tank Commander, I learned that my “new twenty best friends” had just finished running road security for supplies in support of the Marine Base at Khe Sanh during the siege. These Marines were battle tested, salty and that was just what I needed. I learned really quickly to listen to them. If they survived Khe Sahn, they were not about to let a green 2nd Lieutenant get them killed. Lt. Pete Ritch- pistol practice and base camp near DMZ- 1969.

My first operation as a Tanker was a road sweep from Rt. 9 just east of Stud, southward up a small mountain range, ending at a village of roughly 300 Vietnamese farmers. Next to the village was a dirt airstrip, a Special Forces base camp, with Montanyard trainees and a Marine base with my three tanks, a platoon of Marine grunts and a “coordinator”. The “coordinator” was dressed in camouflage unlike any I’d seen since I arrived in country. He appeared to sleep all day and show up around sunset to ask what we had run into, action on the road sweep or day light patrols. Then he would head out of our base camp and be gone all night. He carried a Thompson submachine gun and several knives that were not standard issue.

We’d sweep the road first thing in the morning, to the joy of a hundred or so small kids who would ask for food and wave. After our sweep, the road would be open for traffic and we’d run patrols into the surrounding area. Just outside the village was a large banana plantation run by a French Catholic priest and worked by the villagers. It was beautiful country and we witnessed some fantastic sunsets. Too bad there was a war going on.

Our patrols into the surrounding area were boring. We never found any indication of NVA troops or “pajama’d”

bad guys moving through the areas that we patrolled. Our patrols were limited to narrow corridors bordered by areas patrolled by the ARVN. Every evening I’d meet with the “coordinator”, let him know that we’d found no evidence of the enemy and ask if he could get us permission to widen our patrol area.

Finally, one night he told us that the ARVN would not be patrolling the two clicks to our west and we were free to check it out. The next morning we completed the road sweep and set out with three tanks and a grunt platoon into our expanded patrol zone. We crossed into the grid previously patrolled by the ARVN. The Marine grunts dismounted and moved through a tree line and reported that they spotted smoke across a field, in the next tree line. As they started across the field, they took some small arms fire and hit the deck. I directed the tanks through the near tree line, maneuvered between the infantry platoon and the far tree line and opened fire. We fired around 15 rounds of buck-shot into the tree line. The small arms fire ceased. The grunts than searched the tree line and found five bodies, dressed in NVA uniforms and a small cooking fire. We had interrupted an NVA lunch break.

The grunt platoon commander reported our encounter to his CO and we were ordered to load the bodies on the tank fenders and return to our base camp. The “coordinator” met us just outside the village and told us to place the bodies along the road side in front of the village. The next morning at daybreak, the entire population of the village inspected the bodies. One old woman broke down screaming and crying. She had found her son.

We never were allowed to patrol outside of our narrow grid again and the ARVN resumed their patrols to our left and right. We never had another encounter with the enemy during that operation.

Two days after our firefight, as we swept the road in front of the village, there were no children along the road asking for food and waving. Fifty meters down the road we found a land mine. We blew it in place and continued the sweep. I should have picked up on the fact that there were no kids on the side of the road. We were taught to notice any changes and do not get in a routine.

Our next operation was to support a land clearing operation from Con Tien to Cam Lo. Flame Tank clearing brush covering tunnel complex- 1968 near Con Tien.

My five tanks, with three Army APC’s, a Marine Infantry Platoon and 25 Navy Seabee bulldozers were to clear all the bushes and trees in a 5 mile by 3 mile stretch from Con Tien east. The cleared land would be open to aerial and ground observation and any NVA movement through that area would be easy to spot.

We set up a base camp just outside of the Wash Out near Con Tien and each day we’d take 6–8 foot high underbrush and tress to dirt level. The dozers would line up in an overlapping column and make small forest look like freshly

plowed farm land.

One morning, I was on Bravo 33 watching the dozers clear the brush, when I saw a human hand waving in the freshly cleared strip of dirt. I halted the next dozer before he reached the hand. The hand was moving, so we knew we had a live one beneath the recently tilled soil. We started to dig out the area and eventually got another hand surfaced and determined that there was a good chance that we’d eliminated the chance of any booby-traps and kept digging.

Eventually, we dug out two NVA officers from a tunnel complex. We found hand drawn maps of several local US bases, including one of Bravo Company, Third Tanks, my company base, complete with security positions including tank locations, machine gun positions and our communications bunker. We did not have an interpreter so we radioed for a chopper to come in and pick up our captives.

Later on during this operation, as we were performing maintenance on the dozers and tanks, Staff Sergeant Jewel asked me to join him for an ice run to Camp Vandergrift. Vandergrift had an ice factory, the only ice factory that I was aware of in I Core. As we came through the gate, we heard the sirens go off signaling a rocket attack and troopers yelling “in coming”.. Sergeant Jewel said, “Hang on”. We drove up to the ice factory and there were over fifty vehicles lined up to pick up ice. However, all of the drivers were in bunkers or culverts due to the rocket attack. Even the ice factory workers were gone. Jewel accelerated to the front of the line; we filled our 10 insulated chow containers with ice and bolted. As we exited Vandergrift, the all clear signal was sounded. Back at our base camp, we iced down a couple of cases of Black Label beer and shared them with everyone-grunts, Seabee’s and tankers. It was the only time we ever had cold beer in the bush.

We continued the land clearing operation. The Marine Infantry Platoon assigned with us was commanded by a 2nd Lieutenant code named Blue and were known as Blue’s Bastards. Needless to say they were a very salty group and I was glad to have them working with us. Late one afternoon we had finished clearing several hundred acres of land and escorted the bulldozers back to the base camp near the Wash Out. Our aerial spotter radioed us and said that just behind us over the next ridge there were a bunch of NVA “little people” booging down the trail. He said if we got to the next ridge it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

I took two tanks and two APC’s and Blues Bastards and headed back toward the ridge with the spotter plane tracking the bad guys. Before we got to the ridge there was a gully still thick with underbrush that had a narrow cut that we’d have to get in single file to move through. As we stopped to check out the gully, the spotter said that the bad guys were just the other side of the gully below the next ridgeline. We headed into the gully, single file, my tank in the lead, followed by the two ACP’s with the other tank bringing up the rear. All four vehicles had grunts riding on the >>



fenders and decks. Lt. Blue was on riding on the back of my tank. Halfway through the gully we got ambushed by small arms, 50 caliber and RPG fire. The driver of the APC behind me was killed and the APC stopped in the middle of the ambush. I accelerated forward, spun back around and went back into the ambush zone with our 30 caliber and 50 caliber machine guns firing into the brush. Blues grunts dismounted and followed the tank back into the ambush but Blue remained on the tank, radio in hand, directing fire, like John Wayne. I swung the turret around toward some small arms fire and in the process whacked Blue off my fender with the 90MM barrel. We fired buck shot rounds into the brush on both sides of the driverless APC. The attacking fire ceased and we got a driver into the APC. We loaded up the grunts and drove out of the ambush site. Blue was on my fender holding his ribs.

We called in a medevac chopper for the dead and wounded and as I assisted Lt. Blue on the chopper he said something like "Thanks but my ribs are killing me." I went back to my tank and looked up at the thick glass ring that surrounds the cupola. There were five impact fractures in the 6 inch thick glass where AK-47 rounds had hit the ring. The glass ring was about 5 inches below my exposed torso in the tank commander's seat. I got a little light headed and threw-up.

Lt. Blue, I found out later was Oliver North and our ambush was written up in his first book, entitled Under Fire. We correspond about once or twice a year and he reminds me about batting him into the air like a baseball but also thanks me for saving the day. We both received Bronze Stars for our actions.

Our next assignment was to run supplies to the northern most Marine outpost in I Core. There was a Marine infantry platoon at a small base at the mouth of the Que Viet River situated on the southern border of the DMZ. Every morning, we'd run our tanks, loaded with supplies and replacement troopers up the coast of the South China Sea. One track would be in the water the other track would be in the hard pack sand near the water's edge. The sand was pure white and the weather was great. We'd actually stop and take turns body surfing when the surf was up, with the tankers and grunts providing security.

On one trip up the coast, a just-arrived in-country 2nd. Lt. named Tomlinson joined us aboard one the tanks from Bravo 1. He made the run up the beach with us just fine but on the return trip he insisted on moving inland just beyond the sand dune line. I told him we'd wait for him on the shore line. His tank disappeared over the sand dunes. We could see his radio antenna's moving south, so we shadowed him remaining in the surf and on the hard pack. Suddenly his antennas disappeared. He radioed that his tank was in a marsh and sinking quickly. By the time we reached him, Tomlinson and his tank crew were standing next to the marsh (quicksand) and the only visible sign of a U.S.

Marine Corp. M-48A3 Tank was the two antennas sticking out of the mud. Last I heard Tomlinson was still paying off the tank.

Later on that mission we were running up the beach with infantry troops riding on our fenders. We hit a land mine and the trooper who was sitting right below me on the fender was knocked out but still seated on the fender. Half of his left leg was gone. Using my web belt I tied a tourniquet around his upper leg near his crotch and kept him awake until the medevac chopper arrived. We buttoned up the track and limped back to Dong Ha. I heard later that he made it, but lost the lower half of his leg.

After a week refurbishing our equipment at Bravo Company, Third Tanks, Headquarters on Rt. 9, my platoon was assigned to an U. S. Army unit along the DMZ. Our mission was to assist the Army with the transition of Leather Neck Square to the ARVN. The base camp was just south of the DMZ and included my Marine Tank platoon, an ARVN infantry Company and approximately 20 U. S. Army advisors.

After dark we monitored activity in the DMZ and on clear nights we could see and hear the USS New Jersey lobbing shells into North Viet Nam. It sounded like small cars passing overhead. During the day, we'd provide armor support for the ARVN foot patrols along the southern border of the DMZ. One day we stopped for lunch, yes the ARVN treated this like an 8 am to 5 pm job, and in the sky overhead we saw vapor trails going north. When the vapor trails made a U turn and headed south again, we would wait for the rumble of thunder and ground shaking that accompanied an Arc-Light Strike. Awesome.

After one patrol, as we headed back to our base camp, my two tanks, Bravo 31 and Bravo 33, were flanked by ARVN infantry troops who walked a lot faster on the way back to the Army Base Camp than they did on way out to our objective.

My tank, Bravo 33, hit a land mine. We radioed the Army Major in charge of the operation and told him that I needed the ARVN to set up a security perimeter until we got the tread repaired. Bravo 31, our other tank also provided security. As we worked on the tread, the ARVN ground troops kept moving past us and did not set up a security perimeter. I radioed the Army Advisor and told him that the ARVN column did not set up security and kept moving past our disabled tank. He said he'd get the security perimeter set up.

Suddenly the ARVN column was gone. No security and no more troops moving past my tanks. I radioed the Army Advisor again and told him of our situation. He said he'd send them back. They never showed. Bravo Co. Third Platoon replacing track at Camp Vandergrift- 1968.

We got my tread repaired and started toward the base camp and hit another land mine. I radioed my status and asked for ground troops and a tank retriever. Now we had

one tank damaged and the second tank providing security. We figured that we could fix the tread but that we'd be unable to move the tank at a speed above 10 miles per hour. The Army Advisor responded that he would send ARVN ground troops.

Bravo 6, our Company Tank Retriever Commander, Staff Sergeant Harold Riensche, radioed me that he was headed my way, less that a click away but that the ARVN column troops were all heading in the opposite direction. A minute or so later he advised me that there were no ARVN ground troops to be seen and that he was almost to my position. Then he hit a land mine. We heard the explosion and saw black smoke in the air just over the next rise. Bravo 6 radioed that they were going to button up the damage and try to get to us. I told him we were able to start his direction at a very low rate of speed. Then I heard small arms fire in the background and he said that they had been ambushed. I sent my other tank to his location. Sgt. Riensche radioed that his troopers were down and he was still taking fire. He stated that he had fired all of his weapons, 50 caliber machine gun, and grenade launcher and was now down to his 45 caliber pistol.

Bravo 31 arrived at the ambush site and supplied suppressing fire. My tank limped to the ambush site as darkness set in. We still had no ground troops from the ARVN. I directed all three vehicles to stay buttoned up and shoot anything that moved around us. We had Fat Albert above us all night dropping flares that kept the surrounding area lit up until the sun came up. Sgt. Riensche, me and the Tank Commander of Bravo 31, stayed on the radio with the flare ships and each other throughout the night.

At about the time it got daylight, a Marine infantry platoon from Cam Lo arrived and set up perimeter security. These guys had humped all night to get to us. We found 8 dead NVA troops on and around the Tank Retriever. One of the dead NVA was on the top of the retrieve within a foot of Sergeant Riensche's hatch. Sgt Riensche's hand was severely burned from grabbing the barrel of his 50 caliber machine gun when he had to jam it into place so he could fire more rounds.

We medevac'd two Marines from the tank retriever who were killed instantly when the ambush commenced. And then we repaired Bravo 6's tread. We drove out to the main road and Bravo 6 headed south to our Company headquarters and Bravo 31 and 33 headed to the Army Base near the DMZ.

I found the Army Major who was supposed to provide us with ARVN security and chewed him out. I think he was so surprised that a Marine 2nd Lt. would "chew him a new one" but he never said a word. I left his command bunker and blew lunch. I wished I had blasted on him.

Staff Sergeant Riensche was awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism and calmness under fire. He was the epitome of a fighting Marine.

We continued the transition of responsibility to the ARVN and after one of our patrols, I received word to bring my platoon back to Bravo Company headquarters on Rt. 9 in Quang Tri. When we returned to the Company headquarters, we were told that several of us were going home and that we would be the first contingent of the 3rd Marine Division to be returning to the World. There was going to be a parade when we landed in California, and the political message was that the ARVN were ready to defend their homeland.

The trip back to the World was a blur- a C-130 to Da Nang. Showers, haircuts and fresh uniforms. Then on to Okinawa for 10 hours- confined to the base- not much fun; and then on to El Toro, in California.

We landed to a marching band and about 100 well-wishers and no members of the press. Whatever political statement we were making about bringing Marines home wasn't well attended.

We were given 30 days leave and Lt. Heffernan (also a Tanker) and I booked a flight to New York and headed for the O Club. We took a cab to LAX and split a case of beer on the ride. We were poured onto the non-stop American Airlines flight to JFK airport and slept all the way home.

Almost thirteen months to the day, I finally had my wake up.

*Editor's note: May the good Lord bless and keep Pete in the palm of His hand.*



Pete and Joyce with their golden dog in 2020

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Andy Anderson, Pete Ritch, Chris Vargo in San Antonio 2013

Bob Skeels: I will always highly regret that I missed the "Celebration of Life" ceremony that was held this past Sunday for my good friend and Marine brother, Pete Ritch. I served alongside Pete in Vietnam in frontline combat and I was very proud to have had that honor in my life. My thoughts are with Pete and you (Joyce, his widow) and that I sorely miss this great man. Such a great American patriot and faithful Marine brother as Peter Ritch. He was taken from us too early as was Jay Miller, our US Marine Vietnam commander. Semper Fi to you, Joyce...Please stay well, I will remember and say his name often and always to all his OCS classmates.

J Heffernan: I knew Pete for 54 years and I believe that my life was better for that fact. Everyone needs someone in

their lives with a ready smile who is willing to pick up the conversation like it was yesterday no matter how long has been since you last talked. I've always said that I wanted to spend my life among brave and honorable men doing the right things and to me Pete was the template for that. We sat next to each other on the plane going to Vietnam and returning 13 months later. The conversations in both directions have been with me since. I will miss this kind and gentle decent man deeply. With the greatest respect, RIP Pete.

Francis "Tree" Remkiewicz: I knew Pete from the USMC Viet Nam Tankers Association. Pete and I worked closely on the VTA History Project. His encouraging words propelled me to start a podcast 38for the VTA. Pete's intuition was right and the podcasts took off like a shot. I was incredibly fortunate to get an interview with Pete which turned into a great Podcast.

Pete was a kind, gentle, and intelligent man. I will miss him very much. May the peace of the Lord that surpasses all understanding be with Pete and his family, now and forever.

Ron Knight: I first met Pete when we were 2nd Lieutenants attending the USMC Tank School at Camp Pendleton, CA. He was always a great guy to be around; everybody liked Pete. Several years ago, we worked together on the Board of Directors of the Vietnam Tankers Association, where he was instrumental in compiling several books on Marine tankers' experiences in Vietnam as well as over 75 video recorded interviews during our many reunions. His dedication to the organization will be missed. ■



**Short Stories**  
(Continued from page 28)

("ham & mother-fuckers" as everyone called them). Beef Steak (it was a "steak," alright), Ham slices, Turkey Loaf, Beef/Potatoes/Gravy were okay if you were really hungry. I don't remember Meat Loaf (lol—are you kidding me? How bad would that have been?) Or Spiced Beef. The Caraway Cheese always irritated me—who eats caraway seeds? But I liked the Pimento Cheese. I loved the Cocoa and jam & cookies. The Bread was lame. I ate a lot of Fruitcake because I was one of the only ones who would, so there was always plenty of it. I almost always had a bottle of Tabasco. (Writing this journal is sufficient unto itself, but if it turns out that someone reads this to me when I'm old, please read all the ingredients below—Thanks.)

B-1 Units  
Meat Choices (in small cans): Beef Steak, Ham and Eggs, Chopped Ham Slices, Turkey Loaf,  
Fruit: Applesauce, Fruit Cocktail, Peaches, Pears  
Crackers, Peanut Butter, Chocolate Candy Disc, Chocolate Cream Coconut, Accessory Pack\*  
B-2 Units  
Meat Choices (in larger cans): Beans and Wieners, Spaghetti and Meatballs, Beefsteak & Potatoes & Gravy, Ham and Lima Beans (AKA ham & motherfuckers), Meatballs and Beans  
Crackers, Processed Cheese Spread with either Caraway or Pimento  
Fruit Cake, Pecan Roll, Pound Cake, Accessory Pack\*  
B-3 Units

Meat Choices (in small cans): Boned Chicken, Chicken and Noodles, Meat Loaf, Spiced Beef  
Bread, Cookies, Cocoa Beverage Powder, Jam (Apple, Berry, Grape, Mixed Fruit, Strawberry,  
Accessory Pack  
The Accessory Pack had a plastic spoon, salt & pepper, instant coffee, sugar, creamer, 2 Chiclets, cigarettes—4 smokes/pack like Winston, Marlboro, Lucky Strike (my favorite three), Salem, Pall Mall, Camel, Chesterfield, Kent (nasty things), Kool (Winnie the Penguin says, "Smoke Kooool!"), matches, & Toilet Paper. We all carried a "P-38" can opener and usually had heat tabs or C-4 to heat things. ■

# Feel like I'm Fixin' to Die

BY JOHN WEAR

Just after my 30 day pre-deployment leave back home in Denver, Colorado and prior to my arrival in Vietnam at the end of January 1968, I had been assigned to a large group of individual replacement Marines that were made up of so many assorted military occupational specialties (MOS) that I had lost count. All of us "assorted" Marines came together while assigned to the requisite "Vietnam Training Course" at the Staging Battalion on Camp Pendleton, California. This training took place during the month just prior to our deployment to WESPAC (Western Pacific) and / or the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

What I mean by an "MOS" ... (for any civilian that may be reading this story) ... is that all of these young Marines have been formally trained to perform specific jobs while they serve their enlistments in the Marine Corps. These jobs are designated as a "Military Occupational Specialty." My MOS is 1811...a tank crewman. There are 0311 basic infantrymen ("grunts"), 0331 infantry machine gunner, 0811 artillerymen ("cannon cockers"), 0213 radio operators ("ditty dots"), 2141 tank repairmen (we jokingly call them "shit fisters"), 0243 clerk typist ("Remington Raiders" or office pogues), 2111 optics repairmen...the numbers go on until you have covered every possible job that needs to be performed in the Marine Corps.

The Staging Battalion "Vietnam Training Course" that we all had to complete is the general preparatory course that is supposed to get us ready for what it is that we're about to experience during our tours in Vietnam. The main problem with this method

of group training is that it is not MOS specific. I am a tank crewman, the next guy is a radio operator or a radio repair tech, the next guy is a supply "pogue" or maybe a cook and the next guy is a basic grunt, mortar man or machine gunner. During the Staging Battalion training exercises we practiced such skills as daytime and night time patrols, escape & evasion; basic jungle survival techniques; the history of guerrilla warfare operations and the recent history & politics of both North and South Vietnam. They even try to teach us a few Vietnam phrases...like "come here" (dung li), "go away" (di-di mau) and "be quiet" (com biet).

We spent countless hours searching for and identifying mines & booby traps. We experienced the myriad of other (more or less useless) training. I term it "useless" because I am a Marine who is going to be riding around in a 52-ton tank while I am "in-country." If my tank comes upon a mine, we will probably roll over it; if it is designed as an anti-personnel weapon then we'll harmlessly "pop" it but if it's big enough...we might be blown to bits. I certainly do not plan to be snoopin' and poopin' in the bush on foot. At least I hope & pray that I won't have to!

I know...I know first and foremost "Every Marine is a rifleman." Now don't get me wrong. If I had been one of those unlucky stiffes who went over as a tanker and ended up humppin' the hills with the grunts (...Heaven forbid!) I would certainly thank my lucky stars that I had some proper grunt preparation in Staging Battalion. This most unfortunate tanker-to-grunt MOS switch did happen to some of

my tanker buddies not a month after I left sunny California for Vietnam! If this less-than-desirable MOS change had happened to me back then, the past months' worth of training would have served me well.

The other thing that was incongruous with the Staging Battalion training was that it took place for our group during the month of January...in Southern California. To most of you, anywhere in California at any time of year, means beautiful sunny weather... especially compared to most of the rest of the country in January. Well, let me remind you that January of 1968 we experienced 3" of wet snowfall all over the Southwestern part of the United States, including the San Diego area. It was very wet and very cold in that part of the world and to be receiving "jungle training" in this very wet & frigid weather is not exactly what one might call picture perfect! This would have served us better if we were deploying to Korea!

One of the last classroom experiences that we endured while assigned to Staging was to watch a film produced by the Dept. of Defense called, "Why Vietnam?" The film featured President Lyndon B Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert S McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk. In the film these (then) famous American statesmen try to explain exactly why we were headed halfway around the world to a country that few of us had ever heard of ... and why we were going to defend the United States of America against a growing political ideology that even fewer of us understood...let alone perceived as a real threat to our homeland.

One of the most impactful >>



classes that I experienced was when the instructor told a packed classroom, "Look at the man on your left. Now look at the man on your right. Now look all around the classroom. One in ten of you in this room will be killed in action in Vietnam." Bummer!!!

Upon successfully completing Staging Battalion, we are loaded on to buses and driven north from Camp Pendleton to El Toro Marine Air Station where we load up and take off on a chartered Continental Airlines Boeing 707 passenger jet liner. About fourteen hours later, our plane lands on Midway Island for a refueling stop. There is absolutely nothing but a refueling depot on this tiny Pacific atoll so they keep us inside of the airplane until we take off again. A few hours later we land at Kadena Air Force Base on Okinawa.

It is my understanding that we flew to Okinawa (and not directly to Vietnam) because the Marine Corps really did not know what specific units that each of us were assigned to upon our arrival in-country. That is, they only knew that they had just so many "warm bodies" arriving as replacements but they did not know who would go where and which replacement we were to make for whom. After we landed at the air force base, we exit the civilian plane and are loaded on to Marine green military buses while our sea bags are loaded on to Marine six-by-trucks that will follow the buses. We arrive at Marine Corps Camp Hanson about an hour later. We then pile off of the buses, form up in a company formation and are told that we are waiting in Okinawa for a few days to "cool our jets" while the Marine Corps figured out who we are and where we were to go for duty in the "Nam." My present Marine Corps rank is corporal. I am considered a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) so there are many lower ranking Marines available who are assigned to do the menial work that needs to be done all around Camp Hanson. As most of the readers know, this menial labor is called a "working

party." There are working parties for cleaning the barracks, for mess duty, for picking up trash and lot more. What I end up doing is: Getting up in the morning, falling in for morning chow call, eating breakfast, standing in another post-morning chow formation, watching office pagues processing paperwork, falling in for noon chow call, eating lunch, falling in to a post-noon chow formation, walking around looking busy, falling in for evening chow, eating dinner and then finally going to a movie ... or if we have the money, we head to the E Club (Enlisted Men's Club) for an evening of beer drinking.

It was here on Oki where I first heard the anti-war song on the jukebox by Country Joe (McDonald) and The Fish, called "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin;-to-Die Rag":

Come on all you big strong men,  
Uncle Sam needs your help again;  
He's got himself in a terrible jam  
Way down south in Viet Nam;  
So put down your books and pick up a gun,  
We're gonna have a whole lot of fun!  
Chorus:  
And it's one two three  
What are we fighting for?  
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,  
Next stop is Vietnam.  
And it's five six seven,  
Open up the Pearly Gates;  
There ain't no time to wonder why,  
Whoopie – we're all gonna die!

The tune was kind of fun...but the words sucked the big green weenie!

Since we are on our way to Vietnam, we are not allowed off the base for liberty. Why? Well, maybe it is because we could very well get "lost" and miss our scheduled flight for Vietnam. I don't know how many Marines "got lost" before the Marine Corps "brass" finally figured out that keeping Vietnam-bound Jarheads inside the gate of Camp Hanson was good policy. Later on we found that the Staff NCOs and the officers in our group were allowed to do whatever they felt like doing. Up to and including taking off-base liberty. How did we find this out? Well,

three days later as we boarded the buses for our flight to Vietnam, we ended up "cooling our jets" an additional two hours waiting for two young "butter bar" lieutenants who could not be found. As it turns out they were still off of the base visiting Kin Village while whoring and drinking. Hopefully these two boot officers got into a lot of trouble after our arrival in-country. But I'll never know.

After our short delay we finally boarded a US Air Force Military Air Transport Support Command (MATS) KC-135 cargo jet that is bound for the huge combat base and airfield in Da Nang, Vietnam. The flight was awful. We sat in stiff nylon cargo nets which were a far sight from the comfortable retractable cushioned seats on a commercial jetliner that brought us from California. Due to minimal (or no) insulation for the body of the plane, it was very cold and very noisy inside the large cargo bay. Thank God it only took a few hours to get there. When our plane landed at the Da Nang Air Base in Vietnam, we are herded down the back ramp of the plane and WHAM!!! The heat, humidity and sickening smell of mildew smacks me in the face like a ton of bricks. It turned my stomach inside out and I started looking for a place to puke. And as we deplaned, we were dressed in our clean & starched dark green stateside utility uniforms with our shiny black boots and polished brass belt buckles. Unfortunately for most of us, we pass a long line of ragged looking (salty) combat Marines who are lined up on the flight line waiting their return flights back to the World (...the United States). Those lucky homebound bastards are covered with red dust and dirt. Their faded jungle uniforms, their sad faces and their bodies are looking pretty worn out. I am so nervous and worried about the impending enemy artillery or rocket attack that I scarcely notice the hoots and cat-calls emitting from many of these battle-weary Marines.

"Hey Newbie just wait 'til you get shot at for the first time...don't shit your skivvies!"

"You'll be sorry you ever were born!"

"Hey New Guy, forget about your girlfriend back home. She's mine now!"

"Hey Cherry boy...you're going to die!"

"You'll beeeeeeee saaaaah-reeeeee!"

"Hey Cherry – I got the gooks good and pissed off. You'd better watch your young ass!"

As we pass the dirty and loud mouthed tormentors, we move in mass up a dusty road past tin roofed huts and arrive at the Transit Receiving Barracks. After we assemble in a rag tag formation, the sergeant in charge tells us that we are near "Freedom Hill" but he warns us that we cannot visit that area of the Da Nang Base... with its huge PX, beer garden and all sorts of good stuff to spend our money enjoying. No reason was given other than, "Don't go!"

Since it is fairly late in the afternoon, there is no time left in the day for the office pagues to process our orders to get us to our new parent units so we are again called out to a formation and we are marched to a huge chow hall for evening chow. When we arrive but before the sergeant releases us to go eat, he tells us that we are to be confined to the barracks all night. We are again reminded that we cannot go to the PX, the club or anywhere away from the barracks. He is insistent that if we miss a formation or a flight, we will face a court marshal. After an uninspiring but filling meal we spend the night in the two story wooden barracks near the flight line. Trying to get to sleep is difficult early on with the US Marine Phantom jets taking off at all hours but as the night progresses, less and less flights leave so it begins to quiet down. After falling asleep I am awakened sometime in the middle of that night when an air raid-like siren goes off indicating that the air base is being mortared or rocketed by the enemy.

"Incoming!!!"

In mass we jump out of our racks, charge out of the barracks dressed only in our skivvy shorts and we dive into the flimsy sand bagged shelters that are located between the wooden barracks. We huddle together for several hours while each of us knows for an absolute fact that the next round of incoming has got our name on it. I learn a new sensation: absolute and utter helplessness. It is a strange phenomenon knowing that a mortar round is in the air heading in your general direction and experiencing this feeling for the first time, it makes you bargain with God. One buddy summed it up as: As the gook arty or mortar rounds are coming in, it gives you a chance to play, "Let's Make a Deal" with God.

"Please God, keep me safe. Don't let those nasty incoming gook mortars hurt me. If you do this, I'll be good. I'll go to church whenever I can. Please God!"

When the "All Clear" is sounded there is this incredible sense of relief. Now don't get me wrong, the closest enemy mortar round was probably 1,000 yards away out along the flight line. I tell myself that as the days and the enemy incoming progress, I sure hope that this sort of behavior will be minimized.

The smell of cordite from the incoming mortars mixed with the all of the other new "funky foreign" smells are enough to keep me awake for what remains of the night. I have since read books about other guys' experiences of their arrival to Vietnam. Many Marines say that as soon as they get off of their arriving flight from the World, they got a nose full of shitters being burned (outdoor bathrooms with large barrels holding the human waste), animal shit, burning jet fuel from the runway, open civilian sewers, bloated dead bodies, jungle rot, mildew and more. Not me. Many of those distinctive smells hit me a little later during the first week or two of my tour. But instead, my first olfactory sensation is an overpowering and nauseating smell of mildew mixed with the heat and the humidity.

The next day, right after breakfast, we are assembled and marched back from the chow hall to the Transit Barracks and each of us receives our individual orders to our respective units. Me? I am told that I am heading "Up north" to the 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Marine Division which is located near the big Marine Air Base at Phu Bai. I don't have a clue as to what is what and who is who in this crazy world. We are all full of apprehension, excitement and dread. All of the Marines from our Staging Battalion days say goodbye to one another (...not knowing that most of us will see each other 12 months and 29 days later at this exact same place as we gather to return to the World.).

They form us up and march us down to the flight line to be assigned to flights to get our outfits. I line up with the other Marines heading "Up north" and we sit in the transit area near the flight line. As we are waiting for our flights, we look out onto the flight line and watch a pair of Marine Phantom jets about to take off. They are at the far end of the flight line and in no time they scream past us with a huge orange flame blowing out of their tail pipes! Get some!!!

It seems like hours when I finally receive my actual flight assignment and then it seems as if in no time we are outside on the flight line boarding a C-130 (a propeller driven transport air plane). The Marine aircrew is screaming at us to run up the ramp and to sit on the metal floor facing toward the read of the aircraft. We line up, enter, line up and sit. It is very uncomfortable but we are on our way. After a quick taxi and take off, we are flying a very noisy & unheated ride to the 3rd Marine Division Headquarters located in what is known as Hue-Phu Bai.

It is the end of January 1968 and I am completely unaware of the very serious "wake up call" that is about to befall me in Hue City (also known as Tet 1968). That's another story. ■



# The PRC 25

BY TOM FENERTY

Fox, 2/9 and proud member of the USMC VTA

John my friend, I had just finished reading the piece about the Life Expectancy of a radio man in Vietnam in the 5/1/19 Veterans Bulletin when I received your email. It got me to thinking about my time in the mud.

My MOS was 0311 (just a grunt) and based on my first few weeks of 'welcome to VN' I considered myself a burden on the squad. In addition to witnessing the bug eyed reality of war I managed to get a good dose of dysentery by drinking paddy water (hey, I used the tabs, I was told they would work!). Having the 'shits' while on patrol/operation causes one to fall behind frequently but I soldiered on continuing to dump and hump in Leatherneck Square.

Months passed (now early 68) and there was a need for a man to carry the radio. I didn't say radio operator; I said a man to carry the radio. The Battalion radio operator had rotated, moving a Company radio operator, a Platoon radio operator, and a squad radio operator forward to fill vacancies. That left an opportunity for my squad leader (Fidel, a brave Marine) to volunteer me to carry the squad radio. Training was on the fly. I soon learned the lingo and the codes; off I was.....'Radio-man.' Either humping it or sitting next to it the PRC 25 became a part of me. Communication with many parts of the overall effort became routine. Resupply choppers, forward observers, fire missions, bird dogs, patrol checkpoint confirmations, medivacs, situation reports, LP (listening posts) reports were part of the day to day effort. Quite a revelation for this grunt to witness just how vital communication was to the mission. Duh.

I have long forgotten the number

of frequencies available but remember that I could listen to both friend and foe. I couldn't understand the gooks but I did understand the transmissions from our units who were engaged with the enemy.

On one occasion a two man scout sniper team went missing near the base of Dong Ha Mountain. A sister company was tasked to find them. As Marines debarked from a chopper they were greeted by a waiting enemy. The sounds of the firefight were hissing from my radio as transmissions became chaotic, then frantic. Casualties were being reported and medivacs ordered. Listening to the agony and desperation coming from my handset still haunts.

The attrition factor caused a 'promotion' to platoon radio man a few months later. I was now sending and receiving messages for an officer. Messages included from above (HQ), platoon commanders, and squad leaders.

I carried that radio long enough to walk behind 3 different Platoon Commanders, all Lieutenants. Time in the bush made me salty enough to ask questions: 'hey Lt, why don't you get yourself a rifle and blend in a bit? Besides, if they get close enough for that '45' we're in big trouble'. (The Lt soon acquired a rifle from a wounded warrior)

While on a Battalion Op (Lancaster?), a sweep through the 'Z', we began taking incoming mortar rounds, then sniper fire, followed by RPGs (cause we had tanks). Even though one could clearly hear the sound of the mortars leaving the tube, my Lt got up and began walking forward and directing the troops while the men were yelling,

"Incoming!"

"Hey, Lt, there's a big hole here, let's get in it!"

He didn't and we didn't. I was beginning to think that this SOB was gonna get me killed.

It was on this Op that the "Pfff" sound of an enemy round registered. That goes for the "whoosh" for the RPG as well. Even scarier was that distant boom followed by the quick bullet train arrival of enemy artillery spraying sizzling metal. We lost a few good men on that Op.

I was never aware of the 5 second rule concerning radio operator longevity. Ignorance/bliss? Can't imagine what the number would be for the grunt who walks point on patrol.

A backup battery in addition to the 10' antenna was essential in addition to covering the handset in plastic. The ten footer became necessary when we moved further west (closer to Khe Sanh) especially in the valleys.

As an aside I had not used or heard of the encryption device known as NESTOR.

Guessing that I humped the 'prick 25' for about 7 months before being assigned as a squad leader for the remainder of my 'tour' (known nowadays as a deployment). Being the 'radioman' was easy compared to the responsibilities of leading a sometimes 12 man squad.

I have been fortunate enough to have lived to commemorate, and be a witness to 2/9's involvement in the VN war.

I have a collection of names (rub-bings from the Wall) of men who did not; including the name of the man who carried my radio while I was on R&R in Bangkok, Thailand.

I came home with my TAO map, scars from jungle rot and fragmentation wounds, and a lifetime of 'memories.'

Roger that. ■

PART TWO

# Recalling Operation Starlite

BY LTCOL KY THOMPSON, USMC (RET.).

Ky Thompson's note: As a 2nd Lt, he served as the Platoon Commander, 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company, 3rd Tanks. As with virtually all the Marine Corps participants, OPERATION STARLITE was his first major battle. The Marines won because they were better trained, had far superior supporting arms, and had confidence in their fellow Marines.

A few weeks later, on 18 August, the Marines conducted OPERATION STARLITE, the largest U.S. only operation in Vietnam to that date. Three Marine battalions supported by air from the First Marine Aircraft Wing (A4 Skyhawks, F4 Phantoms, and UH-1 gunships, with additional support provided by two U.S. Army aviation platoons and part of a third; artillery (8 inch howitzers and 155 mm guns); naval gunfire (Cruiser USS Galveston (CLG 3) with six 6-inch guns and six 5-inch guns, and two destroyers, USS Orleck (DD 886) and USS Prichett (DD 561) each with four 5-inch guns, conducted an amphibious-heliborne search and destroy operation in the Van Tuong village complex south of Chu Lai. At 0615 on the morning of 18 August

1965 the words, made famous through countless Navy and Marine Corps amphibious operations, were heard aboard the flagship of Commodore McKinney, USN, Commander of Amphibious Squadron 7, an element of Task Force 76 (TF 76), Commander Amphibious Forces U.S. 7th Fleet: "All Marines lay up to your debark stations", followed shortly by, "Land the landing force. Away all boats."

Cpl Milo Plank, Jr. was the driver of A-32, embarked in an LCU, along with A-31 and A34. Together, these three tanks made up the heavy section of the tank platoon. This section had come ashore in the second wave from U.S. Navy amphibious shipping positioned off shore. OPERATION STARLITE was underway. The section, under command



A-32 during OPERATION STARLITE on 18 August

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of 2ndLt. Ky Thompson in A-31, was in direct support of Captain Bruce Webb's India Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment (3/3).

India disembarked from the LVT- P5s that had brought them ashore, and advanced across the beach into heavy brush and bamboo that bordered the small fishing village of An Cung (1). It was slow going. Huts, hedge rows and berms, all served to hinder the mobility of the tanks. A-32, with Cpl Milo Plank driving, had the point with A-31 and A-34 in trace. A-32's Tank Commander (TC) Cpl. Laidlaw was hit by shrapnel and killed later that morning during the fighting around An Cuong (2). He had been in country less than a week.

2ndLt. Thompson was very concerned that the tanks would not be able to keep up with the infantry and in an area where visibility was, in many places, 20 yards or less, the tanks, lacking minimum perimeter security, would become easy targets for recoilless rifles. Thus, Thompson was pleased when Captain Webb (India-6.) assigned Cpl. Robert O'Malley's squad (14 men—3 fire teams of 4 Marines each and a Corpsman) to provide an element of close-in security for the tanks.

As the Marines approached An Cuong (2) the intensity of firing increased on all sides and mortar rounds began impacting among the Marines. Cpl. Jim Thompson, the gunner of A-34, told 2ndLt. Ky Thompson years later that it sounded akin to the firing line at the rifle range only multiplied 8 to 10 times. A-34 was the first tank to be struck by a 75mm Recoilless Rifle round. Ky does not recall any mention in intelligence briefings prior to OPERATION STARLITE that cited anti-tank weapons such as 57mm or 75 mm recoilless rifles or satchel charges being employed by the Viet Cong (VC), but he quickly found them to be both present and effective! Ky had been standing in the TC's hatch of A-31, yelling at an infantry Marine kneeling along-side a berm at the side of a rice paddy. The Marine yelled back that they knew where the gun was located that targeted A-34. This yelling back and forth was because the tank-infantry phone, located on the tanks right rear fender, was both notoriously unreliable and dangerously close to the tank, which resulted in them being rarely used. This was the first Thompson knew that one of his tanks had been hit (communications among these tanks had been virtually nonexistent as soon as the shooting started which

disabled each tank's antennas). The round that struck A-34 penetrated the turret and nearly took off the right leg off its TC, Sgt Ed Sipel. Ed Sipel's life was saved by Cpl Jim Thompson although he would ultimately lose his leg to the surgeon's knife after his evacuation. A-31 was next. Ky said he had seen the recoilless rifle round coming up and out of the wood line to A-31's front. He had only time enough to duck before the round hit, penetrating the turret causing shrapnel to take off part of Thompson's right foot. He got some satisfaction from learning that A-34 had destroyed the 75 mm with two 90mm rounds, the first going slightly over, the second blowing the gun and crew to smithereens.

Cpl O'Malley deployed his squad from A-32 to the enemy's trench-line, a man possessed, directing the fire teams, providing aid to those wounded, and literally chasing VC from their trench-line a point from which they were endeavoring to fire upon O'Malley's Marines. From his position in A-32, Cpl Plank saw two brave but foolish VC come out of the dense brush merely yards away, and begin running in assault towards the tank. Resting his .45 service pistol on the driver's hatch Plank opened fire and killed the two VC. Had Milo not been alert, the VC might have reached the tank, killed Plank and dropped a grenade into an open hatch. They could have then easily opened fire on O'Malley's Marines from the tank. Having dispatched the two VC, Plank then watched as a large number of VC came running down the trench. They would, if not killed, be on O'Malley's exposed flank in force and able to fire on O'Malley's Marines at point blank range. Plank could see O'Malley about 10 feet away, dressing one of his troop's wounds. Plank shouted to O'Malley, got his attention, and pointed at the on-rushing VC coming down the trench in his direction. O'Malley didn't hesitate. He jumped into the trench, firing his weapon as he ran towards the enemy, stopping only to throw grenades. The next time Plank saw O'Malley, he was climbing out of the trench, his arms loaded with enemy weapons. Cpl O'Malley was awarded the Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action and The Purple Heart. Medal for wounds received that day. Cpl Plank regretted that he never saw O'Malley again, but their all too brief interaction had had a major impact on the fighting that first morning of OPERATION STARLITE. ■

For the reader interested in learning more about OPERATION STARLITE your attention is invited to the best resource document: *The First Battle: Operation Starlite and the Beginning of the Blood Debt in Vietnam*, authored by Lehrack, Otto J.

## 'The best job I ever had'

### Marines remember their tanks as the Corps ditches its armor

BY TED SOUTH



U.S. Marines from Alpha Co, 1st Tank BN at a forward command post during the Battle of Hue, Vietnam War, February 1968.

In the 1920s a small company of Marines were the first to experiment with the novel vehicle at Quantico, Virginia, later taking it on a deployment to China. Marines at Tarawa in the Pacific Ocean used tanks to

shield them from withering machine gun fire. The tanks rumbled alongside Marines on treacherous, icy roads in Korea. The tank-infantry combo turned back the North Vietnamese at Hue City in the Vietnam War. >>



Waves of Marines in 1950s-era tanks took on Saddam Hussein's fleets in the Persian Gulf War.

More than a decade later, the iron beasts would roll through the dusty, bomb-laden streets and byways of countless patrols and battles in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Though Marines, "have fought in every clime and place where we could take a gun," they won't be taking tanks with them anymore, at least not their own.

And that leaves current tankers to find work elsewhere, be it in Marine Corps blue, Army green or out of uniform altogether.

It doesn't stop the veterans of those past and recent wars from swelling with pride for the role they played in the ground fight of the combined arms team many Marines have taken to battle over nearly 100 years.

Ed Gazel, 99, enlisted in the Marine Corps in October 1942 out of his home in Lincoln Park, Michigan, near Detroit.

By late November 1943, he was with Charlie Company, I Corps Medium Tank Battalion, in the waters off of Tarawa in a Higgins boat headed to the first amphibious assault of the island, held by Japanese military forces.

Their job was to protect the tanks from enemy fire as they landed on the beach. But their own boat got caught on the reef.

"Thirty-five guys started walking, only about 10 of us made it to the beach," Gazel told Marine Corps Times.

He recalled nearly 300 Marine infantrymen stranded at the reef, bracing at enemy fire. But the tanks broke the stalemate, rolling over the reef and firing, pushing the assault forward.

"They're the ones to turn the tide at Tarawa," Gazel said. "They did a lot of damage with the 75 mm guns on the machine gun nests."

The company brought 14 tanks to the fight, only two survived the assault. They would be resupplied and head to Saipan and later Tinian before they made it to Okinawa, Japan, in the final stages of the war.

Former Staff Sgt. Max Lopez-Gonzalez served from 2005-2012, nearly all that time with 1st Tank Battalion at Twenty-nine Palms, California.

"I love the tank," he said. "It was the best job I ever had."

Lopez-Gonzalez ended his Marine career as an instructor at the Armor School at Fort Benning, Georgia, later working as a civilian contractor with the school.

Commandant Gen. David Berger and others have pointed to the Army's 16 Armored Brigade Combat Teams as a potential support to call on for armor, should Marines need that in a future fight.

But Lopez-Gonzalez wasn't so certain that could be accomplished on short notice.

Alone in urban terrain, tanks or infantry are quite vulnerable, he said, but together they're a hard force to stop.

"I don't care who you are, you see a tank coming down the road, you're scared," he said.

But that takes a lot of training, which he saw both operationally before and during his three deployments to Iraq and also while training new tankers and tank officers at the school.

The Marines, being a much smaller contingent at the school, got a lot more hands-on training on the tank. First Tank Battalion, stationed at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in California, easily got the most rotations in field training with infantry Marines rotating through the site.

That made for a cohesive team, he said.

Fellow 1st Tank Battalion veteran, former Sgt. Jon Rush, who served with the unit from 2003-2007, told Marine Corps Times that, based on his experience, Marine infantry will be quite vulnerable without armor to have their backs.

"Being able to make holes for (grunts), have a long eye down a street as they searched, or on very crazy and often times sad circumstances, lay down fire with hate and discontent so they could rescue a downed Marine is something that we will never forget," Rush said.

As of late September 2020, Stars and Stripes reported that 130 of the 820 tank MOS Marines in the ranks had opted to switch to a new specialty, 46 requested transfer to another service and six had chosen early retirement.

Likely 39 of those transferring were the reservists from the Company C, 4th Tank Battalion, 4th Marine Division, who left the Corps in September 2020 to join the Idaho Army National Guard to remain in a tank unit.

In December 2020, the Marine Corps issued an official message allowing both enlisted and officers in tank jobs to end their contracts one year early. The Corps is trimming other job fields as part of force restructuring and expects to have 5,000 fewer Marines in the next year and be down by about 12,000 to a total of 174,000 by 2030.

Lopez-Gonzalez looked back on his time in the tank community fondly. His deployments early in the Iraq War were very active, lots of missions, lots of contact, something subsequent tanks Marines didn't get and now will be lost on those who joined in recent years only to have to switch jobs or leave the Corps.

"I feel bad for the guys, the private who never got to sit in that gunner's hole on a mission," he said. "There were days I shot 80 main gun rounds. And those were some of the best days of my life."

Todd South has written about crime, courts, government and the military for multiple publications since 2004 and was named a 2014 Pulitzer finalist for a co-written project on witness intimidation. Todd is a Marine veteran of the Iraq War. ■

## Reminding You about the 2022 Mini-Reunion!!! The National Museum of Military Vehicles Dubois, Wyoming September 17 - 20, 2022



This M-48A3 and this fully restored Ontos guard the front gate to the museum

Website: <https://www.nmmv.org/>

On Saturday, September 17th, 2022, we will all drive or fly into the regional airport in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and stay our first evening at a hotel there. Please note: We will be announcing the hotel contact information soon. Then the next day (Sunday, September 18th) we will take chartered buses to Dubois (a 125 mile drive). We will plan a full day at the museum including driving tanks and then we will bus back to Jackson that evening. We'll then have a "chill" day on Monday, Sept 19th, where we can meet and greet in a hospitality room of the hotel. On Tuesday, September 20th, we'll all head home or on your own, you can become a tourist and sight see to your hearts content.

Dan Starks, the president and CEO writes: "The new firearms museum itself has lots of good stuff. Our best artifact is our Bunker Hill musket. It fired the first shot at Bunker Hill. A \$500,000 acquisition symbolizing the citizen soldier, the Second Amendment, and the founding of the U.S."

"By the end of summer 2021 we will have four galleries complete—the Unknown Soldiers Weapons Vault, the WWII Marshall Gallery, The Chesty Puller Gallery covering the Korean and Vietnam Wars and the Patton Gallery with rotating exhibits.

"I can't think of anything more fun than arranging for your group to drive a number of our tanks. All of this would be free of charge. You guys are what we live for."

As a side note: There are currently 432 vehicles on display and growing.



Tanks, tanks and more tanks The interior of the armor museum



**USMC Vietnam Tankers Association**

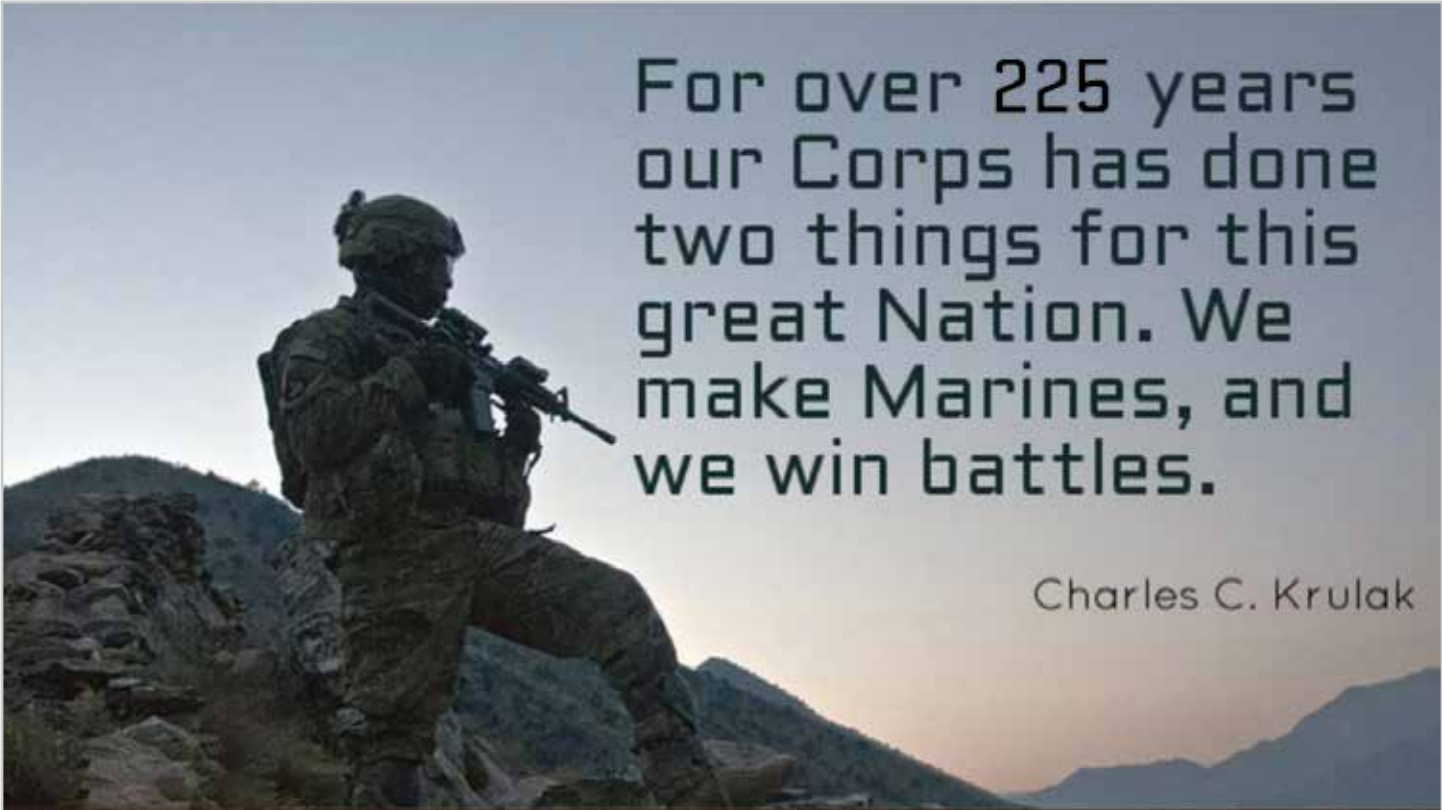
16605 Forest Green Terrace, Elbert, CO 80106-8937

Please note: If the last two digits of "EXPIRES" on your address label is "21" then your 2022 membership dues are payable now.

Make your check out to: USMC VTA for \$30\* and mail to:

USMC VTA c/o Bruce Van Apeldoorn, 99 Shoreline Drive, New Bern, NC 28562-9550

\*Over & Above donations are always gratefully appreciated.



For over 225 years  
our Corps has done  
two things for this  
great Nation. We  
make Marines, and  
we win battles.

Charles C. Krulak