



Sponson BOX

*Voice of the USMC Vietnam
Tankers Association*

Ensuring Our Legacy Through Reunion, Renewal & Remembrance™

JUNE 2023

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LEATHERNECK

MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES



90 Days a Grunt – Bob Skeels, MOS 1802

Featured Stories:	Cover Story: 90 Days a Grunt	Page 20-31
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REMINDER: IT'S JUST 60 DAYS BEFORE OUR MINI-REUNION AT FT BENNING.

Official Publication of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association

ALL FOUR VOLUMES OF "FORGOTTEN TRACKS" ARE NOW AVAILABLE!

We recently reprinted both Vol. 1 and 2 after we sold out of them. We wanted to be able to offer our membership the complete assortment. Each volume is a large collection of USMC VTA members' stories that includes many photos. And just so you note that copies of these editions have been sent to the Archives of the USMC Museum and Library at Quantico, to the Library of Congress "Voices of Veterans Project" and to the Texas Tech University Vietnam Archives. Our goal is to preserve our heritage.

Vol. 1 is 229 pages and is \$40 including shipping

Vol. 2 is 215 pages and is \$35 including shipping

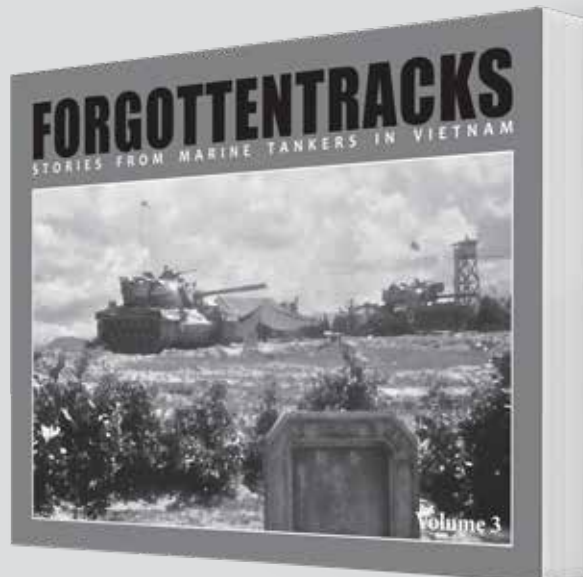
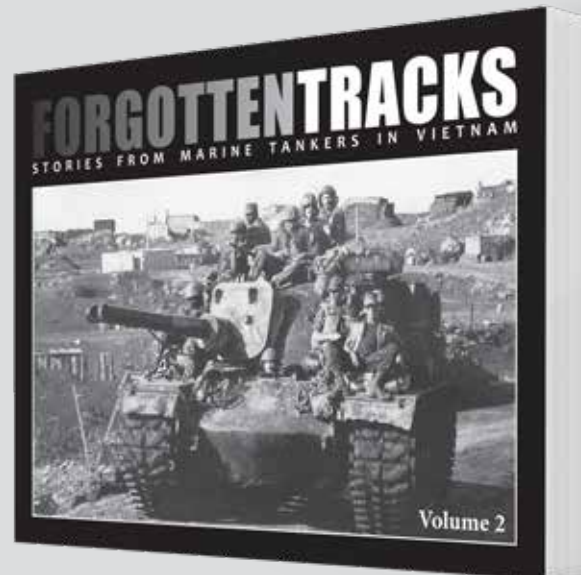
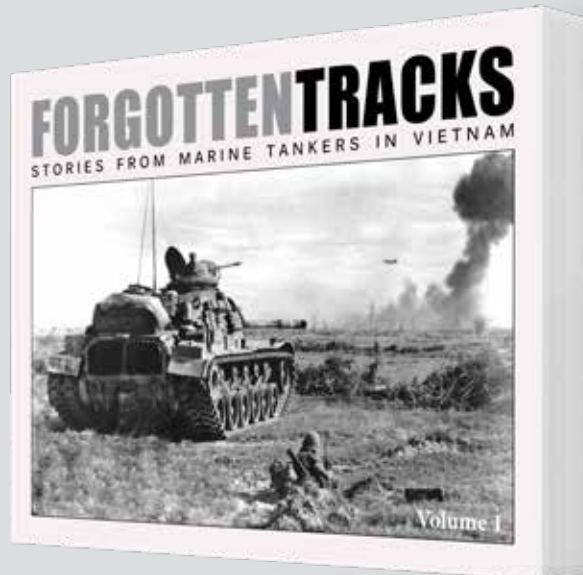
Vol. 3 is 199 pages and is \$35 including shipping

Vol. 4 is 175 pages and is \$30 including shipping

YOU CAN ORDER ON LINE ON THE VTA WEBSITE STORE at <http://www.usmcvta.org>
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This special offer is good from now until September 1st.



Letter from the President

If it is not written, you will soon be forgotten...

2024 MINI-REUNION: In just 60+ days we will be gathering at Ft Moore (Ft Benning), Georgia, for our three-day mini-reunion. If you haven't gotten off your duff and registered, please do it now!!! The details are on the last pages of this issue. And just so you know, as of June 1 we have just 16 members and 9 guests registered. If you are "on the fence" with this gathering, this may be the last one that we have. They are a lot of work for us with the planning and executing. If you-all don't want to participate then so be it.

HAPPY 25th ANNIVERSARY!!! On the July 4th weekend of 1999, fifty-seven US Marine Vietnam veteran tankers met in Washinton, DC, for the first time for a reunion. During that meeting we voted to become the USMC VTA. That was the beginning of our brotherhood. What a most outstanding occurrence!

LEATHERNECK MAGAZINE: Many of you may have noticed that for the past few issues of the Sponson Box, we have featured stories that have already been published in Leatherneck. We are under the impression that the rest of the US Marine Corps is waking up to our brotherhood's contribution to ensuring our legacy. And by the by, there are more Leatherneck stories to come. OOO-RAH!!!

YOUR MILITARY MEMORIES: Your personal stories, captured in your own words and photographs, are one of the most valuable legacies you can leave your family. By being able to read what you did serving your country, enables family members and future generations to understand and appreciate what you went through in order to provide them the freedoms they enjoy today. We are currently running out of member stories. Please keep the Sponson Box healthy and happy by submitting your own accounts of your service to our nation.

AN INTERESTING PHONE CALL: Back in December of last year, I received a telephone call from an unrecognizable phone number in Westhope, North Dakota. The caller was seeking information about a US Marine tanker who had been killed during Tet of 1968. The caller said that he had found the VTA website and discovered that one of the many video interviews had a discussion of the 1st Tanks "Reactionary Platoon" where several members had perished in a firefight. One of those Marines killed was Greg Lunde. Greg and the caller had literally grown up together and until Greg left for boot camp, the caller said that they were closer than brothers. As fate would have it, Greg and I had been in the same Boot Camp platoon, ITR class, the same Tank School class and later in the same tank platoon at 5th Tanks at Camp Pendleton. Over that period of time Greg and I had become good buddies so the caller and I had a lot to talk about. The caller indicated that Greg's death not only profoundly affected his own life (for the ensuing 50 years) but he said that the tiny town of Westhope (population 300) seemed to be greatly affected. Case in point, the entire town showed up for Greg's funeral back in 1968. There is much more to tell but...

Not a week went by when I happened to call charter VTA member, Garry Hall for a different reason but remembering that Garry and I had been in boot camp at the exact same time and we both had been friends with Greg Lunde throughout our training, I mention the above to Garry. Of course, Garry was as astounded as I had been that a civilian friend of Gerg's was so profoundly affected by the death of one of our own brothers. Almost immediately Garry recalled to me one of his own post-Vietnam experiences, which, of course, were similar to my own. At that point, Garry mentioned that he was pretty sure that many, if not most, of the VTA had their own personal stories to tell about their post-Vietnam lives. Garry also thought that perhaps some of us would like to record some of those post-Vietnam experiences and publish them in the Sponson Box.

QUESTION: What do any of you think about that? If you agree, please send me an email note or call me with your thoughts. If enough of you think that it's a good idea, we might begin a series: "My Life After my Tour in Vietnam."

*"People are not afraid to die, they're just afraid to be forgotten.
Make your own memories with them." -- Unknown*

John

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B Co, 1st Tanks, '68 – '69
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MOS: 1811
DOB: 11/01/1946
Wife: Irene
Recruited by: Rick Lewis

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90 DAYS A GRUNT – BOB SKEELS, MOS 1802

Our Readers Write

(Formally known as "Letters to the Editor")

THANK YOU!

Janice Patrick & Jimmie Patrick write: I would like to thank the USMC Tankers Association for the beautiful flower arrangement that I received last Thursday, 2-15, and your sweet message of "Get Well Soon." Jimmie and I are thankful that GOD saved us from death on January 18, 2024 when we were involved in a head on collision. And thank God that the hospital was so close to the accident or we may not have made it. We are slowly getting better a little bit every day. We appreciate your thoughtfulness.

Rick Walters writes: Thank you John and staff for putting together a 1st class organization, website and the Sponson Box. It is always good reading and the pictures, especially of armor, are eye candy. It takes many hours, sometimes daily and patience for some of the 10 percenters to build the VTA.

Howard Blum writes: Nice to see "Washout" photos in Sponson Box. So many interesting memories to share.

Marcia Falk writes: I just sat down with a cup of tea, to thumb the pages and articles of the Sponsor Box. I find that whenever it arrives, I look forward to doing so. The stories and accounts take me back so many years ago as a young woman hoping and praying for my Marine to return from Vietnam. I had no idea what war really was, I was so naive. I have undying respect for the Marine Corps and the men and women who serve our nation.

Thanks for your dedication and all those who contribute their stories to keep the Sponson Box going. It immediately brings a connection to my dear husband, Steve, and the part he and all of you played in Vietnam. It should never be forgotten. And congrats to the USMC VTA featured in Leatherneck. It is very well deserved.

Jim "Sause" Sausoman writes: I just got the latest issue of the "Box" and starting reading. I did notice that one slight error. You labeled my photo holding the M1 Carbine as "Mattingly". I wonder if anyone will really notice. If that's the only error I believe you deserve a lot of credit for continuing to hold this organization together. So, if anyone states otherwise then "fug-gum". Thanks for a good job.

Roger Luli writes: Wow! It will take me a



long time to read all the articles in this issue of our magazine. Great job. Wonderful tribute to Louis Ryle. He was a good man as well as an excellent tank crewman.

All is great with me. I have reunited with my high school sweetheart and we are to be married next week. She will be coming to the reunion and I have warned her not to believe half of what you Marines say about me. Semper Fi

Lee Dill writes: I received my order of "Forgotten Tracks" books this past Thursday. Looking at Vol. 2, I found a story written by Pete Ritch. So having nothing else pending, I sat down and read it. Pete is a high-quality guy and so was the story. I was surprised to re-learn that new tank officers had to do grunt duty first. I somehow had forgotten that detail.

So, I am sitting there thinking: I would like to ask Pete about his grunt tour. I wondered if I will see him at the reunion? Or I could call him right now or maybe send an email...and then I remembered that Pete was gone. My amazing wife, Eileen passed on June 22 and I think that Pete was gone before then. Which basically makes John Wears preaching strike home. Which is:

"If you don't write it then nobody can read it ever ... and you and your part of history will disappear forever!"

Yes, I will miss Pete Ritch but at least I have a story about Pete to remember him.

Remembering a US Marine

I hope you have been well. We spoke a while ago when I interviewed you for a book I was writing at the time, about a young Marine (my mom's cousin) who was KIA in Vietnam in 1969. I'm very happy to say that the book is now finished, and is published. It is titled, Looking For Billy-The Story of an American Life.

As we spoke about last year-my goal wasn't to tell a history of the Vietnam War, but rather to tell and preserve the story of one Marine who fought in it. To tell the story of one of the names on the Wall.

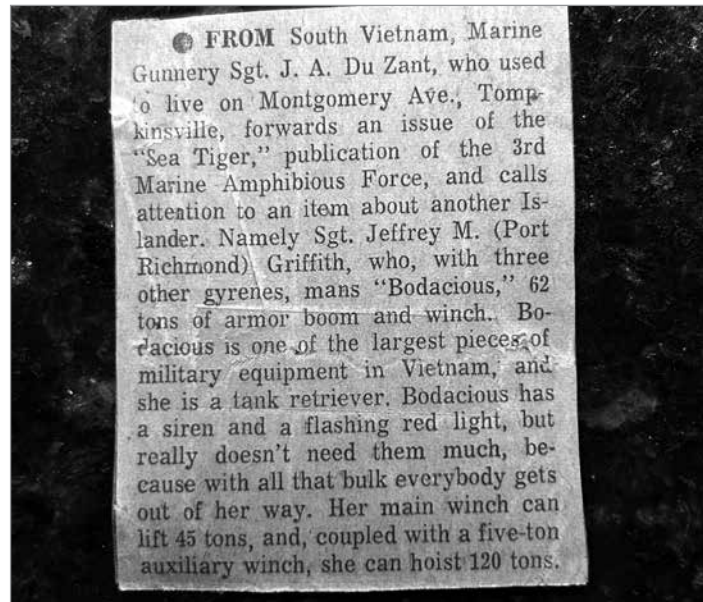
You taking the time to do an interview meant a great deal, and the stories and knowledge you imparted me with contributed to the book in a very important way. I will include a link to the book in this email in case you want to share with friends and family, as you are quoted in it, and I cite our interview in the bibliography. Thank you again for all your help.

Semper Fidelis,
Andrew Loftesnes

Link to the book

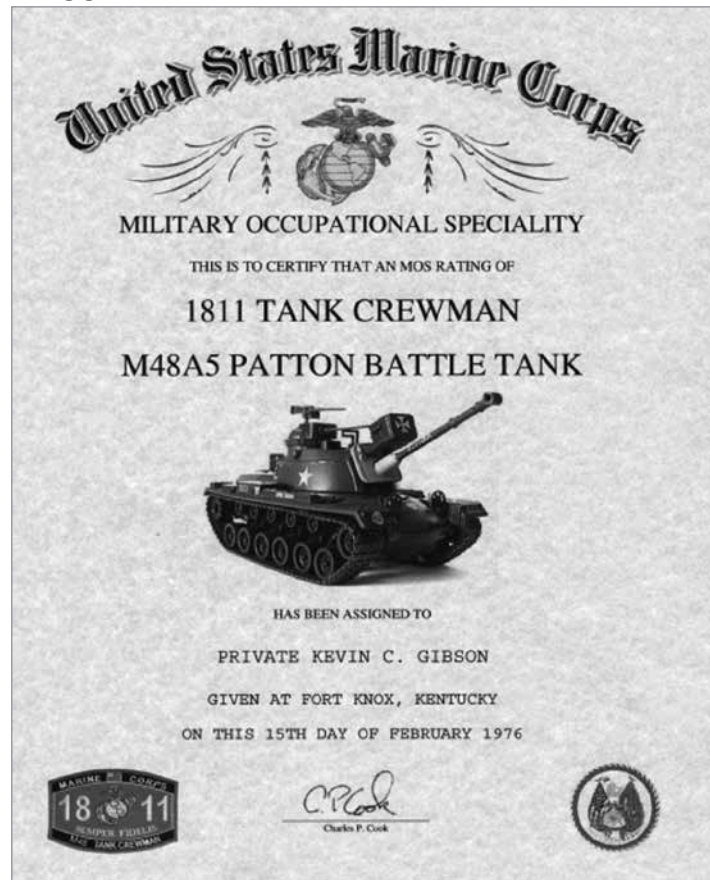
<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/looking-for-billy-andrew-loftesnes/114.495.1096?ean=979.888.1123819> >>

The Bodacious Bastard



Marybeth Griffith sent this old article to us to share.

Doggie Tank on an 1811 Certificate?



Todd Phillips sent this to us. It's from 1976 when the USMC Tank School was at Ft Knox. We are sitting here scratching our heads wondering how the image of a doggie tank got on a US Marine Tank School diploma. That's a little embarrassing.

Doc Hackemack Writes



Many of you already know that I am a fanatic follower/supporter of Texas' Attorney General Ken Paxton. So, I attended a breakfast rally, where he visited with us, showing his support for another Texas conservative running for State Rep Ben Bius. (in the photo, my recent serious sinus surgery still shows)

Ken Paxton would also make a great comedian, as he related to us, in a very humorous way, how his impeachment was largely kept a secret from him until the last minute, with attempts to railroad him out of town by conniving political enemies, even in his own 'camp'. He is part of the reason that TEXAS has the 8th LARGEST ECONOMY in the WORLD – and of course TX Governor Gregg Abbott is part of this AMAZING TEAM! GO TEXAS!!

Just Like Vietnam

Greg Kelley writes: My son is in the Air Force. He will be on his way back to Anchorage in a week after spending two months on Guam and a month in Thailand. His village in Thailand was only 350 miles from Dong Ha, so the weather and temps were close. I had to grin when he sort of complained about the heat and humidity while in Thailand. He said all they had was a big fan in their "quarters", and it was hard to get comfortable in "bed." I didn't say anything, but I wanted to tell him how lucky he was in comparison to what we had to endure. I remember, and I'm sure you do as well, how hot the inside of the tank got after the sun beat on it for a couple of hours. The smell of human sweat mixing with the hydraulic fluid smell is one of those odors that sticks with you through the years!

SPARE TRACK BLOCK?

John Wear writes: Brother Carl "Hokey" Hokinson had some time to kill and when he recalled my story about needing spare track block for my brand-new flame tank and "liberating" two pallets of it from the doggies. He recalled the 3rd Tank BN maintenance Gunny telling me that he did not want to know where the two pallets of tank

block came from. So, Carl felt compelled to make this model. Too funny!!!



LIBERTY IN PARIS



Ed Hiltz writes: I got to spend a week in Paris when we were allowed to go on leave when we were on a six-month Mediterranean cruise /deployment. It was one of the best times I had while in the Marine Corps. We eventually ran out of money, and one of the local bars, fed us free food and drinks. The French girls were great and fun, and we left our customized underwear/skives hanging as a token and tradition at this one bar.

Those were the days!

A woman with \$20 of groceries before going home to her \$15,000 house in 1980



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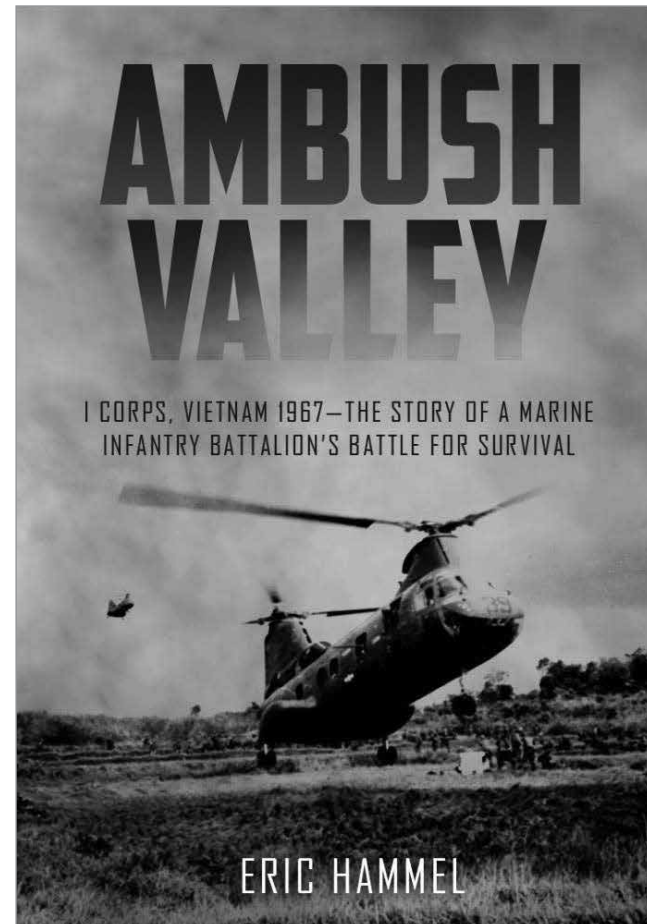
Levitt & Sons

Ambush Valley: I Corps, Vietnam 1967

the Story of a Marine Infantry Battalion's Battle for Survival

BY ERIC HAMMEL

Ambush Valley is an unforgettable account of bravery and survival under impossible conditions during the Vietnam War



In the summer of 1967, the Marines in I Corps, South Vietnam's northernmost military region were doing everything they could to lighten the pressure on the besieged Con Thien Combat Base. Still fresh after months of relatively light action around Khe Sanh, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, was sent to the Con Thien region to secure the combat bases' endangered main supply route. On September 7, 1967, its first full day in the new area of operations, separate elements of the battalion and accompanying tanks from Bravo Company, 3rd Tank Battalion were attacked by at least two battalions of North Vietnamese infantry, and both were nearly overrun in night-long battles.

On September 10, while advancing to a new sector near Con Thien, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines and its supporting arms, was attacked by at least a full North Vietnamese regiment, the same NVA unit that had attacked it two days earlier. Isolated into two separate defensive perimeters, the Marines battled through the afternoon and evening against repeated assaults by waves of NVA regulars' intent upon achieving a major victory. In a battle described as "Custer's Last Stand—With Air Support," the Americans prevailed by the narrowest of margins.

Ambush Valley is an unforgettable account of bravery and survival under impossible conditions. It is told entirely in the words of the men who faced the ordeal together—an unprecedented mosaic of action and emotion woven into an incredibly clear and vivid combat narrative by one of today's most effective military historians. Ambush Valley achieves a new standard for oral history. A war story not to be missed.

US Marine Tank and Ontos Crewmen who participate in the battle:

2nd Lt. Paul Drnec, Plt Ldr. (B-21 and B-25)

Sgt. Frank Vining, TC (B-21)

Cpl. Jack Wilder, TC (B-22) WIA

GySgt. Harold Tatum, Plt Sgt. (B-25) KIA

Cpl. Gary Young, Loader (B-25) WIA

L/Cpl. Louis Ryle, Driver (B-25) WIA

PFC James Wilson, Gunner (B-25) KIA

Cpl. Guy Wolfenbarger, TC (F-23) WIA

L/Cpl. Wayne Chapman, Gunner (F-23) WIA

Sgt. Charles Witkamp, Plt. Maintenance Man

Sgt. Leroy Davis Jr, TC Ontos KIA

L/Cpl. Randall Browning, TC Ontos WIA (Navy Cross) ■

HAPPY 25th ANNIVERSARY!!!

On the July 4th weekend of 1999, fifty-seven US Marine Vietnam veteran tankers met for the first time for a reunion. During that meeting we voted to become the USMC VTA. That was the beginning of our brotherhood. What a most fortunate occurrence! And as you can see, roughly half of the original members are still active members.

USMC Vietnam Tankers Association Attendee List for the July 1999 Reunion

Last	First	Status	Last	First	Status
Arend	Jim	Withdrew	Hackemack	Gene	Active
Barry	Thomas	MIA	Hall	Garry	Active
Blum	Howard	Active	Hopkins	Bob	MIA
Bolenbaugh	Michael	Active	Knoble	Tom	MIA
Brandi	Michael	Died	Laurent	Billy	Died
Brightwell	Hank	Active	Lemon	Carl	MIA
Carey	Richard	Withdrew	Ludecke	Carl	MIA
Carroll	William	Active	Parshall	Larry	Active
Carson	Charles	MIA	Peavey	Bob	Active
Chinnis	Robert	Died	Pingrey	Michael	MIA
Christiansen	Harry	Active	Prindle	David	Died
Clark	Jerry	Died	Reed	John	MIA
Corbin	Charles	MIA	Reveille	Bud	MIA
Cornell	Wayne	MIA	Schultz	Ned	Active
Cummings	Charles	Active	Schuyler	Jack	Died
Cutchins	Joseph	MIA	Smith	Rick	Active
Donnelly	Justin	MIA	Snell	Albert	Died
Doten	Charles	Died	Snyder	Tom	MIA
Dunphy	Terry	Died	Stewart	Raymond	Withdrew
English	RB	Active	Tamez	Mario	MIA
Flech	Floyd	MIA	Tidwell	Don	MIA
Fleischmann	Carl	Active	Tingle	Russell	Active
Frano	Pete	Died	Vining	Frank	Died
Gardner	Herbert	Active	Wear	John	Active
Garrison	Charles	MIA	Wright	Bill	Died
George	Carroll	MIA	Young	Sterling	Active
Griffin	Jesee	MIA	Young	Wallace	Active
Guffy	Jim	Died	Zuley	Lawrence	Active

Three Guest Opinions

Editorial comments in the following article represent the views of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Marine Corp or the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association. We'd like to ask that anyone who thinks that they may be offended by what is written in this article, please skip over it and do not read it. The article is intended to be thought provoking and is not intended to be dogma.

Americans Don't Want to Fight for Their Country

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The United States military inducted its last draftee, Dwight Elliot Stone, into service in June 1973. He was the last of over 17 million men conscripted into America's armed forces. Since then, the nation's service branches have been staffed by an "all-volunteer force," or AVF. The Atlantic recently noted that the shift allowed Americans to remain relatively "indifferent to their military." A new report indicated that most Americans don't want to fight for their country.

On November 9, Echelon Insights LLC published the results of its October 2023 Omnibus Questionnaire. Naturally, several of the report's 22 pages of questions focused on the Israel-Hamas and Ukraine-Russia Wars, the United States military service branches, and the looming possibility of the US getting dragged into a major war.

Question 38 asked participants if they would volunteer to serve in the nation's armed services if the country entered a major war. Seventy-two percent (72%) responded they definitely or probably wouldn't. Fifty percent (50%) responded, "No, definitely not," and the remaining 22% checked the "no, probably not" box.

A paltry 10% said they definitely would volunteer, and 11% said they probably would, for a combined total of 22% providing an affirmative answer. The questionnaire's remaining 7% said

they weren't sure.

Participants also offered insight into their opinions about the ongoing Ukraine-Russia War.

- 33% said they believed Ukraine was winning the conflict. Twenty-one percent (21%) thought Russia was, and 46% weren't sure;

- 53% said providing US military assistance, including advanced weapons systems, was a good idea. Twenty-six percent (26%) thought it was a bad idea, and 20% were unsure.

The survey showed similar results for the Israel-Hamas War, with 42% of the participants saying they thought the US should provide limited weaponry and military aid to Israel. They also indicated that American officials should exercise caution about getting too involved in the conflict.

Similarly, 32% of the participants said they thought the US should provide whatever weapons and aid Israel needed to defeat Hamas. Fifteen percent (15%) said the US shouldn't give any support or weapons to the war-torn country, and 12% weren't sure.

Echelon fielded answers online from October 23 to 26 among a sample of 1,029 English-speaking voters using "non-probability sampling." The survey's margin of error is +/- 4.1%.

How to Ruin the Marine Corps

BY GARY ANDERSON—FEBRUARY 23, 2024

Force Design 2030 reduced the US Marine Corps to something between coastal artillery and naval infantry facing multi-front threats: U.S. military stretched thin across global hotspots! (Russia, China, North Korea, Iran)

Few would ever consider how to completely neutralize a truly iconic fighting force like the US Marine Corps. However, for whatever reason, if one were motivated to do so, I would recommend the following strategy.

The Plan in Theory

First, I would not reveal my plans during my confirmation

hearing as Commandant of the Marine Corps. That would alert the traditionalists among the retired Marines and friends of Marines who might oppose my appointment. Once confirmed and installed, I would present my real plan, proceeding confidently and decisively.

Let's say my concept would involve a radical transformation of the Marine Corps from a worldwide force in readiness into a service primarily focused on deterring or fighting a war with China. I would issue my Commandant's Planning Guidance to that effect and direct my combat development command to set

up a series of war games that would support my plan.

I would use a small group of trusted agents to run the games and make sure that they supported the concept. I would ensure that anyone participating in the games signed non-disclosure agreements, and I would classify the process so that no dissenting opinions would be let loose. I would then declare that the results validated my concept.

Next, I would divest the Marine Corps of what I considered to be legacy capabilities no longer needed for the implementation of my plan. These divestitures would include all tanks, all its heavy engineer and assault breaching capabilities, much of the conventional artillery, its vaunted snipers, and about a third of the aviation assets.

Knowing that many retired Marines and friends of Marines would object to this radical departure from the Marine Corps' traditional force-in-readiness posture, I would direct my public affairs people to dismiss them as hopeless reactionaries.

I would be confident that I was hitting all the right political bases. The administration has identified China as the nation's pacing threat. I would be saving Congress billions by divesting unneeded capabilities.

There would be a few potential obstacles. The combatant commanders of global theaters might object to my taking away capabilities that they need in their war plans. More embarrassingly, the commander of the Indo-Pacific theater might object that he or she did not need my concept. However, I could be fairly confident that the "general officers' protective association" would prevent them from airing this dirty laundry in public.

Finally, I would have my director of combat development designated as my preferred replacement. Because of his complicity in my approach, he would look foolish trying to reverse it. My legacy would be ensured.

How It Has Played Out

Fortunately, I never became Commandant of the Marine Corps. Unfortunately, General David Berger did. With his concept, dubbed Force Design (FD) 2030, he transformed the Marine Corps from a worldwide force in readiness to a service primarily aimed at deterring, or if necessary, fighting a war against China in the South China Sea.

Since his concept did not require large-scale amphibious landings, General Berger released the navy from its requirement

to provide the Marine Corps with a division's worth (two Expeditionary Brigades) of amphibious shipping. This was a savvy move as it got buy-in from the navy's carrier and submarine admirals.

To give Berger credit, this was a brilliant political approach. The Biden administration has identified China as the pacing threat to national security. Berger's plan to "divest to invest" to procure the anti-ship missiles needed to implement FD 2030 would save the nation billions in the short run. Although the divestiture was done without any guaranteed quid pro quo, General Berger apparently believed a grateful nation would reward the Marine Corps for its generosity.

The Results

Things have not gone well for FD 2030 in the past year. Before he left office, General Berger was forced to admit that the Navy-Marine Corps team could not respond to contingencies in Sudan and Turkey due to a lack of amphibious shipping. Congress has belatedly realized something may be wrong, and the current Defense Authorization Act has mandated a second look at FD 2030.

An exhaustive study by a group of retired senior Marine Corps generals revealed the war games justifying FD 2030 were manipulated to produce positive results. General Berger's concept was built on a house of cards. He reduced the Marine Corps to something between coastal artillery and naval infantry.

General Eric Smith, Berger's chosen successor, has obviously felt the heat and recently changed the name to "Force Design," but this is like changing the name of the Titanic after it hit the iceberg. If the congressional study confirms what the retired generals suspect, several things should be done. General Smith is not a well man and should be medically retired. One of the recently retired general officers who objected to FD 2030 should be returned to active duty and appointed as commandant to sort out the mess. That will be difficult; Berger left chaos in his wake.

The author, Gary Anderson served as the Chief of Plans (G-5) of the Marine Corps Expeditionary Force responsible for the Indo-Pacific area. He lectures on Alternative Analysis at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.

A ONE TRICK PONY

BY GEN ANTONY C. ZINNI, USMC (RET)

When I run into an active-duty Marine, he or she will eventually want to talk about Force Design 2030. I never begin any discussion with this topic, but I can usually tell that's where they want to go. When they ask me about my well-known objections, I first ask them what they think. I have yet to encounter an avid advocate ready to engage in debate. Usually, they seem confused and troubled by the direction in which the Corps is heading.

Recently, I was talking to an active-duty Marine colonel

and the conversation went to Force Design 2030 as expected. During our exchange he said something that struck a chord with me. He remarked that he could not believe that the Marine Corps leadership was turning us into a "one trick pony." I knew what he meant but asked him to elaborate. He explained that he felt the Corps' leadership narrowed our purpose to one limited mission, in one theater, and in one role. "That's not who we are" he passionately declared.

After that encounter, I could not get that "one trick >>

pony" description out of my mind. I thought about the post-World War II attempt to reduce the Marine Corps to simple naval support roles in the late 1940s. I thought about the attempt to make us into a counterinsurgency force in the 1960s. I thought about the attempt to "mech" us up for fighting in the central front in Europe in the 1970s. I thought about the attempt to turn us into a special ops service in the 1980s. I remember Generals Vandergrift, Victor Krulak, Shoup, Wilson, Barrow, and Kelley resisting those attempts to "purpose design" the Marine Corps to meet the fad of the moment. They warned against moving our Corps into a narrowly focused role that seemed tempting at the moment but would make us irrelevant once time passed.

Commandants that followed them like Generals Gray, Mundy, and Charles Krulak built the Corps on global crisis response, against any enemy. They believed in a balanced force that was ready. They sought out missions across the spectrum of conflict. They remained committed to fighting for the deployment and sustainment capabilities that gave the Corps global reach and responsiveness.

I can remember retired Lieutenant General Victor Krulak talking to my Command and Staff College class. The swirling debate at that time dealt with "meching" up the Marine Corps. He listened patiently to the heated arguments from all sides (at that time we were actually encouraged to debate these issues in our schools!). After exhausting all the arguments, he said

simply, "Stay ready, stay balanced, and take on any mission." Words for all Marines to live by.

I have listened to our current Marine leaders claim that we can still do the same things we have done in the past. How can that be? We have accepted drastically reduced capabilities in amphibious and maritime prepositioning ships, our means to get there and sustain the force until the supply lines are opened. We have divested ourselves of armor, artillery, engineers, aircraft, infantry, and other critical capabilities. We have heard our leadership talk of "returning to our naval roots" (taken to mean we will reduce our utility by subordinating ourselves to a U.S. Navy type-command), focusing on the littorals, turning into a reconnaissance and surveillance force, and being missile shooters on remote islands. We are becoming this century's equivalent of the Wake Island Defenders.

As I watch the crises erupting in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and in other parts of the world (everywhere but the Western Pacific), I wonder why we lost that global focus. Did history not teach our previous Commandant and current Corps leaders anything? No one predicted a war in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East. It was supposed to be in the Central Front in Europe! Once again, we are learning the lesson of losing our global focus. The previous and current Commandants divested the nation's premier 9-1-1 force into irrelevance, something that every other Commandant since Vandergrift sought to prevent. ■

JOKES



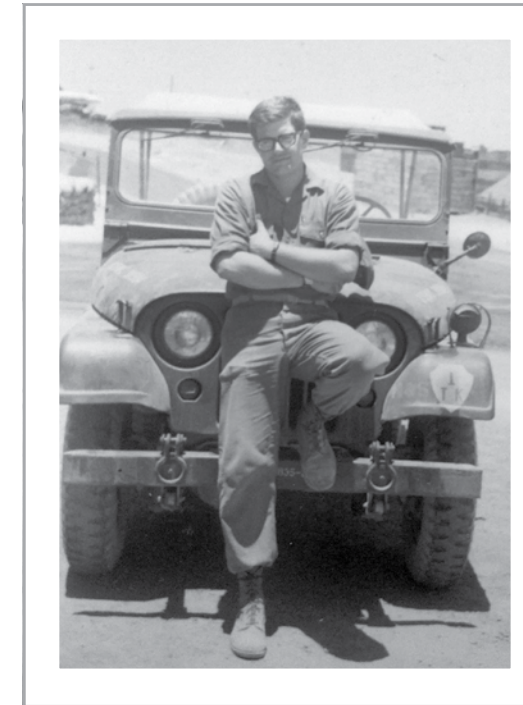
How my dog sees himself when the doorbell rings



GUESS WHO Photo Contest

Can you guess who the person is in this photo?

The first person to contact John Wear at 719-495-5998 with the right answer will have their name entered into a contest for a drawing to win a yet un-named mediocre prize.



Last Issue Winner

On April 2, 2024 at 1:42 PM (MST) we got a call from Brian Fieldhouse properly identifying this WW2 German "Strum Tiger" tank. (a.k.a.: Sturmtyger - 380 mm rocket propelled mortar).



If you feel that you have a photo that may stump the readership, please take a photo of it with your smartphone in ambient light and send it on email to johnwear2@verizon.net Or better yet, if it is already digitized, simply email it.

To the Great Tank Park in the Sky

"Fear not death for the sooner we die, the longer we shall be immortal."—Benjamin Franklin

Bruce L Fox 1950–2023



Bruce "Foxy" Fox died August 29, 2023. He was the driver for Jan "Turtle" Wendling with Alpha Co, 3rd Tanks in 1969. He attended the 2013 USMC VTA reunion in San Antonio but he never rejoined the brotherhood. We are very sorry that we have no details of his death.

David J Thompson 1941 – 2023



Capt. David J Thompson, of Granville, IL, passed away December 22, 2023, in Bloomington, IL from complications of triple bypass heart surgery. Dave served two tours in Vietnam with Bravo Co, 1st Tanks – the first tour lasting just a matter of days, not even a week!

I met Dave when he first came aboard in March 1967. We shared a commonality in that he was a frat brother to one of my high school friends, majoring in Pharmacy at Drake University. At that time, the Marine Corps was not interested in officers majoring in pharmacy/medical or agricultural programs. I questioned how he got in. He said the recruiter told him to go back out the door and come back with a different answer! Dave said his major was Chemistry & Biology and off to OCS he went! Dave was assigned to the 2nd Platoon and on his ride out to meet his platoon, one shot was fired, and Dave found himself holding a piece of his liver.

Dave was medevacked out of country that night and we never heard what happened to him. As it turned out, he recovered from his wound and returned to Bravo Co in December 1967. He was a tank platoon leader during Tet in the An Hoa area. He returned home after 13 months with the rank of Captain. Upon release from active-duty Dave served his community as the pharmacist and

owner of Granville Drug Store for more than 30 years. His membership and involvement in various community organizations typify the lasting qualities of a Marine!

I met Dave again, and his wife Nancy, in the spring of 2009, prior to the USMCVTA reunion in Charleston, SC. Our paths have crossed many times since then. My wife, Doris and I were so glad to see them at the Colorado Springs reunion. Even then Dave had a real problem/challenge with the trip up Pikes Peak! Far be it for him to shy away from a challenge. A proud Marine and we say, Rest in Peace, Marine – Semper Fi.

Submitted by Rod Henderson – Lt Fuzz

Michael S Shaw 1946–2023



Sgt. Michael S Shaw passed away on December 3, 2023, from a battle with cancer. Born in Camden, SC and of a quiet and reserved disposition, it is not known why he chose to join the Corps! Mike served with Bravo Co, 1st Tanks in RVN during 1967. First assigned to flame tank F-21, he must have drawn the short straw

a couple of times as he filled in on F-22, commanded by Sgt Harry Herren and assigned to the infamous Third Herd. This is how I met Mike, and my recollection was he certainly was not a loud show-off but was quiet, did his job and did not need to be told what to do. He saw what needed to be done and did it!

Talking with Stan Olenjack, he said Mike later transferred to a gun tank within Bravo Co but could not remember which tank. Stan also said Mike and David 'Alabama' Walters were always good friends. That may explain why Mike was so quiet, as once Alabama got 'on a roll' nobody could get a word in edgewise!

After his time in the Marine Corps, Mike worked for DuPont, retiring after 42 years of service. This allowed him more time to be on the golf course! He was active in the

Marine Corps League, Military Order of Devil Dogs Pound, American Legion, Masonic Lodge, Jamil Shrine and Gideons International. Mike and his wife Charlene professed and lived their deeply rooted religious beliefs and were a comfort to all. It was always a joy to be with them at our Third Herd reunions. I have often commented how lucky I was to have served with such 'mighty fine Marines'! So, we say farewell, Mike – Rest in Peace, Marine. Semper Fi.

Submitted by Rod Henderson – Lt Fuzz

Bill Fred Kinsey 1948–2024



Bill Fred Kinsey, 75, of Ada, passed away on February 29th, 2024 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma surrounded by his loving family. Bill was born in Anaheim, California on August 28, 1948 to his parents Robert and Wanda Kinsey (Smith). Bill enlisted into the United States

Marine Corps, and proudly protected his country during the Vietnam War with the 1st Tank Battalion.

He married the love of his life, Ann, on May 19, 1988 and together they shared thirty-five wonderful years together. Bill worked hard for many years in his career as a machinist and he was also an avid fisherman who appreciated the outdoors and enjoyed camping whenever he could. Unfortunately, Bill never joined the USMC VTA brotherhood.

Editor's Note: Please see Bill's remembrance on the next page.

Stanley "OJ" Olenjack 1946–2024



Stanley "OJ" Olenjack, age 77, of Bradley, Illinois, passed away Sunday, March 10, 2024 at Riverside Medical Center Emergency Room in Kankakee. He was born on March 13, 1946 in Chicago, the son of Stanley Sr. & Angeline (Bartosick) Olenjack. Stanley attended grade school and high school in Chicago. He enlisted into the United States Marine Corps in November of 1965, and was discharged in January of 1978. He is a combat veteran of the Vietnam war, earning a Purple Heart medal and other decorations during his tour of duty with the 1st Tank Battalion. Stanley was a 100% disabled

combat veteran. He married Vicki Karr on September 11, 1987, and they had two children, a daughter, Katherine Olenjack, and a son, Adam Karr.

Stanley was an advocate to veterans in the community. He dedicated himself to helping his fellow veterans. He belonged to several veterans' organizations. Stanley is the past commandant of the Kankakee County Marine Corps League Detachment 1253, past chairman of the Manteno Veterans Home Advisory Council, past chairman for the state of Illinois Veterans Advisory Council with the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and past chairman of the Kankakee County Veterans Assistance Commission. He was currently serving as the Commander of the Kankakee County Disabled American Veterans, Chapter 34. As a member of the Marine Corps league, he was the color guard and rifle squad commander, and the VAVS representative of the Marine Corps League for the Manteno Veterans Home. Stanley was a leader in the area's Kankakee Veterans Council and had organized and was the Master of Ceremonies for both the Kankakee Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies. He was also a long-time member of the USMC Vietnam Tankers Association.

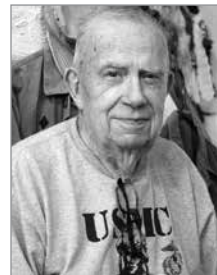
Robert Eugene Mattingly 1941–2023



Robert Eugene Mattingly, passed away on October 10, 2023, in Easton, Maryland at the age of 82. Robert was born October 9, 1941, in Baltimore, Maryland to the late Gordon Eugene and Lillian Mattingly. He grew up in Parkville, Maryland

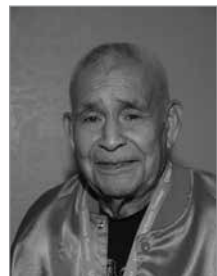
until he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. He attended Columbia University under the Marine Corps' ROTC program, graduating in 1965 when he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. He went on to serve several tours in Vietnam where he was highly decorated including receiving the Silver Star. He retired from the Marine Corps in 1983 as a Lieutenant Colonel. During his more than twenty years in the Marine Corps, he worked in a variety of teaching and intelligence positions. In addition, he earned two master's degrees from the University of Southern California ("USC") and Pepperdine University. He taught military history as part of the ROTC program at the USC where he was awarded the national Col. Leo A. Codd Memorial Award for excellence for teaching. He was an active member of the USMC VTA. This obituary was first published in the MCTA newsletter. >>

Roger Uriel Chaput 1932 – 2024



Nickname: The Loader
 Spouse: Martha Hodge
 Father: Uriel Andre and Chaput
 Mother: Marie Anna Jean
 Children: Roger Uriel
 Birth: 30 Jan 1932 New Hampshire
 Death: 19 Jan 2024 Lake Havasu City, Mohave, Arizona

Joe Martinez 1932 – 2019



Name: Martinez, Joe
 Rank & Branch: Msgt Us Marine Corps
 War Period: Korea | Vietnam
 Date of Birth: 06/09/1932
 Date of Death: 09/01/2019
 Buried At: Section C-19 Site 548
 Cemetery: San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery

Cemetery Address: San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery, 32053 West McCabe Road Santa Nella, Ca 95322

Alfred M. Gray, Jr., USMC (Retired) 1928–2024



General Alfred M. Gray, Jr., 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps, was born 22 June 1928 and hails from Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1950 and served overseas with the Amphibious Reconnaissance Platoon, Fleet

Marine Force (FMF), Pacific, attaining the rank of sergeant. He was commissioned a second lieutenant on 9 April 1952. After attending The Basic School, at Quantico, Virginia, and the Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, he joined the 1st Marine Division in Korea. He served a tour as an artillery officer with the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, and a subsequent tour as an infantry officer with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. In October 1953, he was promoted to first lieutenant.

Major Gray joined the 12th Marines, 3d Marine Division, in Vietnam in October 1965, serving concurrently as Regimental Communications Officer; Regimental S-3

Officer and Artillery Aerial Observer. In April 1967, he was assigned command of the Composite Artillery Battalion and the U.S. Free World Forces at Gio Linh. In September 1967, he was reassigned to the III Marine Amphibious Force in Da Nang, where he commanded the 1st Radio Battalion elements throughout I Corps.

General Gray was promoted to the rank of general and assumed the office of Commandant of the Marine Corps on 1 July 1987. General Gray retired on 30 June 1991 and resided in the Northern Virginia area. He passed away on March 20, 2024.

General Gray's personal decorations and awards include: the Distinguished Service Medal; the Silver Star Medal; the Legion of Merit with Combat "V" and a gold star in lieu of a second award; the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V" and three gold stars in lieu of second, third and fourth awards; the Purple Heart with a gold star in lieu of a second Purple Heart; the Meritorious Service Medal; the Joint Service Commendation Medal; the Navy Commendation Medal; and the Combat Action Ribbon with a gold star in lieu of a second award.

Remembering Corporal Bill F. Kinsey, 1948–2024

By Frank Cardiel

I met Kinsey in 1968 when I was assigned to 5th Tanks on Camp Pendleton, CA. We seemed to click and became friends since we were both from SoCal. We participated in training and maneuvers for a few months before I was transferred to the 1st Replacement Company. Kinsey was assigned to ship out to Vietnam in 1969 and after a couple of months, I was assigned to ship out to Vietnam later in 1969 which was the last year of my four-year enlistment.

In-country I was assigned to Bravo Company, 1st. Tank Battalion. As fate would have it, there was Kinsey, already a seasoned combat Marine. After a few weeks of getting acclimated to the daily assignments and routine, and again, as fate would intervene, we ended up on the same tank, "B-13," "Nonconformist," with me as tank commander since I was a sergeant. Kinsey was my gunner, and what a great one he was. Aside from our daily road sweeps and assistance to our brother Marines on the ground, we also participated in "Operation Durham Peak" and "Operation Pipestone Canyon." Later I said my goodbyes as I was being transferred to the rear and assigned as "Sergeant of The Guard" until I shipped back home in January 1970.

Regrettably, I lost touch with Kinsey and others as we didn't exchange information when we had the opportunity; the reasons are unknown.

Years went by, and I wondered if Kinsey ever made it home, so I started a search, knowing that he was from SoCal ... Anaheim, to be specific. On and off, I would make a few calls with no luck. Then the internet arrived, and I made several inquiries through Myspace and then Facebook without success. Several years passed, and again, on Christmas Eve Day 2023, I felt the need to know what happened to Kinsey or if he even made it back home. So, I once again went through the list of Kinseys on Facebook, and one on the list drew my attention. I messaged that Bill Kinsey and asked if he knew a Bill Kinsey who is a Marine and served in Vietnam in 1969? I also attached a photo for recognition. His response was, "Yes, that's my pops; I'm his son."

I couldn't believe it! He contacted his pops, and Kinsey said he would like for me to give him a call. I called him, and we chatted briefly and agreed to talk again soon. Kinsey

Kinsey is on the left, and I am on the right in the sitting photo and Kinsey is on the right and I am on the left in the tank photo.
 Sergeant Frank T. Cardiel



also said that he received a promotion and eventually became a Tank Commander after he fired on a Viet Cong stronghold that was also an ammo depot. Believe me when I say that I was very pleased and relieved to learn that Kinsey made it home and had a good family life.

A couple of months passed, and I got a message from his son asking if he could call me rather than message me, and of course, my answer was "Yes!" His son informed me that his dad had fallen and was seriously injured. Paramedics were called, and Kinsey was taken to the hospital and admitted to the Intensive Care Unit. We prayed and asked God that Kinsey would make it to spend more time with his family. Bill Jr. said he would keep me updated on his pop's progress.

Unfortunately, the next day, February 28, 2024, I got a call from Bill Jr. to let me know that his pops had passed. It was Kinsey's time to leave and meet the Lord. Rest in peace, and thank you for your sacrifice and service. Semper Fi. ■



Your Attention Please!

We would greatly appreciate it that if you recognize a name in the obits that you, please send us an email note or give us a phone call telling us about the recently departed Marine. Anything that you recall might be posted so that others will know that he is remembered by others... plus we will have another record of his memory.

Bullets Halt One Enemy Other Runs

DA NANG—For several hours, Marines of "I" Co., 3rd Bn., Seventh Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, silently watched two men coming and going at a village where sniper fire previously harassed the Leathernecks.

Although the sniper fire was silenced, the Marines weren't in the mood to take chances. They went after the suspected VC, immediately after the two had left the village the fifth time.

Leading the patrol of six men, Cpl. Joseph P. Lamb (Toronto, Canada), moved toward the village to set up an ambush.

"We had orders to capture the suspects, but to return fire if necessary," said Lamb.

A half hour later, the two VC were on their way back to the village. Both were armed.

The Marines were stretched from the village to a curve in the road, 100 meters away.

Positioned at the curve, Lamb and another Marine prepared to capture the suspects.

Their plans were foiled, however, when one of the VC sighted Lamb and, grenade in hand, proceeded to rush him.

Three shots from Lamb's rifle hurled the VC to the ground. His grenade exploded atop him tossing the VC into the air.

A map of enemy supply routes throughout the area, medical supplies, an AK-47 assault rifle and several grenades were found on the enemy's body.

During the skirmish, the second VC escaped in the opposite direction.



DIVINE SERVICES—Cdr. Carl Auel (Reed City, Mich.), First Marine Regiment chaplain conducts worship services during Operation Medina. Leathernecks of the First Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division participated in the 10-day search and destroy operation southwest of Quang Tri. (Photo by: Cpl. M.J. Coates)

RVN-Sponsored APT Teams A Demoralizing Factor to VC

PHU BAI — A civilian force that saves Marine lives, uncovers countless booby traps and identifies Viet Cong suspects is helping Leathernecks in the Phu Bai area.

Spearheading the pacification program are 74 men of the Vietnamese government-sponsored Armed Propaganda Teams (APT), all former Viet Cong.

Marines from such activities as the Civil Affairs section of Force Logistic Support Group

"Alpha" (FLSG-A) work hand-in-hand with the APT in a combined effort to crush the enemy in the Phu Bai area.

Accompanying Marines on combat operations in unpopulated areas, such teams are able to gather valuable information from farmers and villagers which often aids the success of these tactical missions.

"The mere presence of the APT is a demoralizing factor to the local VC because these men were once counted among their numbers," said Lt. Jim Uhl (Flagstaff, Ariz.), FLSG-A civil affairs officer.

According to Fernando de los Santos, 1st Corps director for APT, his men talk to relatives and parents of VC sympathizers, explaining the Chieu Hoi program. Chieu Hoi villages are designed to house refugees who have rallied to the side of the South Vietnamese government.

Chieu Hoi advisor for Thua Thien province Juan D. Artajo said, "APTs find such face-to-face contact most effective. Its members present themselves as examples of the good the South Vietnamese government can accomplish."

Santos and Artajo are Filipino advisors to the Republic of Vietnam government.

Careful observation of those Chieu Hoi villagers who are con-

sidered good prospects for APT is made by political advisors living among the Chieu Hoi's. Attitude and loyalty to the government are top characteristics desired.

"All APT members have to be volunteers. Once they are selected, they must undergo a four-week training course to orient them in the function and operation of the team," Artajo continued.

Because of day-to-day junkets into enemy territory, the five-man teams are armed. The Phu Bai APT branch is the largest propaganda unit in South Vietnam. It began operating under its present concept in September, 1966.

"These teams are very successful. It's quite a relief to know they can find out from the people where mines are planted, ambushes are set-up and who the VC are in each village," Cpl. Dave Patton (Pine Ridge, S.D.), FLSG-A Marine, said.

Plans to add another platoon of 100 men have already been approved for the Phu Bai area by the Ministry of Chieu Hoi in Saigon. Additionally, APT officials are contemplating assigning ranks as titles to the APT members as a form of identification even though it is not a military force.

Engineers Are Destructive While on Operation Knox

DA NANG — "We really had a workout on this one," said LCpl. Tommie Marshall (Baltimore, Md.), describing the work of Marine combat engineers on Operation Knox.

Marshall and LCpl. John Jones (Modesto, Calif.), made up the engineer team working with "H" Co., 2nd Bn., Seventh Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, during Knox. Both are from the 1st Engineer Bn.

The seven day search and destroy mission, 25 miles northwest of Da Nang, included the destruction of one Viet Cong cave, 12 enemy bunkers, numerous fighting holes, 21 Chi-com (Chinese communist) grenades and the dismantling of a Claymore mine.

"The cave," explained Marshall, "was a natural granite

cave. We couldn't destroy it completely, but it'll take some doing for the VC to dig it up again."

"The cave had a tunnel going under it," explained Jones. "In all it was about 60 meters long. The opening was only three feet by five and it was concealed behind some bushes."

The concussion grenades, hand grenades, and other enemy materials destroyed by the Marine engineers were abandoned by the VC when they hastily fled their positions in the wake of a Marine assault.

Marines from "H" Co., 2nd Bn., Seventh Marine Regiment, secured the hill, fighting an estimated force of more than 20 hard-core VC in a fierce one-and-a-half hour battle before the enemy abandoned the hilltop position and supplies.

Marine Unit Uncovers VC Camp

DA NANG — Marine ground units, heli-lifted into an area 19 miles northwest of Da Nang in support of a reconnaissance squad that had come under enemy attack, succeeded in uncovering an enemy base camp in the aftermath of the encounter.

The camp site was searched, then marked for destruction by air bombardment. It had been hastily abandoned by the enemy just before the Marines arrived.

"We found rice that was still warm from cooking," said LCpl. Garry Reed (Holland, Ohio), a radioman with the 2nd Plt., "I" Co., 3rd Bn., Seventh Marine Regiment.

The rice was found inside one of the three fortified bunkers at the camp site. Digging materials and two canteens were also found.

Discarded equipment and blood trails were found near the area where the Marines recon squad had been ambushed the previous day. The enemy attackers were estimated to be a combined Viet Cong-North Vietnamese Army unit.

"We were on an observation mission in the area," said LCpl. Syrie Di Gioia (San Diego, Calif.), a point man with the recon squad from "C" Co., 1st Recon Bn.

"They must have had a force of about 20 men," noted Di Gioia. "They were equipped with machine guns and automatic weapons."

Elements from "I" and "K" Co., 3rd Bn., Seventh Marines, were heli-lifted into the mountainous area following air bombardments on the enemy positions.

In a search of the battle area the morning following the enemy attack, blood trails and discarded equipment were found.

The enemy camp site was situated on a hilly area about a mile from the battle area.

Engineer Up VC Mine Discovered

DA NANG — When the word came over the radio for the engineer to come up, LCpl. Erwin G. Hilling (Jermy, Pa.), wasn't sure what to expect.

Hilling, an engineer with "I" Co., 3rd Bn., Fifth Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, was out on a platoon sweep.

"I was with the platoon command post, about 3,000 meters from one of the squad-sized patrols, when we were radioed," Hilling recalled.

When one of the Marines in the squad felt tension on his leg, he knew something was about to happen. He realized it was a booby trap, and slowly backed off. It was then that the engineer was called up to check it out.

With a fire team, Hilling proceeded to the patrol to try and remedy the situation.

"He was just as shaken up as I was," Hilling stated. "It was that kind of booby trap that only goes off when the trip-wire is jerked completely, but since it was only half-way pulled, something had to be done."

Taking his time about the whole matter, Hilling removed the Chi-com grenade from its position and took it over to a ditch where he put a charge on it and detonated the booby trap.



STRIKE FORCE—Leathernecks of the 1st Marine Division prepare to board helicopters of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing to kick off Operation Essex. The search and destroy mission is being conducted in Antenna Valley, southwest of Da Nang. (Photo by: SSgt. W.F. Schrider)

Want Your Own Red Wagon? —Get High Marks in School

CAMP CARROLL — Five months ago, MSgt. William D. Abbott initiated "Operation Red Wagon" with two wagons sent to him by his wife. Today he has received more than 300 of an expected 1,000 wagons.

Abbott, sniper-scout platoon commander with the Third Marine Regiment, conceived the wagon idea last May when he saw a Vietnamese child pulling his friend along in a discarded ammunition box near the village of Cam Lo.

"I thought it would be nice to see those kids with a real wagon," Abbott said.

He then wrote his wife Madreen, residing in Stafford, Va., with their two children, to send him two little red wagons.

One of the wagons he received was given to a child in the vil-

lage. The other was given to a Roman Catholic priest who works with the families in the refugee camp.

Since then, Abbott's idea has snowballed and contributions for the 14 wagons have been received from people and clubs all over the States.

"The primary goal of Operation Red Wagon," explained Abbott, "is to reward the children who achieve high marks in school and to encourage the people to help themselves."

The wagons will be presented to deserving children during appropriate ceremonies in the villages.

Abbott added that, "Because of the hundreds of refugees cramped into the Cam Lo area, the spread of disease through unsanitary habits is a health

hazard. Therefore the wagons will also be awarded to families who keep the cleanest homes and cleanest children."

The idea was enthusiastically received by the Amateur Trap Shooters Association (ATA) in which Abbott and his wife have long been active members.

Ralph Taylor, president of the ATA and a long time friend of Abbott, spoke about the project at a shooting match and enough money was raised on the spot to buy 100 wagons.

"Since then more than 900 have been purchased and are being shipped to me," commented Abbott.

The wagons are being assembled by members of the Third Marine Regiment motor transport section and men in Abbott's platoon.

Plans are being formulated by the civil affairs officer with the village and hamlet chiefs to create incentive programs so that children and families can earn the wagons.

"I never expected this much," Abbott admits, "but every minute I've spent with this program has been well worth my time."

Cpl. Kills VC

DA NANG — A Marine corporal who was spun around by a Viet Cong bullet that pierced his flak jacket, came out of the spin to return a blast of fire of his own, killing the surprised attacker.

"My reflexes went into high gear," recalled Cpl. Richard L. Neufeld (Upper Saddle River, N.J.), telling about what amounted to a quick-draw showdown between himself and the VC sniper.

The incident occurred during a helicopter extraction, 18 miles southwest of Da Nang.

"We were being heli-lifted back to our base camp after a three-day search and destroy mission," explained Neufeld, a fire team leader with the 2nd Plt., "I" Co., 3rd Bn., Seventh Marine Regiment.

"I was on the flank as protection while some of the others were boarding the chopper. The sniper hit us from the other side. He was about 50 meters away. Luckily I was able to come back firing after his bullet spun me around."

Camouflaged Enemy Mauled by Marines

PHU BAI—A large force of armed, camouflaged Viet Cong was caught in the open and severely mauled by a reinforced Marine company four miles east of Camp Evans.

Army Quad-50 machine guns and artillery from the 3rd Bn., Twelfth Marine Regiment helped the riflemen of "M" Co., 3rd Bn., Twenty-Sixth Marine Regiment rout what may have been the lead elements of a Viet Cong battalion.

The troops were attempting to cross into the rich rice country to the east of Highway 1 when they ran into the Marine ambush.

At approximately 8:45 p.m., the Marines saw 15 enemy soldiers cross a ridgeline approaching their position.

The enemy scouts suddenly retraced their steps back over the ridge, returning a few moments later guiding two troop columns.

The Marines held their fire until the Viet Cong were within 75 meters of their position.

By then more than 70 enemy soldiers could be seen.

Calling in artillery, the first exploding round was the signal for the Marines to open fire.

The Viet Cong were too stunned to move as tracers and bursting shells slammed into their exposed columns.

As the enemy began to retreat, Marine artillerymen walked their barrages after them.

More than 400 rounds of high explosive 105mm and 155mm shells were fired at the fleeing VC.

Many of the enemy soldiers were seen to fall under fire and others were observed being carried away.

There were no Marine casualties.

A number of the Marines were new arrivals to Vietnam. This was their first real contact with the enemy.

Capt. Alfred Lardizabel Jr. (Oxnard, Calif.), praised the professionalism and aggressive actions of the Marines.

Said the captain, "My lieutenants are just out of basic school, my staff noncommissioned officers just arrived from the

States, and, in fact, most of my company is new, but they did an outstanding job. We learned a lot."
So did the Viet Cong.

Phu Bai Villagers Get Water

PHU BAI—Thousands of villagers in the Phu Bai area have cleaner water as the result of work and cash donations by members of Force Logistic Support Group "Alpha" (FLSG-A). The unit is constructing covers for 20 hamlet wells and installing hand pumps on them. Thirteen of the pumps have already been installed.

The pumps were bought in Japan for \$12.50 each with money donated by unit members.

The project is part of FLSG-A's medical aid and sanitation program. "Open wells," pointed out the unit's civil affairs officer, 1stLt. James Uhl (Flagstaff, Ariz.), "are an open invitation to disease."

Several hundred families often use one well, he explained, and the buckets lowered into the wells are not always sanitary. Open wells become breeding places for malaria-carrying mosquitoes. The covers also prevent objects, insects, and rodents from falling into the wells and contaminating the water.

"If the pumps prevent one case of malaria," said Uhl, "they will be cheap. It costs less to prevent illness than to cure it."



OUT ON A LIMB?—A track-mounted 175mm gun receives a thorough cleaning job at the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division's base camp at Duc Pho. And you think your M-16 is hard to clean. (USA Photo)



READY FOR TROUBLE—Amtracs of the 3rd Amphibian Tractor Bn., 1st Marine Division, carry Republic of Korea Marines up inland waterways in search of Viet Cong 17 miles south of Chu Lai. (Photo by: Sgt. Russ Coteen)

Introduction to Cover Story

Our 3rd Platoon's (more than) key role in Multi-Battalion Heli-lift Assault on Mutter's Ridge on Dec 7, 1968

BY BOB SKEELS

This recount story is about and for my heroic Vietnam Marine infantry platoon members who I have re-connected with and who have asked me to write a story about our 3rd platoon's more than key role in this major multi-battalion assault on Mutter's Ridge in this punishing, miserable Vietnam DMZ Jungle War on Dec 7, 1968.

This huge battle involving six battalions (notably battalions: 1/4, 2/4, 1/3 and an ARVN battalion blocking force to the East) was written up in the prestigious Marine Gazette magazine two years later in their March 1970 issue written by our Battalion and Regimental Commanders: J.E. Hopkins and Martin J. Sexton. It was also featured on the front page of the Stars & Stripes newspaper in Jan 1969 called "Battle of Foxtrot Ridge."

Our 3rd Platoon, Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division had more than a key role in this eighteen day "search & destroy" operation.

- We were tasked with being the point unit of the long column sweeping East along this long ridge to the Primary Objective of the entire mission, "Objective Bravo".
- We were tasked with taking the main objective with its 178 enemy bunkers when we arrived on this first day of the assault on Dec 7, 1968
- We had the first enemy contact of this entire assault.

We have an everlasting duty to remember and to honor the fallen. There would be no better way for a Veteran to pay this tribute to them than by joining a local VFW Post, in their names, and help out other fellow veterans in need in your local communities. And maybe reap some stealth therapy value for yourself for free, if needed, from any wartime stress. The bottom line: You need to be connected with people with a shared experience after a war ... the natural bonding, understanding and brotherhood among Veterans.

You two Marines have advanced the already strong legacy of the US Marines by tenfold by your exceptional service to the nation in that Vietnam DMZ Jungle War.

Semper Fidelis to the Max, Brother Marines,

Bob Skeels

robertfskeels@aol.com

COVER STORY

90 Days a Grunt: A Short-Term Assignment to the Infantry, the Jungle and the Battle at Mutter's Ridge

By Kyle Watts

In late September 1968, Bob Skeels stepped off a plane at Quang Tri Combat Base. The aircraft delivered three of Bob's friends to Vietnam alongside him. The four men shared much in common. All were young, newly minted second lieutenants. All had recently graduated from training as 1802 tank officers. For Bob's part, a surge of personal patriotism drove him to the Corps after college despite growing disillusion with the war at home. Vietnam was the war of his generation, and he wanted to play a part, just as his parents had in World War II. He pursued a career as a tanker. He preferred the idea of a heavily armored carriage with massive firepower carrying him to battle in relative safety.

The four lieutenants hauled their gear off the plane and entered a building to check in. Their crisp new uniforms and beaming golden bars stood out among the faded, drab background of

the base. A gruff and weathered lieutenant colonel summoned them into his office. They lined up and snapped to attention. The officer got straight to the point.

"Sorry to tell you this, gents, but a curveball is coming your way. We are short on infantry platoon commanders, so for your first 90 days in country, you will be assigned to a grunt battalion. Welcome to the infantry."

Bob swallowed hard stifling a wave of emotion. Scuttlebutt had reached the states that 1968 was the war's worst year yet to be a new Marine infantry officer. Grunt lieutenants held a low chance of survival. Bob gathered his strength to remain upright and breathed a hardy, "Yes, Sir."

"We couldn't make a noise because we could tell the guy was a hard ass and he'd bust you right there on the spot," Bob recalled today. "I was in fear, but your eyes can't show anything, your words can't show anything. What are you supposed to do? You just obey your orders."

The four tankers left the lieutenant colonel's office and parted ways. Bob received his orders to "Echo" Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines and his spirits faded further when he learned the officer who had informed them of the temporary assignment would later be his battalion commander. The man seemed even less pleased with the situation than the tankers had been.

Bob collected the weapons, clothing, and 782 gear issued to a new grunt bound for the bush. He loaded onto a chopper heading west for Vandegrift Combat Base. The sun disappeared behind distant mountain tops as the helicopter set down. Someone directed Bob to a tent on the perimeter to spend the night. Another chopper would deliver him to his unit at Khe Sanh the following morning. Several NCOs invited Bob to join their card game and dealt him in. In the twilight, ridges and valleys extended for miles, nestled beneath a perfectly painted sky. Could a place like this really be a war zone?

Bob stripped down to his skivvies as they played. The oppressive heat seemed the only blemish on the otherwise beautiful country. An artillery round suddenly exploded 150 meters away. Bob scanned the table, gauging the reactions of other Marines. A second round hit 100 meters



1stLt Bob Skeels following a successful ambush mission on Dec. 29, 1968. Less than a week later, Skeels left "Echo" Co, 2nd Bn, 4th Marines, after spending the first 90 days of his tour with the infantry and returned to his primary specialty as a tanker.

COURTESY OF BOB SKEELS

Right: A view of the mountainous terrain immediately south of the DMZ, photographed by LCpl Pat McWilliams during a patrol with 3rd Platoon, Co E, 2/4. The words on his helmet capture the general sentiment of the Marines who endured and survived that jungle. (Photo by Patrick McWilliams)

away. Everyone ran outside. A third round came 75 meters away. Someone screamed, "Get in the goddamn trench! We're on the gun target line!"

Six Marines dove headlong into a water-filled hole next to the tent. Wearing nothing but his skivvies and hard-rimmed glasses, Bob plunged in after them. He sank to the bottom and struggled not to drown as the tangled mass of bodies all took cover. Someone knocked Bob's glasses off and they disappeared into the muck.

When the incoming fire finally stopped, the Marines clawed their way out of the trench. The tent which housed the card game hung in shreds. Naked, soaked, and blind without his glasses, Bob never felt so vulnerable.

"I was so embarrassed. I learned to never go to bed without being fully dressed. From that point on, I always went to bed with my boots on and rifle on my chest. I found out later the incoming rounds were misfires from friendly 105 mm howitzers nearby. That was my first night in country. What a hell of a night."

In the morning, Bob boarded another helicopter and flew farther west. The chopper descended into thick fog, completely socking in the jungle beneath him. The helicopter crew chief shouted back as Bob peered out the door.

"OK, Lieutenant, you're here!"

Bob stared, completely befuddled. A white sheet hung in the air, veiling what seemed the entire world outside of the chopper. "What?"

"You're here, Hill 881 North."

"Are we on the ground?"

"No, but we're only about 10 feet off. You'll be alright, go ahead and jump."



**"Sorry to tell you this, gents,
but a curveball is coming your way.
We are short on infantry platoon
commanders, so for your first 90 days in
country, you will be assigned to a grunt
battalion. Welcome to the infantry."**



One of only three photographs taken by Bob Skeels while he was in Vietnam captures the view from a hill on Mutter's Ridge looking down into the valley where his platoon would make the initial contact of a multi-battalion operation on Dec. 8, 1968.



An aerial view of FSB Russell in late February 1969 after the base was overrun by NVA sappers on Feb. 25. Skeels' platoon spent many nights on Russell in November 1968 carving the site out of the hilltop and were there the night it was attacked. (USMC map and photo)



Bob cursed the Marine, the fog, and the hill somewhere below as he slid into his pack. With over 125 pounds of gear on his body, he jumped. The helicopter noise muffled any cracking sounds from his body as he collided with the ground. He lay on his back catching his breath as the helicopter departed. A driving rain began, pelting his face as he stared toward the sky. Men snickered in the distance. Bob hurt too much to care. A Marine finally approached.

“You Lieutenant Skeels?”

“Yeah,” Bob muttered. “My back hurts like hell.”

“Jesus, sir. We gotta get you out of that dead cockroach position.” He helped Bob roll over and get on his feet. “You’re 3rd Platoon Commander. They’re all waiting for you over there on the east side of the hill.”

Bob located his Marines, collected under several ponchos tied together. The platoon sergeant stood as Bob entered their shelter. “Welcome, Lieutenant.”

“Thanks. It’s good to finally be here. I’ve had a couple rough days.” The Marines smirked and shot glances around the group.

“Well, you’re about to have tougher days. What do you want to do now?”

Bob gathered the platoon sergeant, squad leaders, and anyone who was on their second tour. The Marines arrived as Bob decided what to say. One of the grunts beat him to the punch.

“Lieutenant Skeels, before you get started, can I ask a question?” Bob braced for impact.

“Sure.”

“How the hell did we wind up with a green tanker for a damn infantry officer?”

“You guys gotta give me a break!” Bob replied. “Sure, I am green, but looking at your brand new uniforms, some of you guys are just as new as I am. I’m here to learn from you guys that have been here the longest, and we’re all going to be in this together.”

A silence followed Bob’s retort as the Marines traded looks and considered their new leader. Finally, the Marine who offered the challenge let on a smile.

“OK, Lieutenant. We’ll let you have a chance. But no orders for crazy frontal charges!”

Echo Company departed Khe Sanh shortly after Bob arrived and headed north toward the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Bob’s platoon separated from the rest of Echo Co and spent the next two months patrolling the jungle. The unit operated autonomously, rarely seeing other Marines in the bush. The shortage of true infantry officers became evident. Bob’s company cycled through multiple commanding officers while he patrolled the Vietnamese mountains.

Bob learned quickly the hardships of a grunt in war. He and his Marines engaged daily in battle with the jungle. Rats three times the size of those stateside moved in from every corner of the country to follow Marines and feast on garbage left behind. Bob cinched his poncho high around his face every



COURTESY OF PATRICK MCWILLIAMS

LCpl Patrick “Mac” McWilliams on patrol in Vietnam. McWilliams served as point man for Bob Skeels’ platoon on Dec. 8, 1968, during the battle on Mutter’s Ridge.

night, lest he find a rat perched on his chin in the morning looking for crumbs. Often, this happened anyway. Just like the rats, he constantly scrounged for food. Inclement weather often prohibited resupply and the isolated Marines survived many days on one C-ration.

Heat and humidity left the Marines constantly wet. Everyone developed jungle rot. Even as his knuckles seeped and split open, Bob called in medevacs for Marines with cases far worse than his own. Leeches dominated the environment, ready to suck out any amount of life the Marines had left. Bob developed his morning routine which included a full-body sweep and removal of leeches with a flame or salt, sometimes up to 30 leeches at a time.

“It was like an extended camping trip with occasional periods of sheer fright,” reflected Patrick “Mac” McWilliams, one of the grunts in Bob’s platoon. “I tell people most of my time in Vietnam was spent battling the elements. We just lived out there, digging a hole every night.”

“Everything we did, we did for our brother in the hole with us,” remembered Bruce Brinke, another Marine serving under Bob. “We didn’t have any grand ulterior motives, we just put one foot in front of the other and tried not to think of the whole 13 months. When you’re a lance corporal, a ground pounder, you just do what the squad leader tells you, and he just does what the platoon commander tells him. You don’t have much of a grand view.”

One of Bob’s squad leaders, Cpl Alvin “Twink” Winchell, struggled finding words to describe his time in the jungle as he recounted the memories recently.

“My daughter is a nurse with experience helping veterans,”

**“OK, Lieutenant.
We’ll let you have a chance.
But no orders for crazy
frontal charges!”**

Bob Skeels at Mutter’s Ridge on Dec. 9, 1968. The peaks of “Objective Bravo,” the main objective of the operation, can be seen across the valley in the background.

Winchell said. “She helped me explain how I survived the jungle. She said, ‘Soldiers are trained to go into survival mode mentally and physically. Some did it well, some caved. The jungle was a site like none other could imagine. Those of you that perfected survival mode attempted to come home. Most of you who are still alive are still in constant survival mode.’ This is how I am to this day.”

When his platoon was not patrolling, Bob received orders to help establish new fire bases on remote jungle hill tops. At the future sites of Fire Support Bases (FSB) Alpine and Argonne, the Marines dug holes and set up security as helicopters lifted in heavy equipment to remove the trees. Bob endured the drain of sleep deprivation on these long nights while checking his positions.

One night, as Bob watched through a Starlight scope, he picked up something unknown moving around the perimeter. He investigated in the morning and discovered fresh tiger tracks. From then on, Bob performed his nightly rounds with a pistol in one hand and a 12-gauge shotgun in the other. He had always worried about getting shot in the dark by a probing enemy soldier or even a trigger-happy Marine. Now, the thought of a 400-pound cat ripping him to shreds boosted his anxiety to a whole new level.

In November, the platoon humped all day to the top of another hill where the next FSB would become reality. Soon to be known as FSB Russell, the hilltop proved critical to supporting grunt operations in the surrounding area.

Nights at Russell brought sightings of a species other than tigers. Listening posts (LPs) set 150 meters out from the perimeter radioed in constantly reporting enemy movement. Starlight scopes revealed human forms moving slowly through the jungle, probing the new defenses and mapping out the perimeter. Bob requested permission to engage the targets but was denied so as to not give away the defensive positions. He walked the lines and out to the LPs each night on high alert, shotgun and pistol in hand. With all the enemy sightings, sooner or later, contact felt imminent.

Before dawn on Dec. 7, 1968, word came down of an upcoming operation. For the first time since Bob arrived with 2/4, the entire battalion would take part in an assault. Several other units would also join in the massive cordon and search. The objective was a well-known and well-fought over terrain feature immediately south of the DMZ known as Mutter’s Ridge. Somehow, out of six participating battalions and their subordinate units, Bob’s platoon drew the task of pushing across Mutter’s Ridge on point for the entire operation.

“You’re gonna get your platoon a lot of ribbons on this one,” the battalion sergeant major told him. “That place is a hell hole. This happened in 1966. It happened in 1967. Now, it’s our turn. We gotta go in there and clean them out.”



COURTESY OF BOB SKEELS



COURTESY OF ALVIN WINCHELL

Cpl Alvin “Twink” Winchell, a squad leader in 3rd platoon, while recovering on USS *Repose* (AH-16) in December 1968. Winchell received his second Purple Heart after being wounded during the Battle of Mutter’s Ridge on Dec. 8, 1968.

Bob tried not to dwell on the stupidity of an annual operation where Marines died to simply drive the NVA back across the DMZ. Less than eight hours after receiving the initial frag order, the Marines loaded into choppers and flew to their insertion LZs.

The main objective, designated "Objective Bravo," occupied the highest hill of Mutter's Ridge. The rushed timeline planned for Bob's platoon to secure Objective Bravo the same day the entire operation was conceived. The sun sank lower and lower into the western sky as 3rd platoon moved across Mutter's Ridge. When Objective Bravo finally came into view, Bob saw not one, but three distinct hill tops rising into the twilight. Storming a single enemy-occupied hill would be difficult. Tackling three such hills seemed nearly impossible—in the dark, surely suicidal. Bob called his platoon sergeant over.

"How the hell are we supposed to take that? It's got three tops! It would be crazy to try to take that in the dark."

The staff sergeant stared blankly back. "It's your call, Lieutenant."

Bob considered Objective Bravo in silence. Finally, he called up his radioman and raised the company commander. "Echo Six, this is Echo Three. Request permission to set up at our present location for the night and attack the objective in the morning, over."

An unfamiliar voice replied. "Echo Three, the CO's not gonna like that. He's gonna be pissed you're screwing up his operation."

Bob struggled to place the voice. Could it really be another new company commander? Whoever it was, Bob didn't care. "Just ask him."

An excruciating pause followed. Finally, the voice returned with orders.

"Echo Three, patrol over to the base of Objective Bravo,

then return and hold your position for the night. Resume the advance tomorrow morning at 0630. Out."

Bob set down the radio and breathed a sigh of relief. He passed the word to his squads. They found nothing on their final sweep of the day to the base of Objective Bravo, then returned and dug in. Bob passed the night walking the lines.

Dawn broke over the jungle. 3rd platoon roused early and geared up for the coming assault. Shortly before the appointed hour, Bob's radio came to life.

"Echo Three, Echo Three, this is Six. Operational change. Foxtrot Company has been tasked with securing Objective Bravo. You will proceed east along the ridge and act as a blocking force for their assault."

Bob set the radio down. The Marines around him waited for his word. He wrestled with the sudden change in orders. Why now? He knew trying to understand was futile. Their job as point

for the operation was now someone else's job, their fate someone else's fate. Third platoon's job now was to simply execute the new orders.

They marched out down a ridge line. The three peaks of Objective Bravo jutted out of the sky to the north with the rest of Mutter's Ridge extending west out of view. It took most of the day to reach the end of the ridge where it dropped off and opened into a valley leading north to the base of Mutter's Ridge. In the late afternoon, the point man suddenly called a halt. Bob moved forward. Ten pots of boiling rice sat abandoned on the jungle floor, still simmering. Bamboo tables and chairs surrounded them. Marines crouched on high alert.

"It was a pretty big outpost we encountered," Bob recalled. "You see something like that, and your sphincter muscle starts to fire. You know you're going to have contact very soon."

"You're gonna get your platoon a lot of ribbons on this one," the battalion sergeant major told him.

"That place is a hell hole."



PATRICK MCWILLIAMS

FSB Russell on Feb. 26, 1969, the morning after it was overrun. Marines from Skeels' 3rd platoon, including Alvin Winchell, Bruce Brinke and Patrick McWilliams, occupied the site and survived the battle.

Bob called over Cpl Alvin Winchell's squad. He gave Winchell five map checkpoints in the vicinity to investigate. The six-man squad set out down a hill towards the first checkpoint on the valley floor. The rest of 3rd platoon started digging in for the night.

Patrick McWilliams took point for Winchell's squad. The 20-year-old lance corporal volunteered for the spot, even though he had never run point before and had not seen combat. They neared the first checkpoint in a thicket of bamboo and elephant grass. McWilliams crested an embankment running across the valley. The embankment revealed itself to be the edge of a trench line. In the trench directly below McWilliams, a NVA soldier sat eating. Before McWilliams could shoot, the enemy soldier bolted and fired wildly back towards him.

McWilliams considered jumping into the trench after him, then a bullet tore through the hand guard of his rifle, grazing his finger. Machine-gun fire peppered the embankment, creating a dust cloud behind McWilliams as he sprinted back toward the rest of his squad.

He reappeared through the elephant grass as a roar of automatic fire rose above the embankment. Before Winchell could learn what McWilliams had seen, AK-47 fire ripped apart the foliage around him. A sudden sting in his leg dropped Winchell to the ground. He grabbed the radio and found Bob already waiting on the other end.

"What's going on down there?!"

"We walked into something, it's a hornet's nest!"

Winchell switched frequencies to talk with the company's 60 mm mortars. He directed their fire into the trench and surrounding area. The NVA maintained such a rate of fire that he could not even raise his head to watch the rounds impact. He estimated their range from the sound of the explosions and swept rounds across the valley.

The machine-gunner in Winchell's squad opened up with his M60. Another Marine shouted, "They're flanking us!" Meanwhile, the NVA raked the Marines' position as they advanced. Winchell called the mortars in closer. Grenades suddenly landed between the Marines. Winchell grabbed his own grenades and threw them back. The back-and-forth went on until a grenade finally found its mark. Winchell's radioman screamed in pain as the explosion blew apart his knee. Winchell moved the radioman farther back, then called the mortars even closer.

"We called it, 'hugging the belt,' where they'd try to come in so close that you were afraid to call in mortars on your own men," Winchell remembered. "Well, I kept bringing them in."

When the battle opened less than 200 meters down the hill, Bob ordered his remaining two squads to saddle up. The new company commander radioed again demanding updates.

"We've made contact with the enemy down in the valley," Bob told him.

"Well, get someone down there to sweep," the voice replied.

"Already did. That's who is getting hit."

"Hold on, I'm coming up there."

Now, with two Marines missing somewhere in the area, he couldn't risk jets dropping their bombs. He called the aircraft off and formed up his remaining Marines to move out toward Winchell and search for the missing men.



BOB SKEELS

One of the enemy bunkers found by 3rd platoon during their sweep and initial contact at the Battle of Mutter's Ridge on Dec. 8, 1968. In total, more than 50 similar enemy positions were counted in the vicinity where the Marines made contact.

As the rest of 3rd platoon prepared to move, a second lieutenant appeared. Bob determined this must be his new company commander. Automatic fire raked the ridge line as Bob explained their current situation. Leaves and limbs rained down from the branches above their heads.

“Get your ass down there and get those guys!” The lieutenant ordered.

Bob bit his tongue. No point in getting into it with a senior lieutenant right now.

“On my way.”

The platoon’s remaining two squads advanced off the ridge toward the gunfight. They discovered three enemy bunkers built into a hill on their right flank as they worked their way down toward their fellow Marines. Bob realized they could not risk leaving them occupied by the enemy to chew his platoon apart as they moved toward his trapped squad. He adjusted course for the bunkers. Enemy fire slowed their progress as the platoon strung out through the jungle. The point squad finally reached the bunkers and found them unoccupied. Bob sent a runner back through the line to get a count and let everyone know they would resume course back towards Winchell. The runner returned with unexpected news.

“Lieutenant Skeels, we’ve got two missing.”

“What? What do you mean, missing?”

“They went missing some time during on our movement. No one back there saw them.”

Bob fought to keep his bearing as his heart sank to the pit of his stomach. His radioman approached. Fixed wing aircraft held station overhead, ready to pummel the valley floor. Bob still hadn’t located Winchell’s squad. Now, with two Marines missing somewhere in the area, he couldn’t risk jets dropping their bombs. He called the aircraft off and formed up his remaining Marines to move out toward Winchell and search for the missing men.

Bob witnessed at least 20 uniformed enemy soldiers 400 meters away, safely perched on a hilltop near Objective Bravo and firing into the valley. They obviously felt impervious to the battle raging as they added their fire into it.

More Marines fell wounded as the platoon advanced. The man next to Bob was shot in the chest. Bob rolled him over and removed his shirt, revealing a large exit wound. He moved the Marine back uphill toward the abandoned bunkers where a casualty collection point formed.

A small observation plane soared in over at treetop level. The pilot came up on 3rd platoon’s radio and advised he spotted a Marine lying motionless on the jungle floor, shot dead center in the chest. Bob called for volunteers.

“I need two volunteers to come down there with me to look for our MIA.”

One of the remaining squad leaders chimed in. “Lieutenant, you can’t go, you’re the lieutenant!” Without hesitation, two other Marines spoke up. “We’ll go, Lieutenant.”

LCpl John Higgins and PFC Paul Dains stepped forward. Bob didn’t know what to do. Two Marines were missing, at least one probably dead. One squad was trapped in a fight for their lives. Aircraft and artillery waited his word to obliterate the valley. Multiple casualties required evacuation. Darkness threatened to consume Mutter’s Ridge at any minute. The senior company commander demanded answers.

“All right. Look, just get down there. Take a look and get back here. You’ve got five minutes. Just take a look and get back here!”

Back in the valley, Winchell continued calling mortars for what seemed like an eternity as the rest of 3rd platoon tried to reach him. He inched the explosions closer and closer. Mortars



Bob Skeels, left, with several of his Marines in early 1969 after joining Co B, 3rd Tank Bn, 3rdMarDiv. During this time, Skeels learned of his old infantry platoon’s involvement in the tragedy at FSB Russell.

COURTESY OF BOB SKEELS

rained down merely 20 meters away. Shrapnel cut down trees and vegetation around the Marines. A piece of searing metal tore into Winchell’s knee. When other Marines also suffered friendly shrapnel wounds, Winchell ceased the fire. The NVA retreated from the area. The mortar barrage saved them.

He rolled over and rose to his good knee. Suddenly, through the trees, he saw LCpl Higgins walking alone 30 meters away in the direction where the NVA fire had originated and where they had retreated. Winchell caught his attention and frantically pointed toward the enemy positions. Higgins acknowledged him and proceeded on, disappearing back into the jungle.

Back with the rest of 3rd platoon, Bob checked his watch. Five minutes came and went. Five more minutes passed. As Bob debated what to do, movement down the hill caught his eye. A Marine staggered through the trees. Not Higgins or Dains, but one of the Marines who went missing earlier. He appeared badly wounded, purple in color, and missing his helmet and rifle. The Marine stumbled and fell. Bob rushed down the embankment and picked him up. He struggled back to the perimeter with the Marine over his shoulders. He ordered his radioman to call for a medevac as he lay the Marine with the other casualties.

Dusk settled in and it started to rain. The wounded had to get



Above: The author, left, first met Bob Skeels, second from right, in 2018 at the 50th anniversary reunion of Skeels’ TBS Class. This was the first time the author ever heard of the battle at Mutter’s Ridge.

Below: Patrick McWilliams, left, and Alvin Winchell, right, in 2010.



COURTESY OF ALVIN WINCHELL

out now. The only chopper available or willing to come was an Army Chinook. Bob praised and thanked the pilot as he helped load nine Marines on board the helicopter.

More good news arrived shortly after the chopper departed. Winchell’s squad made it safely back up the ridge and linked up with the other elements of Echo Company. All six Marines were wounded, but all six made it back alive. Winchell and his radioman were evacuated due to their wounds. The word helped Bob remain positive. Higgins and Dains had to be out there somewhere, waiting out the darkness, waiting out the NVA.

The sun rose quietly over Mutter’s Ridge on Dec. 9. Bob moved out with his diminished platoon at first light. Echo’s 2nd platoon joined them in searching for their missing Marines. The enemy had completely abandoned the valley, retreating to their stronghold on Objective Bravo. Bob’s platoon located the Marine spotted from the air the day prior. PFC Charles Hall Jr., was no longer missing, but was now the platoon’s first confirmed KIA.

Nearby Hall lay the lifeless body of PFC Dains, similarly cut down by a sniper’s bullet. They proceeded on toward the trench where Winchell’s squad made first contact. A later count revealed 52 enemy bunkers constructed beyond the trench line. Lying next to one of these bunkers, the Marines found the body of LCpl Higgins.

Echo Company spent the rest of the operation blocking the eastern flank of Mutter’s Ridge as Foxtrot Company assaulted Objective Bravo. On Dec. 11, 1stLt Steven Broderick led the assault across the three-topped hill, his platoon in the position Bob’s was intended for before the operational change. Broderick died in the battle, moving among his

squads and directing them under fire. He posthumously received the Silver Star.

Twelve other Marines were killed and 31 wounded while taking the objective, later renamed “Foxtrot Ridge.” Over 170 enemy bunkers were counted there, stuffed with ammo, weapons, and supplies. In all, less than 60 dead NVA were left on Mutter’s Ridge to be counted. Commanders deemed the operation a sweeping success and a prime fighting example of the Corps’ mighty air/ground team.

Bob remained with 3rd platoon through the end of December. He wrote up LCpl Higgins for a posthumous Silver Star. The citation recognized Higgins’ bravery under fire throughout the day of Dec. 8, his initiative in volunteering to seek out the missing Marines, and courage for continuing on alone toward Winchell’s squad, where he died trying to help them.

Bob’s 90 days as a grunt ended as the new year rolled around. He left 2/4 for Bravo Co, 3rd Tank Battalion on Jan. 3, 1969.

Having adopted the mold of an infantry platoon commander, Bob struggled at first remembering how to lead a platoon of five tanks. Near the end of February, Bob and his tanks stood guard over a bridge along Route 1 near the DMZ. One evening, radio traffic trickled in about a fire base near Mutter’s Ridge that had been overrun. Bob’s ears perked up when he heard the name FSB Russell. Having spent several weeks carving Russell out of the jungle, Bob could never forget the place. His platoon occupied Russell, alongside numerous others, when Bob left

them. On the night of Feb. 25, over 200 NVA sappers broke through the perimeter and overran the outpost. In the ensuing terror, 26 Marines were killed and 77 wounded.

Bob begged his new CO to let him go to Russell and check on his old platoon but was refused. Winchell, McWilliams, Brinke and all the others would have been there. Bob did not know if any of them survived.

Bob supported infantry operations along the DMZ for the remainder of his tour. He worked with numerous grunt battalions moving in and out of the bush. Every time he went out, Bob loaded his tank with extra C-rations and passed them out to the grunts. He knew they were always hungry. When grunts were wounded in battle, Bob sometimes evacuated them, riding on the fenders of his tank. He knew helicopter evacuation was not always possible. Every time he went out for two or three days, he thought of the infantry enduring weeks at a time in the jungle.

Bob, like so many other Vietnam veterans, spent the next 40 years trying to forget the war. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Bob found a patriotic spirit that inspired him to join the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He formed new bonds with veterans who shared experiences similar to his own. They inspired strength to dig deeper into his past. Bob visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. He found John Higgins, Paul Dains, and Charles Hall on panel 37W of the wall. He searched each line for other names he'd recognize. He bowed his head in thankfulness, discovering that

no more of the Marines he had ordered evacuated on Dec. 8 had died of their wounds.

Bob located a website published by the LZ Russell Association. Here, he finally connected once again with Winchell, McWilliams, Brinke, and other Marines from 2/4 who survived Mutter's Ridge and the nightmare at LZ Russell. Winchell received the Bronze Star with "V" for heroism on the night Russell was overrun. Brinke was wounded and received the Purple Heart. Bob learned that 2ndLt William Hunt, the lieutenant who replaced him in 3rd platoon, was killed there.

The Marines asked Bob to fill them in on the operation at Mutter's Ridge and what had happened leading up to their making first contact of the operation. This proved yet another plight of the grunts, to obey orders without question, while not always understanding what they were doing, where they were going, and why they were there. Bob did his best to explain the broader picture and took the opportunity to tell them what they had meant to him all his life. "I came away from those 90 days with the belief that the grunts deserve everything," Bob reflected today. "They deserve all the support that anyone else can give them. Dec. 8, '68 was a terrible day in my tour. My worst day. I only spent 90 days as a grunt. I don't know how they endured that jungle for 13 months. It was truly the honor of my lifetime to serve alongside those Marines." 🇺🇸

Bob located a website published by the LZ Russell Association. Here, he finally connected once again with Winchell, McWilliams, Brinke, and other Marines from 2/4 who survived Mutter's Ridge and the nightmare at LZ Russell.



KYLE WATTS

Bob Skeels reflecting at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., in June 2018. Panel 37W holds the names of John Higgins, Paul Dains, and Charles Hall, the three Marines from Skeels' platoon killed at Mutter's Ridge on Dec. 8, 1968.

NATIVE AMERICAN PRAYER

It is said a man hasn't died as long as he is remembered. This prayer is a way for families, friends and fellow veterans to remember our fallen brothers and sisters.

Do not stand at my grave and weep I am not there; I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow,

I am the diamond glints on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain,

I am the gentle autumn rain.

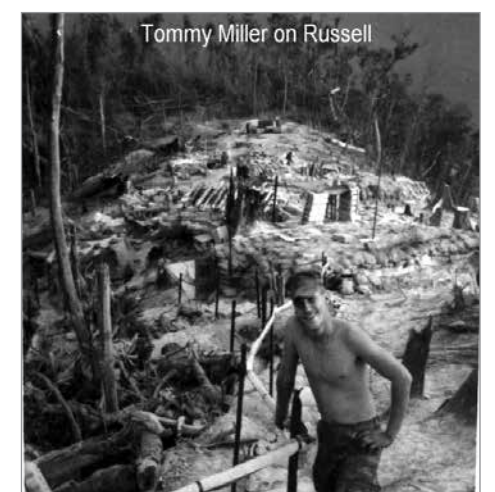
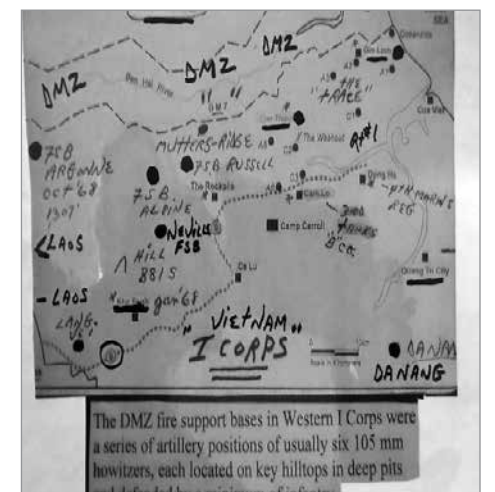
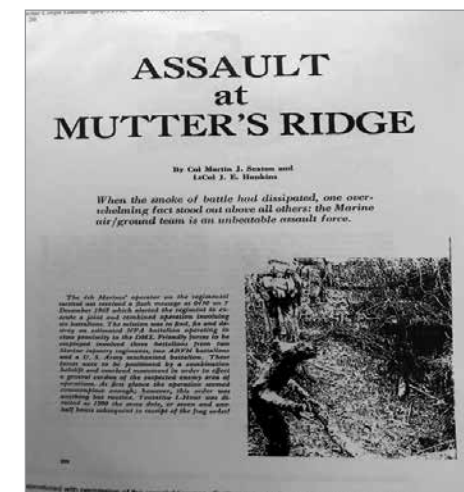
When you awaken in the morning hush,

I am the swift, uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight,

I am the stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry, I am not there, I did not die

PHOTOS FROM BOB SKEELS



Tanks & Medals of Valor

Thomas Eugene McKee

HOME OF RECORD: Palm Springs, California

Silver Star

AWARDED FOR ACTIONS DURING Vietnam War

Service: Marine Corps

Rank: Lance Corporal

Battalion: 1st Tank Battalion, 1st Marine Division (Rein.), FMF

GENERAL ORDERS:

CITATION: The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to Lance Corporal Thomas Eugene McKee (MCSN: 2066048), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Tank Crewman with Company A, First Tank Battalion, FIRST Marine Division (Rein.), FMF, on 15 June 1967, in connection with operations against insurgent communist (Viet Cong) forces in the Republic of Vietnam. During Operation Arizona, Lance Corporal McKee's tank was maneuvering under intense enemy fire to recover a damaged amphibian tractor. With complete disregard for his



own safety, he unhesitatingly dismounted his tank under continuing enemy fire to attach a towing cable to the disabled amphibian. Suddenly, his tank came under heavy Viet Cong 57-mm. recoilless rifle fire, sustaining three direct hits, resulting in the traumatic amputation of his right leg and serious fragmentation wounds to his abdomen and lower extremities. His daring and heroic actions in attempting to recover the amphibian vehicle inspired all who observed him. By his uncommon courage in the initiative and selfless devotion to duty at great personal risk, Lance Corporal McKee upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service. ■

What Members are Doing

Several months ago, Jim Pillsbury (a friend, longtime coworker and machine gunner in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne) happened to meet an elderly Marine while waiting for an appointment in the waiting room at the local VA Medical Center. When Jim was finished with his appointment the Marine was still waiting to be called so Jim asked if he'd like to meet later for coffee and chat for a while. The Marine jumped at the chance and Jim invited me to join them.

Since then, the three of us have met for many coffees and several luncheons for the past few months now and Jim and I have learned the following:



The Purple Heart Medal

By Fred Kellogg

Richard "Dick" Anthony had used his brother's birth certificate so he could enlist in the Marines during WW2. He was only 16 at the time. Sometime later Dick admitted to the authorities that he had lied about his age to get into the fight and the government ended up punishing him by docking him a half month's pay which was \$15. But they didn't kick him out.

He fought in several battles including the invasion of Okinawa. After the war he was assigned to Graves Registration and sent to the Aleutian Islands (Attu and others) where he participated in recovering 600 bodies.

He remained a private for

the next 4 years due to downsizing but stayed in the Marines. Then the Korean War broke out and he was in the first waves landing at Inchon. He fought at the Chosen Reservoir where he was shot in the leg, patched up by the medical staff and sent immediately back into the fight where he remained until reaching the beach for evacuation.

He stayed in the Marines and fought as a grunt in Vietnam. Sometime during all of this he was promoted to staff sergeant. When he finally retired, he became a deputy sheriff for five years.

He currently lives by himself in a rural area, chops his own firewood and gets around just fine (he no longer drives however). He's 95 years old!!!

Sometime ago some a dirt bag broke into his home and stole the Purple Heart medal that he had received in Korea ... but for

whatever reason the thief left his other awards. Dick was really pissed about losing his Purple Heart and he still becomes emotional whenever conversation drifts in that direction.

So, Jim and I decided to rectify that situation and replace his Purple Heart. It took me a couple months to find one but I wasn't able to get it in time for a Christmas gift.

After the award arrived to my home, Rosalyn (my wife) wrapped it beautifully and then Jim and I took Dick to lunch this past Monday (February 19th) and presented our gift.

I learned something in addition that day: Be careful giving a combat Marine a beautifully wrapped gift because he immediately whipped out his knife and started dismantling the package. I had to take it away before he damaged the display box underneath the wrapping. Dick became emotional and started to cry he was so moved by our kindness. He's quite a guy.

Tom Kelly's Buddies

(L to R) Herb Steigleman, Jimmie Patrick and Carl Ludeke.



We think that this may have been the 2005 VTA reunion in Philadelphia or the 2007 in Las Vegas.

Rick with an Iwo Jima Marine Tanker

Rick Lewis with Cpl. Leighton Willhite lunch at MCRD for the Iwo survivors. ■



Editor's Note: It would truly be outstanding if our membership felt compelled to write their own opinion of what they learned from their experience while serving in the United States Marine Corps in Vietnam instead of us having to use a "commercial" story.

VIETNAM—The War of Leaks

BY JAMES G HERSHBERG, VIETNAM '67
The NY Times—OCT. 27, 2017

Leaks have been in the news a lot lately, but unauthorized disclosures of secret information have long been a staple of Washington politics and journalism — including during the Vietnam War. Of course, there's the granddaddy of all leaks: Daniel Ellsberg's release of most of the immense Pentagon Papers study of American decision-making in Vietnam to Neil Sheehan of The New York Times, which after months of clandestine preparations began publishing excerpts in June 1971, followed by other newspapers after the Nixon Administration tried to suppress the revelation.

But there were other, less memorable but still important leak episodes. Largely forgotten today, the "Marigold Affair," involving diplomats on both sides of the Iron Curtain, stands out as much for its cloak-and-dagger Cold War intrigue as it does for its significance — for in it lies an object lesson in why a negotiated peace was so hard to achieve in Vietnam. Long concealed, this subterranean struggle has more fully emerged thanks to the release of reporters' notes and opening of non-American, especially long-shut Communist, archives.

In 1966, the United States and North Vietnam had established secret contacts aimed at opening direct contacts. The effort, code-named "Marigold," involved covert contacts in Saigon between the American ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, and a Communist Polish diplomat, Janusz Lewandowski, who could shuttle to Hanoi and back (via neutral Cambodia and Laos) to relay messages. Their

clandestine meetings, hosted by Italy's ambassador, Giovanni D'Orlandi, climaxed in early December with a seeming breakthrough: Hanoi's consent to an unprecedented encounter between American and North Vietnamese ambassadors in Warsaw to confirm a 10-point American platform that could serve as a basis for ongoing discussions.

Yet the meeting never happened. In December, the United States conducted an intense bombing campaign against Hanoi, leading the North Vietnamese to cut off contact. (The bombing was memorably recounted by Harrison E. Salisbury, who visited the city soon after to witness the destruction of civilian neighborhoods.) The Poles, having warned the Americans that the strikes would doom the chance for peace, were furious.

Concerned that Washington might peddle its own, self-serving version of events, the Poles launched a pre-emptive strike in what quickly became a "war of leaks." Violating a mutual-secrecy pledge, the Polish foreign minister, Adam Rapacki, directed his diplomats in Rome and New York to reveal the peace effort and share Poland's view on why it fizzled to Pope Paul VI and the secretary general of the United Nations, U Thant, who in turn radiated secondary leaks, including to the Canadian and French ambassadors to the United Nations.

After Secretary of State Dean Rusk learned from the Canadians, on New Year's Day 1967, that a "disturbing" Polish-inspired account of Marigold was circulating, President Lyndon B.

Johnson authorized a round of quiet counter leaks to the pope, Thant, the Canadians and the British. Word of the failed peace bid spread to chancelleries around the globe — and, inevitably, also seeped out to reporters.

Robert H. Estabrook, the Washington Post's United Nations correspondent, broke the story in early February, making banner front-page headlines. The insinuation that Washington had squandered an authentic peace chance infuriated American officials; the United Nations ambassador Arthur Goldberg fingered the "tendentious" Poles for the leak. (Decades later, Estabrook revealed that his source was actually a Danish diplomat, supplemented, his notes show, by Thant and Canadian and Yugoslav sources.)

In response, the Johnson administration, led by Rusk and the national security adviser, Walt Rostow, plotted to leak a more sympathetic story, and found an ideal conduit: John M. Hightower, the veteran national security specialist at The Associated Press. Hightower even received guidance from administration officials, notably Rusk himself, in meetings and phone calls to "tidy up" his draft: "Sec. told H. to write the story that takes into account some of the things Sec. has said privately and then Sec. will go over certain points with H."

Hightower's article, reflecting the American view that the Communists, not Washington, had destroyed any peace prospects, was featured by The New York Times (which never published its own inquiry) atop its front page on May 9; it quoted unnamed

"high officials" as being "skeptical that Warsaw ever had a firm commitment or Hanoi a serious intention to open secret talks." A State Department spokesman quickly endorsed the story's accuracy.

In other words, the first account of the Polish peace affair, with an anti-administration spin, appeared in The Washington Post, whose editorial page strongly supported the war (and basically told readers to ignore the scoop on the front page), while The New York Times, editorially a trenchant antiwar critic, trumpeted a report with a strong pro-Administration tilt, shaped backstage by Rusk.

The administration's victory proved pyrrhic, however. The exculpatory A.P. article aroused the suspicions of the Los Angeles Times Washington bureau chief, David Kraslow, whose paper remained staunchly Republican but was keen to enhance its journalistic stature. Sensing an important tale behind the classified veil, Kraslow and the bureau's White House reporter, Stuart H. Loory, took a leave from their usual duties to chase a blockbuster exposé.

Over the summer they made scant progress quizzing reticent officials, yet were tantalized by a conversation with one figure they would describe only as a "close associate of the President" but whom notes identify as Bill Moyers, code-named "Source M."

Johnson's former press secretary, who had left the White House just as the secret peace gambit withered, said the reporters would "never get the inside story" of "Marigold" — the first time they heard the still-secret code-name — because none of the 10 or so officials who knew the truth would talk to them.

Why not? "Because it makes our government look so bad," Mr. Moyers said.

The reporters sensed progress in October, when, on a tip from Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who had soured on the war — Kraslow visited Cambridge, Mass., to interview Henry A.

Kissinger. The Harvard historian, a State Department consultant, was rumored (correctly) to be involved in a secret scheme to communicate with Hanoi via "French channels," but he deftly deflected the reporter's grilling. Exasperated, Kraslow threw a Hail Mary.

"We were chatting and chatting, and he was being very coy and very tight-lipped," Kraslow remembered. "I said, 'Henry, what do you know about Marigold?' He turned beet-red and said, 'How do you know about Marigold?' And that told me everything I needed to know."

Convinced they had a story, even a book, the reporters intensified their interviewing. They found sources — some of whom sent memos to higher-ups insisting they had intoned only the official line — who, notes indicate, actually spoke more candidly, admitting that failures to coordinate military and diplomatic tracks may have derailed multiple peace overtures.

Some top officials reacted angrily. McNamara told the reporters that anyone who spoke to them about "the most delicate subject confronting the United States government today," other than the president or secretary of state (both refused interview requests), "should have his head cut off." Rostow yelled that The Los Angeles Times' probe was "as bad as giving away war secrets." After Kraslow and Loory had fanned out to Western and Communist Eastern Europe to interview sources, the national security adviser scoffed: "Everybody and his brother knows what you're doing. You remind me of Laurel and Hardy trying to play sleuths."

At a late November meeting at the White House, Johnson and his aides plotted to undermine the duo. The president suggested that Rusk's top Vietnam aide, William P. Bundy, disclose titillating tidbits on a Sunday TV talk show, while McNamara, afraid "the Canadians, the Italians and the Poles have 'spilled their guts'" to them, proposed to "torpedo" their impend-

ing reports by leaking a more favorable version, including the "Marigold" code name, to a friendly reporter, The Washington Post's Chalmers M. Roberts.

But again, the administration leak boomeranged. Warsaw's ambassador in Washington, who had already spread a Polish version of Marigold, correctly inferred that Roberts's article was intended "to take away the wind from the sails of the California journalists" and urged retaliation. In this situation, he cabled Rapacki, "We especially need to leak out information to them." From Lewandowski in Warsaw, and D'Orlandi in Rome, Loory confirmed that both Communist Poland and the NATO member Italy had urged Washington against the Hanoi attacks that had spoiled the initiative.

In early 1968, as Kraslow and Loory wrapped up their interviews and began writing, the administration made one last thrust to steal their thunder: Bundy fed inside dope to enliven a Life magazine cover story ("Behind the Peace Feelers"), trotting out a ringer — a Hungarian diplomat who had defected the previous May but remained reclusive ever since — to back the argument that East European Vietnam diplomacy was fraudulent.

By the time the reporters published their findings, in the spring — first in a Los Angeles Times series, then a book, "The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam" — Johnson had already dropped out of the presidential race. Historians still dispute whether Johnson missed any real opportunities for peace. But the drip-drip-drip of leaks that he had done so, both foreign and domestic, had already widened his "credibility gap," generating charges that his peace efforts were insincere, incompetent, or both, and leaving him vulnerable to an insurgency from within his own party.

James G. Hershberg is a professor of history and international affairs at the George Washington University and the author of "Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam."

JUST A REMINDER: For many years, a retired US Army officer who lived for a very long time in the Philippine Islands produced a twice monthly emailed newsletter that recapped "All-things-Veterans Administration" which also included many other concerns for veterans. Unfortunately, the good man passed away about a year ago and his publication has ceased being published. As a result, our source for our own magazine's VA NEWS has dried up. We will try to search for another source but unfortunately, we may be seeing an end of that informative and useful section of our quarterly magazine.

Emergency Medical Care Coverage

What to know if you get care outside of VA

If you're experiencing a medical emergency, you shouldn't hesitate to get emergency care. Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room quickly. A medical emergency is an injury, illness, or symptom so severe that without immediate treatment, you believe your life or health is in danger. Some Veterans live far away from a VA emergency room and need to get care quickly. If you go to a non-VA emergency department for care, VA may still offer coverage. Notifying VA is necessary for getting coverage and sharing important medical updates. We have the information you need to make it happen.

Notify VA as soon as possible

During a medical or mental health emergency, we encourage you to seek immediate medical attention right away. You don't need to check with VA before calling 911 or going to an emergency department. But it's important that the facility treating you notifies VA within 72 hours. Promptly notifying VA allows them to coordinate care or transfer to a VA medical facility, if necessary. It helps VA check if the requirements for them to pay for the care are met and may impact a Veteran's eligibility for coverage. Payment by VA is limited to the time of stabilization, except when:

- VA is contacted upon stabilization but can't accept the transfer of the Veteran, and
- The community care facility made and documented reasonable attempts to transfer the Veteran to a VA or other facility.

How to notify VA

It's best to ask your emergency care provider to report the treatment to VA's Centralized Emergency Care Reporting Center as soon as possible. If you're able, tell your care provider that you're a Veteran. It's a good idea to remind caregivers and other family who might be with you in an emergency that they should tell a care provider your Veteran status. Your emergency care provider should report the treatment using the VA Emergency Care Reporting portal or by calling 844.724.7842.

Be prepared

If you live in an area where you may need to seek health care outside of VA, prepare before you go. Locate your closest emergency department so that you don't have to worry about that during an emergency. You can also plan by locating your nearest urgent care facility. Urgent care is different from emergency care. Urgent care services are for less than life-threatening illnesses or injuries, like strep throat or pink eye. Save yourself time later by keeping a handy list of the urgent care clinics closest to you. Find out in advance which ones are in-network with VA.

Remember: If you're seeking emergency services, you don't need to check with VA before calling 911 or going to an emergency room. Getting care when you need it is the priority.

My HealtheVet Emergency Information

Be sure to keep your emergency contact information up to date in My HealtheVet. Log a name, contact method, and phone number for people who should be contacted in case of emergency. This tool is for your records only—your VA health care team won't see it unless you share it with them.

A Little-Known Benefit for Aging Veterans

By Susan Sleiger

As veterans age, many are unfamiliar with a benefit that can help pay for care at home or in assisted living or a nursing home. Here's a riddle: When is a government benefit that pays for caregivers, assisted living and a nursing home not a benefit? When hardly any people know they're entitled to it.

That seems to be the story with a Department of Veterans Affairs benefit called the Aid and Attendance and Housebound Improved Pension benefit, known as A&A, which can cover the costs of caregivers in the home (including sons and daughters who are paid to be caregivers, though not spouses) or be used for assisted living or a nursing home. The benefit is not insignificant: up to \$2,019 monthly for a veteran and spouse, and up to \$1,094 for the widow of a veteran. Surprised that you've never heard of it? You're not alone.

"It's probably one of the lesser-known benefits," said Randal Noller, a Veterans Affairs spokesman in Washington. Of the 1.7 million World War II veterans alive

as of 2011, who were in need of caregiving assistance and thus eligible, only 38,076 veterans and 38,685 surviving spouses were granted the A&A benefit that year, according to Mr. Noller.

Mr. Noller is not the first to acknowledge A&A is a well-kept secret. Jim Nicholson, former secretary of Veterans Affairs, said in a December 2006 news release that "not everyone is aware of his or her potential eligibility" for the program, which he called an "underused" benefit. Not much has changed. A search of the Veterans Affairs Web site for evidence of public information efforts in the six years since came up blank.

"The sad thing is, it's been an entitlement for 61 years, but it's sat idle — the V.A. employees just haven't been educated about it," said Debbie Burak of Midlothian, Va. She said she repeatedly called department offices on behalf of her father, a World War II veteran, and her mother, who became homeless after their house caught fire and their injuries required extensive care. She was told there were no benefits they were entitled to. (Indeed, when I called two Baltimore-area Veterans Affairs offices for my father, a World War II veteran, no one had heard of this benefit or any benefit that paid for caregivers or assisted living or nursing homes.)

"My parents' end of life was so difficult. They lost everything, were living in a terrible hotel, ran up every credit card we had," Ms. Burak said. "My mother begged us not to cremate her, but there was no money for a burial; we had no choice."

It was only after her father died that Ms. Burak discovered her parents would have been entitled to as much as \$160,000 over the last decade through the Aid and Attendance benefit. She applied, but no money arrived before her mother died. Mr. Noller said the program's low visibility might be an effect of the size of the department. "The V.A. is the second-largest agency in the federal government, and you can't expect everybody to know everything," he said, referring to the agency's work force. To bridge the information gap, Ms. Burak introduced VeteranAid.org, a Web site and a 501(c)(3) charity, in 2005, to provide information about A&A eligibility and how to apply.

To qualify, a veteran need not have suffered a service-related injury. He or she only had to have clocked at least one day of his or her 90-day minimum military service during a time of war and need caregiving for activities of daily living. Applying can be confusing and arduous. If you know the program's name and search the Veterans Affairs Web site for Aid and Attendance, the first page states, among other things, that you are not eligible for A&A unless you already qualify for a basic Veterans Affairs pension — for which you have to be "totally disabled." That's more than a little misleading.

Changes in the Aging Brain: Dementia Basics

Learn the common symptoms

As we age, our bodies and brains are always changing.

Over time, we may experience changes in our hearing or vision. We may also have difficulty remembering and thinking clearly. Many of us have heard of Alzheimer's, but there are actually 4 main types of dementia. Understanding dementia and your brain may help you identify common symptoms that you can discuss with your health care team.

Dementia basics

Dementia is a group of brain conditions that makes it harder to remember, reason, or communicate. At one time, dementia was accepted as a normal part of aging. But it's actually caused by ongoing damage to cells in the brain.

Symptoms differ depending on which parts of the brain are affected, and the stage of the disease. The most common symptoms include:

- Memory loss, including trouble with directions and familiar tasks
- Having language problems, such as trouble getting words out or understanding what is said
- Finding it difficult to plan, organize or exercise judgement
- Experiencing changes in behavior and personality

Types of dementia

Dementia has many types. In some cases, the main causes can be treated. In other cases, dementia is part of how the disease progresses. Some of the most common types of dementia are:

- Alzheimer's disease: This is a series of changes to the brain's nerve cells that happens most commonly in older adults. It's the most common cause of dementia in older adults.
- Vascular Dementia: A stroke or series of strokes can cause brain damage that leads to dementia.
- Lewy Body Dementia: Abnormal proteins called Lewy bodies can build up in the brain and cause damage.
- Frontotemporal Degeneration: This type of dementia happens when there is damage to the frontal and temporal lobes.

Keep in mind that there are sometimes other causes. Low levels of vitamins B1 or B12, thyroid problems, and problems with blood sugar, calcium, or sodium levels in the body can cause symptoms of dementia. Many of these causes can be treated, and the symptoms of dementia can get better.

Talk to your doctor

It's common to forget or lose things sometimes, but if you're finding that your memory loss is getting in the way of your everyday life, you should discuss that with your health care team. Consider writing down problems when they happen and using Secure Messaging to describe any signs of dementia to your doctor. Your provider may run exams and tests to determine if changes in your memory and thinking are due to a type of dementia, normal aging, or another problem. ■

"Belmo" Writes About His Tanker Grandson

BY MIKE BELMESSIERI

My grandson "TJ" is presently with the US Army 1st Cavalry Division and as some of you know, he was a US Marine tank crewman for several years. After the Commandant got rid of tanks, he was assigned as a weapons instructor at the OCS schoolhouse at Quantico. He greatly missed tanks so he, like a few other Marine tankers who he knows, did an inter-service transfer to the Army. He was amazed at the difference between the USMC tanks and the Army tanks. As I recall one of the things that he said was that the fire control system was far better in an Army tank.

Since his move, he has been doing pretty well. He was one of the few in his battalion to earn his spurs. I asked him if it had anything to do with being a Marine, especially given that all of the soldiers in his unit and most in the battalion knew he is a Marine. His reply was, "I could not make Marines look bad...and I could still hear my DI yelling in my ear!" He was also selected by the battalion CO to be

the gunner on the colonel's tank. I also understand that he will soon be picking up E-6. This coming May he and his command is being deployed to Poland.

I have been advised that the best tank that the Russians have in the theater is the

T-90 plus intel reports indicate that the T-24 has been there but at best only in the indirect fire support role.

My grandson tells me that in the hands of a good crew, the T-90 is a threat to our M-1A2 and A3. And that the T-90 has a 125 mm main gun and that has greater range than our 120 mm main gun. However, a Ukrainian crew that had recently been transferred from the infantry to the Bradley and had just returned from training on a Bradley killed a T-90 so it looks like once again training pays off. As for the Russian T-14, Armata tank, it sounds like it is still in the development stage.

Bob Hope in Vietnam

BY DENNIS GROSE-USMC VIETNAM CAS PILOT

Bob Hope was a legend. But my personal experience with him was less than legendary. He came to Chu Lai in 1969 and performed at the U.S. Army's Americal Division theater next to the USMC Chu Lai Air Base. I was a 1/Lt flying in VMA 223. I had been in-country for 11 months and was a bit salty and short with less than a month before going home.



That day, I was sent over to the Army base to be the Marine liaison to support anything the Bob Hope Show needed to know or do regarding the Marine Corps. I told my boss, "Thanks a fucking lot." He laughed and told me to get my ass over there. I arrived and almost immediately, there Bob Hope was in the flesh. One of his many assistants met me and walked me across the room to meet the legend. He introduced me to him and Bob looked at me and said, "I don't need any bull shit from you."

I didn't say a thing, except "I have no bull shit to give you, sir." He walked away and that was that. I got to watch his show near the front of the audience, first several rows very near the cameras. I sat with a couple of the other flun-

kies among the wounded, some seriously with attendants. I got to hear him rant at all his entertainers and get pissed at just about everything. The M.A.S.H. unit was located directly behind the stage. Actual medivac chopper flights were arriving and that upset him. The weather was overcast and it rained off and on ... and then just on. That pissed him off no end and towards the end of his show when the rain intensity increased, I heard him give orders to cut the show short and say "Let's get the fuck out of here."

During the show he simply read his cue cards and was playing to the cameras. The troops loved him. His #1 objective was to create show film that was to be played back in the states. His entertainers were great—Connie Stevens, Lola Falana, Gold Digger Girls, Martha Ray, Les Brown and his orchestra, and Bob. The best part was when the cameras panned the audience, my wife back in the States saw me sitting in among the wounded when the show played back home. We stood out in our utilities among all the sea of blue pj's. Everyone loved Bob Hope but like everything in life, there are two sides. "Rest in Peace Bob Hope, God's Speed."

Vietnam Tanker's Version of "Hallelujah"

LYRICS BY VTA MEMBER TERRY WALLACE

MUSIC BY LEONARD COHEN

You packed your bags and shut the door You crossed the sea to fight a war You didn't know just what would happen to ya. Got off the plane in the steamy heat Hitched a ride in a beat-up Jeep. And in your mind, you whispered Hallelujah... Hallelujah...

Through the sweat and dust and shanty towns You could hear the sounds of distant rounds

And you knew this place was soon about to screw ya

You reported to your duty place. The scowling Sergeant in your face Said get your gear son it's been good to know ya. Hallelujah...

Your tanks were looking pretty beat in the dusty park and sweaty heat There were shirtless guys and parts Strewn all around ya. With groans and roars they sprang to life You rode the dragons to the fight

The fumes, the noise and ringing ears won't lose ya

The stink, the bugs, the grizzly sights. The rain for forty days and nights. The bodies of some friends Who hardly knew ya. And when you thought you're doing fine. You'd take a round or hit a mine Your memories of the bloodshed never leave ya. Hallelujah...

Your tour was through no victory won. The world you knew had come undone They blamed you for your duty and they booed ya You blended in the best you could. Tried to forget but you never would Respect you earned was never coming to ya. Hallelujah.

The years flew by things fell in place Your country put some men in space. Your choices either made or were made for ya. But part of you never left that place

Your dreams and nightmares can't erase what's written in the memories that still move ya. Hallelujah

More Stories from Jim Cowman

HUNKS OF SUGAR CANE

Returning to RVN in early 1971 as Liaison officer (LNO) GF, MCDEC to CG III MAF, I rated a telephone utility repair truck provided by the US Navy. This truck was primarily used for hauling ammunition for firing demos provided to the five USMC units then remaining "in-country." As LNO for MCDEC monitoring the many MCDEC "projects" being evaluated in Vietnam, was my mission. These projects included all matter of items from dog food to flak jackets. The firing demos involved the XM174 grenade launcher and a "stoner" weapons system I had "liberated" from the 1st Marines (which is another story). The telephone utility truck was a real gem, but we managed to keep it running, by "we", I mean myself and the SSgt assigned to MCDEC. Having been warned by the major who I relieved, we had created and practiced quick exit drills which included driving with the doors ajar so we could get the hell out of the truck in a hurry, even to the point of executing a forward roll coming up with a pistol in hand. As a side note, later the major was OIC in Beirut when the barracks bombing occurred.

Returning from a firing demo usually meant driving through several well populated areas, and in some of these areas Marines were not among those considered as "well liked." Driving through one such area, something flew through the open window on the passenger side and hit me in the chest! Thinking that it was a grenade, I immediately panicked. All "quick exit" drills were forgotten! I applied the brakes with enthusiasm, fumbled for the thrown ob-

ject, and in general made a fool of myself. Hit is been a grenade; all would have been lost. It was actually a hunk of sugar cane some Marine-loving kid had thrown into the truck.

MINE PUTTER INNER

When a grunt company of 2/5 was maneuver company, one of their assigned missions might include security of the road which ran from An Hoa to Liberty Bridge. The enemy also liked this section of the road and seemed to delight in placing big mines in it to hinder the rough rider convoys. Hotel Company was assigned the mission many times. The following incident occurred in late July of 1966.

About midnight or so, ambushes, listening posts and patrols started to report all sorts of movement and activity in the area. Lots of rounds were fired and something was going on. We went on 100% alert. Several probes at the road were turned back. It was an exciting evening.

Just when things seemed to be quieting down, a tremendous explosion shook the area. Initial reports indicated none of our Marines were involved or hurt. We decided to wait until it was just turning light in investigate.

A huge hole had been blown in the road. A search of the area turned up a piece of ribcage that the corpsman determined to have belonged to the enemy. Apparently, the head "mine putter inner," who had no doubt been trained up north and had ventured all the way down the Ho Chi Minh trail, had screwed up when putting in the mine or booby trap. Marine EOD personnel later determined that the explosion had indeed been an American bomb of some sort.

It was some weeks before another trained head "mine putter inner" was assigned to our area to implant the big stuff. Normal booby traps remained as constant as before.

The Marines of Hotel Company chuckled over this event. Most of us could just picture some be-speckled buck-toothed enemy, squatting in the dark over a huge American bomb wondering which wire went where. He obviously connected the wrong wires.

THE CATTLE KILLING CAPER

In June of 1967, orders took me from 1st Tank BN to the 5th Marines in An Hoa. Flying by helicopter (UH-34) to Hotel Company's position on about 3 or 4 June was quite an experience and that flight is the subject of another sea story.

About the 10th or 11th of June, Hotel Company was to return to An Hoa, completing their part of Operation Union II. And Op. Union secured about that time as well. The 5th Marines received a PUC award for both Union I and II. Operation Arizona was to start soon.

Before returning to An Hoa, the forty-odd head of cattle that had been discovered by Hotel Company posed a minor problem. What was to be done with them? Several plans were formulated, attempted and discarded. All Hotel Marines with ranching experience were gathered. They felt sure that they could "round up" and "drive" the cattle to friendly areas. Not so. The oriental cattle would not cooperate.

Battalion next formulated a plan to sedate the cattle and fly them in choppers. The helicopter people not only said, "No!" but, "Hell no!" It seems that this had been tried before and the sedate cows had become un-sedated too soon and commenced to kick the hell out of the chopper. They wanted no more of that and I am sure they had better things to do. Then the plan to send out amtracks to pick up the cattle was a brilliant concept that died as rapidly as it was conceived.

Hotel Company was leaving, so the word came down to kill the cattle! Most of the cattle were where they were found, in a free fire zone, and most were tethered in place in the valley below Hotel Company's position.

A gun team set up its M-60 and commenced to eliminate the cattle. As I recall, M-79's and LAWs expended a few rounds into the cattle area. Then came the crowning blow. A forward air controller was in the area, he circled the cattle in his military version of a Piper Cub and fired at them with what I thought was a grease gun out the window of the aircraft. More was coming! An F-4 Phantom jet appeared on the scene and had several unexpended "snake eye" bombs on board. They were dropped on the cattle! I'm not sure what the size of the snake eyes were but they put an end to most of the movement in the cattle area.

When Hotel Company walked out of there the next day, our route took us near the cattle. Some were still alive! And they were dispatched with .45's and M-14's.

JUNE '67 SNIPER

On this same operation, a Marine sniper attached to Hotel Company observed a "bad guy" who showed up daily in a rice paddy area quite a distance from our boulder infested secured HQ area. We took turns observing the bad guy through a range scope carried by Capt. Layer. This went on for several days, the bad guy would show up on time, lean his weapon against a tree, remove his shirt and pith helmet and poke around the paddy. After a few days of this, the decision was made to have the Marine sniper take out the bad guy, which he did. The body laid there for a day or so, when some locals showed up and attempted to move the body with grappling hooks of some sort. We had the position zeroed in with artillery and took it under fire. When the first round impacted, the locals tried to run but there was no place to hide. Later the patrol returned with the weapon, other items and we got credit for 3 KIAs. We recovered 3 carbines and ammo.

Leatherneck's World-Famous SOS Recipe:

1 1/2 pounds extra lean hamburger or ground chuck
2 tbsp. oleo or butter
1 cup chopped onion
3 tbsp. flour
2 tsp. granulated garlic
2 tbsp. soy sauce (or less, to taste)
1 tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
2 cups milk

salt and pepper to taste
sliced bread

Brown the meat, then drain. Add oleo. Stir in the onions and cook until you can see through them. Add flour, stir and cook two to three minutes. Add garlic, soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce and mix thoroughly. Add milk and stir until it thickens. Serve over bread.

Camp Lejeune's SOS Recipe for Manly Men

1 lb. lean hamburger
3 tsp. beef stock powder
3 tbsp. plain flour
1/4 tsp. salt
1/4 tsp. black pepper

1/2 tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
1 pint whole milk
Brown hamburger. Add beef stock powder, flour, salt, pepper, and then cook. Add Worcestershire sauce. Add milk and stir over low heat until thickened. Serve on burnt toast.

Army Unveils the M10 Booker, its First New Combat Vehicle in Two Decades

BY COREY DICKENSTINE-STARS AND STRIPES • JUNE 10, 2023

Submitted by Lee Dill

The Army's first new major combat vehicle in two decades will be known as the M10 Booker Combat Vehicle, honoring fallen soldiers killed in the Iraq War and World War II, service officials said. Top Army leaders on Saturday afternoon during an Army birthday celebration at Fort Belvoir, Va., were set to unveil the official name for the vehicle — a light tank-like assault weapon — that had been previously known as the Mobile Protected Firepower Ground Combat Vehicle.

Doug Bush, the Army's assistant secretary for acquisition, logistics and technology, said their differing jobs highlighted what the M10 is meant to do — bring new firepower and frontal-assault capabilities to light infantry formations. The armored vehicles will be operated by tankers but fight alongside and ahead of light infantry forces.

The first M10 Bookers are expected to arrive to the Army in November, said Maj. Gen. Glenn Dean, the Army's program executive officer in charge of ground combat systems. The Army expects to stand up its first M10 battalion to conduct initial operations testing in late 2024 or early 2025, Dean said. He declined to say where the first M10 battalion would be located.

The M10 Booker Combat Vehicle, a new light tank-like assault weapon, pictured in this undated photo, was officially unveiled by the Army on Saturday, June 10, 2023.

Eventually, the Army intends to build M10 battalions into its light infantry brigade combat teams, including its airborne units. While the vehicle cannot be air dropped, it can be transported by air — two can fit inside a C-17 transport jet, Dean said. Though the M10 looks much like an M1 Abrams main battle tank, the Army has decided against classifying it as a tank. Dean would not say precisely why that decision was made, noting it was a doctrinal decision and not the responsibility of his unit, which is focused on development and acquisition.

He joked the Booker "sort of looks like, smells like, feels like" a tank. In fact, the weapon, built by General Dynamics, shares many aspects of the Abrams. It will be manned by four tankers in a cockpit nearly identical to an Abrams and sports a heavy, 105mm direct fire cannon, like older models of Abrams. But the Booker is much lighter than the newest versions of the Abrams tanks, which have 120mm main guns. The Army's M1A2 SEPv3 Abrams tank weighs nearly 74 tons and the M10 will weigh about 42 tons, the service said. The M10 also will be significantly less expensive. The latest Abrams costs about \$24 million per tank, but the Bookers are expected to cost about \$12.9 million per vehicle, which includes spare parts and the costs to field and train for the new weapons, Dean said. The program, which began in 2015, has thus far been on time and on budget, he said.

Marine Corps' longest-held Vietnam War POW, Harlan Chapman, dies at 89

BY CLAIRE BARRETT MAY 9, 2024—MARINE CORPS TIMES

By the summer of 1965, just months after the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade landed at Da Nang, the intensity of the Vietnam War was surging. Ramping up, too, were the rules of engagement. President Lyndon B. Johnson was reportedly quoted as saying American pilots could not bomb an outhouse without his approval. Frustrated pilots found themselves "flying into heavily defended areas on predictable flight paths that exposed them to great risk while yielding often

token results," Stuart I. Rochester wrote in "The Battle Behind Bars."

It was in this environment that then-Capt. Harlan Page Chapman and his fellow Marines of Fighter Squadron 212 found themselves during the opening months of the war. More than 30 American aviators had already been killed or presumed missing in action, while more than a dozen were captured. After six frustrating and challenging months, Chapman was soon to discover that Johnson's outhouse quip was, in reality, all too real. >>



Born in 1934 in Elyria, Ohio, Chapman commissioned as a 2nd Lt. in the U.S. Marine Corps through the Navy ROTC program at Miami University in June 1956, serving for over a decade before he'd find himself peering down into North Vietnam's dense jungles from the cockpit of his Vought F8 Crusader.

During a mission on Nov 5, 1965, Chapman's strike group was tasked with pounding a heavily defended railroad and highway bridge deep within enemy territory of Hai Duong. Hitting the target required a perilous high-speed, low-level approach, according to Chapman's Distinguished Flying Cross citation.

"As pilot of the last aircraft of a major strike group of 32 strike aircraft on target, he bravely and skillfully maneuvered his aircraft, in spite of the intense and lethal anti-aircraft fire, dived on the target, and delivered his bombs on the bridge," his citation reads.

Strafed by anti-aircraft fire, Chapman was forced to eject, dislocating his shoulder in the process. With that, Chapman became the first Marine aviator shot down in North Vietnam.

"There was Vietnamese all around me," Chapman later recalled in a 2015 interview with *The Chronicle*. "I was conscious after a very soft landing, and I'm over my knees in mud — I wasn't going anywhere. The local militia got me and paraded me around, and I ended up in the [Heartbreak section of] Hanoi Hilton that night."

With his legs shackled and arms tied tightly behind his back, Chapman began to endure the first of many interrogations. "[They] Pulled out a gun," he told *The Stockdale Center*. "Threatened to shoot me ... and after a while the pain got so bad that I knew I had to do something ... so I gave them names like Clark Kent ... just all sorts of false names.

"That went on for too long. I felt like hell that I didn't stick to name, rank, and service number. You felt like you've really failed, you know if I was tough enough..." Chapman was then placed adjacent to several other aviators in a cell block, where communication between prisoners was strictly forbidden. Men were thrown into solitary, locked in irons, strung up by ropes and beaten when they were caught trying to communicate, according to historian Geoffrey Norman.

Still, it was worth the risk for many. Using a method known as the "tap code," prisoners were able to communicate and establish an organization.

"They're in the same deep shit you're in," he told *The Stockdale Center*, recalling the budding camaraderie within the

cell blocks. Still, he conceded, he had never felt more alone.

The Marine would endure over seven years in the infamous prisoner of war camp, spending 2,657 days in captivity before becoming the first Marine Corps POW of the Vietnam War to be released during Operation Homecoming on Feb. 12, 1973.

"It would be difficult, if not impossible, to relate the treatment of over seven years of captivity in the space allotted," Chapman recalled to the *Columbus Federal Voice*. "However, I can sum up my opinion of the treatment by saying it was basically cruel. While in captivity, I was tortured many times, using ropes, cuffs, isolation and beatings."

Despite his suffering, Chapman harbored no animosity toward the Vietnamese people, his wife, Frances "Fran" Chapman said.

"He was not a public prisoner of war," she told *The Chronicle*. "Harlan was very quiet about it. He thought it was much more important that people know who he is now and his character... He didn't tout being a prisoner. He was very private about it," Darold Hessel, Chapman's stepson and a military veteran, told *Military Times*. "Except maybe when we're young, he nagged us and said, 'You know, at least in prison we had toothbrushes. Make sure you brush your teeth every day.'

"He came into the family when I was nine and he seemed like a superhero. He just was physically fit and morally strong and just so impressive to be around. ... He's an American hero."

Despite leading a quiet life removed from the public eye, Chapman's story may have caught the eye of the wardrobe department from the 2021 blockbuster "Top Gun: Maverick." According to the U.S. Naval Institute, the vintage G-1 leather flight jacket Tom Cruise's character wore to perfection in the 1986 "Top Gun" had been altered for the sequel.

"The jacket supposedly belonged to Maverick's father, who flew Vietnam-era F-4 fighters," but eagle-eyed viewers noted that the USS *Oriskany* and 3rd Marine Air Wing patches on the front of Maverick's jacket may have been an homage Chapman, who was shot down the same day Maverick's fictional father was said to have been downed. Upon his release, Chapman took command of Marine Fighter/Attack Squadron 314 in El Toro, California, where he served from July 1974 until his retirement two years later. Chapman was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and early-stage dementia in 2017. He died on Monday, May 6, 2024, his family confirmed with *Military Times*. Lt. Col. Harlan Page Chapman was 89 years old.

Merry Christmas

BY TOM FENERTY

USMC VTA tanker Joe Harrigan led me to join *The Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH)* a couple years ago. In addition to monthly meetings, we meet for an occa-

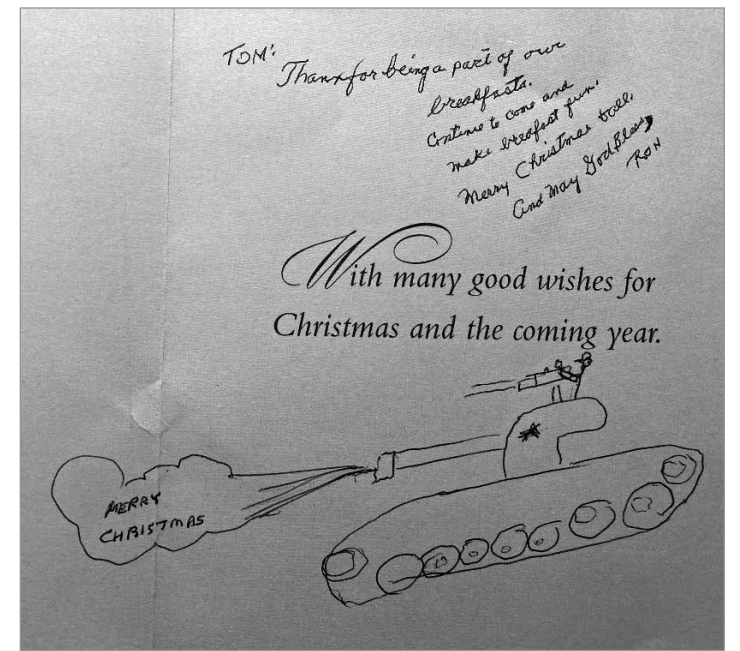
sional brunch. It was at a brunch where I met U.S. Army tanker, 93-year young, Ron Vellner. At least one of us was a Marine and one of us was a tanker.

I received a Christmas card this past March from my new veteran friend, Ron Vellner. He drew a tank with an exploding "Merry Christmas" and hand delivered the card. Why March? I will never know.

Knowing Ron's tanker status, I began giving him a few copies of the *Sponson Box* magazine for his reading pleasure. And a friendship was formed.

Ron served in the Korean war. After graduating Temple College, Ron enlisted in the US Army on Sept. 11, 1952. Once training was completed Ron was assigned to tanks and before long was shipbound to Korea. The Thebaic mountain range, which overlooked North Korea, soon became home for Ron and the other 4 men who manned their M-47 tank. His M47 tank had 30 & 50 caliber machine-guns along with a 90 mm cannon.

Ron was wounded on July 11, 1953 by incoming enemy mortar rounds. During the barrage the men were hustling from their bunker to their tank when his right femur was struck by shrapnel. Ron's wounds were serious enough to be sent from the in-country MASH unit to Japan for further medical procedures. After two months on the mend, Corporal Vellner was anxious to return to his tank unit. However, the Army had different plans; with the war winding down (Armistice 7/27/53), Ron was assigned a teaching position in the rear. He taught his NCO 'students' reading



and math until shipping home in 1954. Note that the Korean War Armistice was signed just two weeks after receiving his Purple Heart. Ron came home by ship in 1954 and finished out his tour of duty to the USA.

I am honored to write a few words for those who served in the 'Forgotten War'.

Editor's Note: I was going through some old emails and found this one from May 2022.

We understand that some of the facts may have been a bit "fuzzy" for Jimmy.

Patrick Schroeder writes: This is what I wrote down and figured out who was who from the interview I did with Jimmie.

Interview with Jimmie Ray Dorsett on November 27, 2019

...AND CORRECTED WHILE IN THE VA HOSPITAL IN SALEM, VA, JAN. 19, 2020—RELATING TO THE ACTION THE DAY HE WAS WOUNDED IN VIETNAM.

March 23, 1969. Jimmie Dorsett's tank retriever was following a column of tanks. One tank got stuck in quicksand and several men were pulling material out of the tank when the retriever arrived. One of the tank crew had been left with the tank. After getting the tank pulled out with the retriever they brought it back to Dong Ha, a repair outpost where they spent the night. The next day, March 24, they left the damaged tank and moved out with the retriever to catch up with the tanks. Dorsett rode on top of the retriever while the rest of the crew were inside. The tank column had become engaged attacking enemy positions. Before reaching the tanks, the retriever encountered a boulder in the road and swerved downhill to go around it and hit a mine. The explosion of the mine blew a track off the retriever and deafened Dorsett, but the crew of the retriever were uninjured. The tread flattened out. Dorsett jumped out of the retriever, got an acetylene cutting torch and began working without a mask on getting the remains off the idler wheels.

Members of the crew jumped out of the retriever to help with the idler wheels. After working a few minutes, Dorsett still couldn't hear, but suddenly saw sparks from bullets ricocheting off the retriever. One of the crew "took off" behind him running toward the front of the retriever and fell flat being struck by a bullet. Dorsett said this was the driver [Mike Foster]. Another of the crew [Craig Ammons] ran around the back of the retriever. Dorsett said: "the boy was screaming on the opposite side of the retriever being severely wounded and hiding behind a little pile of dirt." Dorsett went and got him and was bringing him back to his side of the retriever where there was more protection in the form of a larger pile of dirt. This Marine had been shot through the foot. When reaching the back of the retriever, an NVA boy, who Dorsett estimated his age at 12 or 13 years old who could hardly hold up the rifle, rushed the back of the retriever. Dorsett, who was only armed with a hunting knife, dropped to the ground as did Ammons and they start- >>

ed to crawl on their backs under the retriever. Another of the crew [Robert Walkley] was laying severely wounded on the ground across the back of the retriever. Dorsett went to pull him further under the retriever when that crew member was struck in the head by a bullet. The NVA boy sprayed with his AK-47 under the retriever. Dorsett had his left arm up pushing himself further under the retriever when a bullet stuck his arm and it felt useless. According to Dorsett, the Gunny [Harold Riensche] shot this NVA soldier in the head with his .45 pistol. Dorsett also said that the whole time the attack was underway, the Gunny was firing the 60 cal. and throwing grenades to suppress enemy fire and repel the attack. Two tanks came back, including a flame tank [tank with a flame thrower] and sprayed flame in a circle around the disabled retriever. Dorsett said "it stunk to high heaven", with the burning elephant grass and bodies. Dorsett recalled that 14 enemy dead were counted. The Gunny backed the retriever off of Dorsett and Ammons, Dorsett holding Ammons close and tight so his limbs did not get caught in the treads. After they were out from under the front of the retriever. Dorsett assisted to the wounded Am-

mons to a medevac helicopter. The Gunny called to Dorsett and asked "How's your arm?" "Can't move it" replied Dorsett and the Gunny said "Get out of here!" The helicopter pilot was in such a hurry to take off that he lifted off with Dorsett standing on the skid and hanging on with one hand, and was pulled in to the chopper while in the air.

Dorsett said that it also took numerous grenade fragments during the engagement, the metal later turning green under his skin. He also mentioned that he had welded a .50 cal. machine gun to the retriever, in addition to the 60 the Gunny used during the action. When asked about South Vietnamese troops on that day, he said: "We passed them way back."

When going through some of his photos that he apparently had not seen in a while, he said: "That's the Gunny! And got a big smile on his face. He also identified a photo of Lt. Pete Ritch.

Patrick adds: I have learned since the interview with Jimmie from Lt. Pete Ritch that the Master Gunnery Sergeant was Harold Riensche, and two of the crew that died were Mike Foster and Robert Walkley. ■

It's just 60 days until we reunite...



USMC VTA 2024 MINI-REUNION
SEPT 12 – 15, 2024
Fort Benning (Fort Moore), GA
 Hampton Inn, Columbus, GA

Please Print All

Name: _____

Guest's Name (s): _____

Address: _____

Town: _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Cell Phone: _____ Home Phone: _____

E-mail Address: _____

Your USMC VTA membership dues must be current in order to attend the reunion. If your membership is delinquent please mail your dues with this registration (or the dues will be collected at the sign-in desk). No partial payments of the registration fee are accepted. Fee covers planned food functions (banquet), bus transportation & lunch, meeting facilities, hospitality room, beer & sodas and other expenses associated with the cost of hosting the reunion. Registration fee does not include your sleeping room, taxes or air fare.

Please note that this is a mini-reunion for three days. We will not be conducting any special events other than visiting the US Army Armor Collection and the US Army Tank Restoration Project and a catered dinner at the Infantry Museum on the last evenings. All other meals will be on your own.

To cover the bus transportation and Slopchute beverages, please pay: \$25 per person. Mail completed form and your reunion registration check to:

USMC VTA
c/o Ron Knight
6665 Burnt Hickory Drive
Hoschton, GA 30548-8280

Our Little Flag

BY VTA MEMBER JIM NEW

We have a little Stars and Stripes that we put up every day,
 Unless it's raining or storms are on the way.
 Last night as I was folding her some thoughts came through my mind,
 About the hells that she'd survived, the foreign and domestic kind.
 Brave men and women fought and thousands of them died, to keep her flying somewhere,
 And now we stand watch some fools burn her on the square.
 They say that their lives matter, I guess more than yours or mine,
 God must have got confused and made another kind.

Kids go to school today and don't know what they are.
 Is she a boy, is he a girl, how did we get this far,
 I know they can't fold the flag leaving just the stars.
 The mobs that flash in our cities and loot their neighbor's stores,
 Never have and never will fight to defend our shores.
 Encouraged by our leaders to "peacefully" express their views,
 I guess it's all good cause you won't see it on the news.

God Bless America, Semper Fidelis.



It's Just 6 Months Before We Reunite In Georgia!!!

2024 Mini-Reunion – We are going to (again) visit Columbus, Georgia in September 2024.

We have been invited to visit a brand new (and yet not open to the public) Tank Collection at Ft Benning (aka Fort Moore). If you remember, back in 2018, we conducted our first (ever) mini-reunion where we visited the (now closed) USMC Tank School and a very special Tank Restoration Project located at Ft Benning. While we were there, we learned that the Tank Restoration Project was being conducted with the idea that the US Army would eventually open a massive and all-inclusive **Armor Museum**. Many of the tanks have now been fully restored and are housed in a very large building on the Army base.

One very interesting point was the fact that the Tank Restoration Project has at least one of every tank that was ever produced at any time, by any nation in the world. The one and only exception is a tank that was produced by the Nazi during WW-2 which is the super-heavy "Panzer VIII Maus" tank. We understand that only five of those German monster tanks were ever produced and only one survived after the war. That one and only model is now housed in the Russian Tank Museum in Kubinka.

This September when we visit Ft Moore, we will see a very impressive collection of international armored vehicles. Another interesting note is that the M-4 Sherman tank had 19 variants built over the years. The collection will have one of each variant. Below is a photo images of some of the restored tanks.

The mini-reunion hotel will be the Hampton Inn (2870 Lumpkin Road, Columbus, GA 31903) where we stayed in 2018. The dates for our gathering are **September 12 – 15, 2024**. The special hotel room rate is \$139+ tax per night with a free breakfast each morning.

More details on the last pages of this issue...

U.S. Army Armor & Cavalry Collection



VTA Mini Reunion Ft Moore, Columbus, GA Sept. 12th to 15th, 2024

Schedule of Events

Thursday, Sept. 12th	Arrival Day–Dinner on your own.
Friday, Sept. 13th	0700 – Complimentary Breakfast 0900 – Load buses for tour of the Tank Collection 1200 – Lunch on your own at the base PX 1400 – Return to hotel 1800 – Dinner at hotel paid by the VTA
Saturday, Sept 14th	0700 – Complimentary Breakfast 0900 – Load buses for tour of the Tank Restoration Project 1200 – Lunch on your own at the base PX 1400 – Return to hotel 1500 – Tour Infantry Museum on your own. 1800 – Dinner at hotel paid by VTA.
Sunday Sept 15th	Departure Day

Travel Suggestion:

Fly to Atlanta–(ATL) Hartsfield–Jackson **Atlanta International Airport**

Go on line to arrange for limo / bus to drive the 1–1/2 hours from ATL to Columbus (\$49 each way) from:

Gromme Transportation

2800 Harley Court

Columbus, GA 31909

Phone: 706.324.3939

Email: columbusoffice@groometrans.com

Website: <https://groometransportation.com/>

In order to get the \$49 one-way (\$98 round trip) fair, you have to book on line and not on the telephone.

OR you can possibly book a flight to Columbus, Georgia. You will have a short layover in Atlanta (ATL) and fly on **Delta Connector** from ATL to Columbus (CSG). There is no hotel shuttle. The hotel is 15 minutes from the airport. Uber or a taxi can be hired to provide transportation.

Lodging:

Hampton Inn – Columbus South – Ft Moore

2870 South Lumpkin Road

Columbus, GA 31903

706.660.5550

Special Room rate: \$139 per night + taxes, etc.

Rate includes:

Two queen beds

Free breakfast- Free Wi Fi–Free Parking

Room reservation cutoff date: 08/10/24

- 1. You can call the hotel direct at 706-660-5550 to make your room reservation by giving the agent our dates and the code: "USM"**
2. Or you can book a room through this website link:
<https://www.hilton.com/en/attend-my-event/csgfbhx-usm-f32c51f1-44f3-47f1-bad9-332b724244cc/>

Please note: This mini-reunion requires all attendees to fill out a reunion registration form and to pay a \$25 registration fee per attendee to help defray the cost of the tour bus transportation; the beverages in the Slopchute and the dinner for two evenings.

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

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 "23" or lower your 2024 membership dues are now past due. .

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.**

**IT'S A FUNNY THING, BUT, AS YEARS
GO BY, I THINK YOU APPRECIATE
MORE AND MORE WHAT A GREAT
THING IT WAS TO BE A MARINE...**

**I AM A U.S. MARINE AND I'LL BE
ONE TILL I DIE.**

*— Ted Williams
Baseball Hall of Fame*

