

VIET NAM: DAY ONE- 3/7/3

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF

Lance Corporal Alvin Chester

Born 12/07/1943

KIA 4 JULY 1965

Native American: Navajo

Sovereign Nation of Navajo

Fort Defiance, Arizona

<http://www.thewall-usa.com/guest.asp?recid=8895>



The year 1965 was a pivotal year in a war that would escalate in slow agonizing increments for ten brutal years. There were turbulent activities in the dark shadows of national diplomacy. Messages went from Communist block countries through mysterious individuals, and back through quiet diplomats from neutral countries, all trying to quiet the swelling ideological rage that grew between the U.S. President Lyndon Johnson and the forming factions of the North Vietnamese Communist Party headed by Ho Chi Minh his General Nguyen Vo Giap and Party Chairman Pham Van Dong. It was a year when the routine of peacetime military service changed from its sleepy regimen to a war time pace, a pace that was hardly detected in the busy morning commuting traffic of Long Beach, California.

Around April of that year, units of Third Battalion, Seventh Regiment, Third Marine Division shipped out of Camp Las Pulgas at Marine Corps Base Pendleton, in a convoy of heavy olive Six-by trucks and olive green busses loaded with her olive uniformed Marines, each in full field pack holding one sea bag in their laps, headed up the coast toward Long Beach and the waiting Air Craft Carrier Valley Forge. The

Regiment included Rifle Companies, known then and now as Line Companies or “Grunts”, their attachments which ranged from the smallest artillery weapon platoons of Flame Throwers, known simply as Flames, Eighty One Millimeter Mortars usually called “81s”, to 106 mm recoilless rifle units to Tanks, heavy field artillery, Ontos artillery vehicles and Amtracks, armored tank-like troop amphibious assault vehicles.

The following is an account of how peacetime Marines journeyed from their early morning departure up the coast highway past surfers waxing their boards for the day, to the afternoon they set foot for the first time on the soil of Vietnam.

“I was already consulting with the generals when Taylor returned from his meeting in Honolulu. On April 24 the ambassador presented Dr. Quat with the consensus reached in Hawaii. Quat understood completely the gravity of what was about to happen; for some weeks he had been anxious over just this development. Quat told Taylor that he needed time to consider the military and political implications of such a dramatic increase. Immediately after Taylor left, Quat rushed me into my office, visibly shocked, and practically shouted at me. “What’s happening on the battlefield that we don’t know about? Are we on the verge of collapsing?”” Bui Diem SVN Ambassador. *“In The Jaws of History”*

Okinawa- 17 June 1965-*“This letter is probably the only one you have received in weeks. Training has, for the past month or so, been very intense and taxing on all of us. For the first time in three years, I feel a definite need for the training because it’s going to get me back to the States with all my appendages and my tail too!*

This weather is stifling and we can not do very much at one time but believe me, we go the limit. Today I nearly passed out because of the heat but managed to hang on. We have been through quiet a number of lectures on Vietnam and I understand the weather there is an exhausting heat pocket. Either wet or dry at different times of the year. We are going you know. It has been confirmed and I will be very surprised if we don’t. There are rumors of leaving the seventh of next month. I hope we can get where we’re going without incident.

I feel sure I should get the camera gear now because under the conditions we will be in I can expect some first rate pictures. Maybe I’ll send them to Life! By the way, a good friend came in to some misfortune a day ago. His mother passed away. After some difficult hours, he chose to stay with the unit rather than go home on emergency leave.

This entire situation has come about so suddenly that I seem to weave in and out of reality. Fortunately, I want to go down South and am somewhat anxious about what will be a very dangerous and taxing experience mentally and physically. College is still there waiting but somehow I will get through even it takes a lifetime. But for now there are more important things. I am thrown into this thing and whether I get out or not, I guess I’ll shoot what I can with the camera.

Most of my idle time has been spent up at the club drinking beer with the crew. We sure can talk about a lot over a nice cool pitcher of San Miguel. So mainly I wanted to tell you I am okay and feeling well. My state of health is good. The gear is ready to go. Bye for now. Vance “

* * *

“Hanley’s back!” yelled Platt.” Lance Corporal Richard Platt was a short stocky 81’s gunner. He had a round face, a ready smile and when the opportunity presented itself, he would light up a cigar. If he didn’t light it he chewed on it. Platt was from a coal town in Pennsylvania.

“No shit! Did they bust him? Vance Poplar his tall A-Gunner had just come from Mama-san’s stall between the barracks with a fresh white laundry bundle she had expertly folded into several small square packages. PFC Poplar’s floppy Marine cover was cocked back on his head revealing a high and close hair cut more skin than hair.

“Court marshaled his ass aboard the ship that left after we pulled out of Long Beach. He’s a Private now. Corporal to Private just like that.” Platt laughed to himself taking his cigar out and looking at it. “Fined his ass too.”

The two looked out the front of the barracks at the group of uniformed Marines standing around on the road. Then they put the mops they had been slinging in morning field-day clean up of the barracks in a locker and walked out into the morning sun for zero eight hundred formation.

“Hanley, wherein hell did you go?” asked Poplar as they milled into a loose formation.

“Back to Texas. Had some personal business to take care of before we shipped out. When I got back, Pulgas was empty. I turned myself in at the XO at Mainside. Still had on the same gear I wore in a rodeo.”

“Rodeo?” the squad members heard him and laughed.

“Hell yea. Busted me back to E-1 and fined me five hundred” Hanley reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of twenties. “And I won eight hundred bucks bustin’ bulls.”

The group broke up laughing at the complementing fate Hanley had described. They ducked into his story clinging to it as if it were a single precious artifact after a ship wreck. A rodeo. The familiar low slung concrete barracks of Okinawa’s Camp Schwabb glowed pink in the morning sun now rising over the sea nearly a football field’s distance from them.

“Looks like we’re going in this time Poplar.” Said Hanley glancing around. “Ya’ll going down the Island tonight?

“Nah. We aint been much in for liberty. Maybe Hanoko for a few beers. It’s different now.” said Poplar. It had been a month of hard training leaving most if the Marines yearning for a bath in town and perhaps a long evening drinking beer and talking. Their favorite bar at Hanoko, a village outside the base was Bar Texas.

Now there were no wild taxi rides down the island for good times. There was a different mood in all of the units. The units that had occupied this old base Schwabb just three months before were at that moment deployed around the Enclave at Danang, engaging in often murderous day to day skirmishes, fire fights that would become the fabric of the early Vietnam War. A fate the new arrivals yearned for because of their training but like all who face battle, a certain quietness within them had marked their days. The drinking and whoring did continue as it had in the happy horse shit peace time garrison Corps. But now it was different.

The last range exercise had occurred the third week in June. Eight Ones loaded their guns and canisters of rounds upon the Six-bys and headed for the mountains north

of the camp. Shadows of gray billowing rain clouds covered the verdant terrain admitting little ribbons of sun light that seemed to try in vain to cheer their days. Sheets of rain swept across the platoon as the guns took fire command after fire command over the field telephones.

“GUN ONE...DEFLECTION ...OH FOUR...THREE. ELEVATION...” the gunners pawed at the sights as the assistant gunners snapped the bipods around to a new direction. “ONE ROUND WILLY PETER.. CHARGE FOUR...FIRE WHEN READY.”

“Cease fire. Cease Fire. Came the order over the telephone. Gun three, misfire.” Firing stopped while an A Gunner and gunner cleared a round from a tube that had not fired.” The A-Gunner carefully removed the round from the tube and delivered it to a bunker.

“Let’s head down to Naha tonight.” said Otto to squad leader Langford across the line of guns. Platt leaned back in the gun pit and chewed on his cigar.

“Too far down the Island. I’m going only as far as Koza. Gon’a get laid, get a bath and head back.

“Sounds good to me”, Poplar chimed in.

“GUNS!” Another fire command.

“Gun One up!” And so the response went until all gun positions replied.

“BREAK DOWN THE GUNS AND PREPARE TO MOVE OUT! WE’RE SHIPPING OUT 81s!”

“Well that shoots Koza in the ass” muttered Langford. “Okay, Gun Three, saddle up we’re shipping out.”

“You mean leaving the range?” asked inquisitive Private Weaver the ammo humper.

“No Weaver” snapped Langford in his usual cynical style, “I mean we’re leaving Okinawa.”

“For where?” Weaver liked to irritate Corporal Langford.

“Weaver,” Langford helped Private Hilton carry the heavy base plate and move into formation. “Where the fuck else would we be going?” The whole squad howled with laughter.

“From air strikes to “passive base defense” to aggressive base defense to general combat role – the steps led from one to the next with a relentless logic. Within the next nine months, the original, embryonic unit of Marines would be transformed into an army of over 200,000 Americans and allied troops, all there according to the demands of the same reasoning.” Bui Diem

LETTER HOME: 28 June 1965 (age 21): *We have left Okinawa and have been at sea for a day and a night. We don’t know where we are going yet, somewhere in Vietnam I guess. There is no look of fear in anyone’s eyes nor is there talk of personal feelings.*

There are occasionally a few guys in their racks sharpening their bayonets and K-Bar knives. There is the air of something never before felt though. I have sharpened my gear already. I am growing a mustache, something I have always wanted to do. I can’t believe they’re letting us do it! Coming along pretty well.

We had some rough weather today but it has calmed down a little. This ship is the LPH Iwo Jima. You wouldn't believe how it's loaded down with so many rounds of artillery, mortar and demolition, helicopters. It should last us for weeks! Johnny Mathis is playing over the intercom. Sure reminds me of wine and pretty girls, red carpets and fire places. When this is over, I couldn't spend enough time playing.

We had such an interesting experience during our brief stop over in Yokosuka, Japan sailing on the Valley Forge. A friend and I decided to go to Komakura and pay homage to the great Buddha. We went there by train. Once at the Buddha we climbed to the top and into the Buddha's head and through the windows, the Buddha's eyes, we saw two girls.

We broke our necks getting back down through this three hundred thousand pound piece of bronze and breathlessly said, "Sya, how do you get to the train station from here?" One girl said, "You go there, turn right, then ...would you like a ride?"

It had started to rain (a sign of good luck to Buddhists, we learned) Then a well dressed elderly Japanese man emerged from a garden and said, "Why yes, we'll be glad to give the young men a ride." On the way we hit it right off with the attractive girls, riding in a big Mercedes. The elderly man turned out to be the father of one of the girls and an English Professor at Tokyo University. He took us by his yacht club and brought us a round of drinks, then dropped us off at the station.

I don't know how long this thing's going to last but I'll be home someday. Until then, keep the lawn cut. Vance"

COMMAND DIARY FOR BLT 3/7

Entry: 24-26 June: Embarked personnel, equipment and supplies. Companies I, K, 107 mm Mortar Battery, Division and force Recon Platoons and the bulk of H&S Company were embarked aboard the USS Iwo Jima. (LPH-2) L and M Companies and the engineer Platoon were embarked aboard the USS Taladaga (APA 208) and a detached Tank and Motor Transport, Amphibious Tractor, shore Party, Anti-Tank Platoons, J Battery, 11th Marines, the Naval Beach Unit and all heavy vehicles were embarked aboard the USS Point Defiance (LSD 31)

Entry: 26-30 June: Enroute to the Republic of Viet Nam. A warning order was received alerting the SLF to be prepared to land at Qui Nhon, RVN to protect the U.S. Army support forces located there.

Entry: 1-8 July: Operations ashore at Qui Nhon, RVN.

Entry: 1 July: Companies I and K and 107mm Mortar Battery commenced landing by helicopter at 14:00. M Company landed by LCVP-5 at 1700 while L Company was transferred to the USS Iwo Jima by LCMs as BLT reserve. The units ashore established defensive positions on a hill complex south of the city. One man died of spinal meningitis aboard the USS Iwo Jima.

Entry: 1-4 July: Task Group personnel were quarantined and administered prophylactics for spinal meningitis.

Qui Nhon was and is an ancient city on the coast of Central (South)



Vietnam. It is a city with banks, cafes, stucco buildings and schools, not a village. Qui Nhon has a sweeping scorpion like lick of land that scoops out into the China Sea and has offered shelter to Vietnamese fishermen in basket boats; in centuries past, Chinese ships carrying sharp eyed merchants. French and English ships too anchored with priests and colonial managers and holds cleared for opium cargo. In the Fifth Century the Ta Nhin Rebels held up in these very mountains and launched attacks against corrupt Chinese Bankers and merchants and their mercenary troops who's skill in profiteering exploited the native population. But on this day Qui Nhon citizens would scan the horizon and see the United States Seventh Fleet, come to call.

The first day of July, 1965 the mountains over the city of Qui Nhon became a midwife to the green troops of K Company and its H&S attachments, Third Battalion Seventh Marines. An Expeditionary Force, the Marines now gazed from the flight and hangar decks of the Iwo Jima at the mountains that would deliver them from the blissful virginity of the peace they had known to all of the possibilities of armed conflict.

The only word that had filtered down was that the SVN Government Forces had held positions on the ridge lines over the city and had pulled out leaving the high ground open for defense. It is more likely that the commanders wanted to get their jumpy troops on the ground and underway upon the long road to confidence on the battlefield. So on 1 July the U.S. Iwo Jima, LPH2, throttled back, heading the strange unattractive lines of her bow into the wind and launched here cargo.

Except a UH-34 that had landed on the football field at Schwabb to give the grunts a tour, it was the first helicopter operation any of them had made and when the Marines of K Company and the units of H&S Company, 81 Millimeter Mortars to include Corporal Langford and his gun crew, queued up in the passage ways for embarkation, the chopper squadrons had already made a slow circular tour out across the calm China Sea and were positioning for orderly touch down upon the wooden deck of the Iwo Jima, load the assault



Marines and take off again toward an undisclosed Landing Zone (LZ)

The Navy crewmen hurried around the waiting choppers, their orange jump suits and soft cover caps snapping wildly from the prop-wash, yelling inaudibly to closer crew members. The intoxicating odor of J-2 fuel the deafening noise of the engines and hot exhaust now filled the morning air.

“GO!!!” the load master shouted again and again as the Marines ran across the flight deck in full olive combat gear. Soon two platoons, then three were airborne and the Marines aboard, their ears popping in the blast of cool air of increasing altitude, viewed swirling glimpses of the great waiting leviathan of emerald and red and rock and scrub and reddish earth passing across the open hatchway of the UH-34s. They also saw in the flood of light pouring through the hatchway the silhouette of the UH-34 crew chief, his M-60 and a belt of 7.62mm steel jacketed, armor piercing rounds locked into position. It was a birth of sorts from the warm womb of the Iwo Jima now only a speck upon the sea, its galley and cozy bunks and endless card games now a memory, to the uncertainties of a hostile, deadly world.

Back on the carrier deck those still in waiting under condition “One Alpha” when ammo, grenades and mortar rounds were distributed the Marines, likely felt conflicting notions tugging at their guts as they gazed at the chalky green mountains and ridge lines looming above them. Much like sailors and soldiers of yesteryear who after being at sea for weeks or months, they

welcomed a change, a commitment, the lack of ambiguity, danger or not. The yellow morning light on the ochre beach and the pink red soil were pleasant to see, momentarily.

Eighty
Ones too struggled

up the ladder-well with their enormous loads. Weaver, Poplar, Platt, Hilton and Privates Butcher and Rizzo, Rockaway Beach, NY- wearing a vest with pockets for live 81mm rounds, all followed Langford up the ladder-wells to the flight deck, and soon their ears also popped during the breathtaking lift off into cool air over the water and the ascent as the details of the landscape drew closer, a quick exchange of glances. “Bump.” They were on the ground.

“LETS GO LETS GO LETS GO GO GO GO GOOOO!!!” yelled Lankford now on the ground standing at the UH-34 entry hatch. Each Marine banged out of the delicate aircraft with their heavy, light artillery and equipment of war. Langford saw that the Marines of K Company had scattered out over the ridge line. It was now early afternoon. Now they were atop the mountains they had seen from the ship. Each man fidgeted with his gear nervously and retreated into his training. They seemed to do everything extra carefully from snapping a magazine case to listening to the squad leaders and platoon sergeants without the usual insolence or checking their weapons once twice, then again. They, the men of 81s, worked quickly to set up the gun pits and the FDC –Fire Direction Control bunker.

The great Buddha Poplar visited had been kind to them. The LZ had received them without hostile fire. The day passed without incident. As night fell a cool breeze from the Northwest now chilled their sweaty bodies as they worked feverishly to prepare their positions readying for the unknown. A deep violet black veil now settled over the mountains and upon them. The cooling orange rubber ball sun now left them to the sprits of the “Ma”, marauding spirits of the unburied dead of centuries past.





The mountain over Qui Nhon early July 1965, was a place of deliverance. Yet in for combat, the Marines of K Company 3/7/3 and their attachments dug in for the long night would contribute to their new combat expertise. Here on the second night of their in: Marines of H&S Company, 81s man their guns ready for fire commands from FDC. In light of day a light rain had begun to fall soaking the men causing some to shiver under the cool mountain air. Marines rush to secure their positions before dark.

A light rain began to fall eliciting mumbles of curses and the rustle of ponchos, Marines covering their guns as well as themselves. But in time they became soaked and as the rain ceased the air began to cool and they began to shiver, some uncontrollably. Poplar could not stop shaking and he cursed at himself gathering all of the control he could muster because he knew that soon the fire commands would begin to come. He flapped his arms around himself trying to generate body heat. After long agonizing moments the wet uniform dried a bit allowing him to concentrate once again upon his duty as Assistant Gunner.

“Is FDC set up yet?” whispered Platt. He worked nervously with the aiming sight and complicated bubble assembly used to coordinate the mortar with the other guns now strewn out some thirty yards behind the defensive line set up by K Company.

“Get out there with those aiming stakes!” he ordered. “There’s only a little light left and we need to get those stakes perfect! Move!” he said to Poplar.

By now the Company of Marines had tactically deployed along the ridge line and each man using his entrenching tool had burrowed into the hill. To each man, rifleman, 3.5 Rocket team, M-60 machine gunner fields of fire set or even a pistol bearing officer, the sloping terrain in front of them was deadly ground. The ground in front would bear all the evil he had ever known, read about or seen in a John Wayne movie. From bonzi charges to kamikazes to the screaming Turks of Gallipolis, all these images danced in their heads. And as the last laughing photons of light evaporated into the blackness they were left alone with themselves to make it through the night, hopefully alive.

"Its crooked. The goddamned stake is crooked!" puffed Platt in a loud whisper to Poplar.

"What? Oh.Okay..Jesus Christ." Poplar got up from a position by the mortar tube that would allow him to maneuver the bipods as well as drop the rounds in the tube when FDC gave the commands.

Poplar went back out in front of the gun but still behind the Line of K Company and, in the dark, stumbled over the scrubs and boulders exclaiming. "Goddamned! Shit!" Then he reached the errant stripped pole that supported two red lights shinning dimly toward the mortar and waiting Platt. Platt gazed into the eye piece at the crooked lights waiting for Poplar to begin realigning the poles. "Jezzzz, where the fuck is Poplar?"

Then the lights began to wiggle as Poplar again worked with the pole that had nearly fallen. "OK OK that's good. Come on in."

Weaver cupped the mouthpiece of the phone. He could smell his own sweat now, his alertness. He too shivered. "FDC? Test. Yah hear me?" A similar fumbling had occurred up and down the line of mortars. Then over the wire from Fire Direction Control the old familiar voice of Corporal Pete Sharron, Worcester, Massachusetts. "GUNS!" and the guns reported in one by one.

"Gun Two Up." Murray from Long Island, New York.

"Gun Four Up" Levette from Connecticut.

"Gun Three Up" Weaver from Arkansas.

"Gun Six Up" l Mack from Delaware.

"Gun One Up" Otto, New York City

Squadrons of mosquitoes grew in number as occasional mumbles floated through the darkness. Face after face was now under attack by the great swarms of feeding mosquitoes. "Damn fuckin things hurt! Son of a "Someone laughed.

"KNOCK IT OFF, came a voice near FDC, Sergeant Myers career Marine and a veteran of the Korean War.

An hour passed. Two. Three. "Slap!!" What time is it?" Oh Two Hundred." Then.

"GUN THREE." FDC had a fire mission. The whiz kid Sharron they knew as Pete from Mass was on his plotting board quickly computing the numbers that would go over the phone. Lieutenant Sanders took the coordinate from the Forward Observer up on the ridge line with K Company.

"Gun Three." Was it a test. Sure it was only a test. Right?

"ONE ROUND, ILLUMINATION, shit get the fucking round from the canister! Get the fuckin canister! DEFLECTION ONE THREE ZERO. CHARGE FOUR. FIRE WHEN READY."

Weaver unpacked the round, passed it off to Poplar. Poplar feeling the charges at the base of the round, stripped off the charges to equal the four FDC called for. One second passed. Two seconds. Poplar couldn't move fast enough. It had to be perfect. This first round fired in combat by 81s.

"WHERE'S MY GODDAMN ILLUMINATION 81s!!!" bellowed a K Company lieutenant from up on the line. He had called for illumination to check out movement out front.

Perhaps they were too slow. Wanting to be too perfect. This was combat! Four seconds. Five seconds.

“FIRE THE FUCKING THING!” roared the officer through the darkness.

Langford rose and rustled toward his crew through the darkness toward his crew, stumbling over a scrub bush. “God Damned!”

“BOOOOOM!” Poplar dropped the round into the tube and it was away. There was a little pop sound and suddenly the ground and fog over the mountain was illuminated. Silhouettes of Marines, Helmets, Images, then,

“CRACK!!!” the concussion from a fragmentation grenade went off. “What the fu..”

Automatic weapons fire up and down the line now began to crackle then stop. Then came the blinding flash from a 3.5 rocket launcher strobing Marines in strange poses, startled from the ear splitting ignition. The rocket hit close in and M-14 rifle fire began again.

“GUN ONE UP.” Another illumination was sent aloft as the first drifted to earth on its tiny parachute and burned out.

“Poplar. The gatdamm stake fell down!!!” Can’t you fix the fuckin pole so it’d stay?”

“The ground’s so hard I can’t...”

“Get the fucking stake in the ground Poplar. Get out there and hold it up if you have to.”

“He sees the blue white faces
All trying to grin
And he feels his innards ailing
And his bowels giving way.”

Jorge Borges quoting
Rudyard Kipling 1919

Poplar pulled out his .45 automatic with fully loaded magazine. A round was in the chamber. He did not know what the Line Marines were firing at but was sure it must be approaching probes from the Viet Cong. The Lieutenant has said the hard corps Viet Cong units were in the area and would likely probe our lines. So with his weapon in hand, he proceeded out into the darkness once again to fix the critical aiming stake. He had never heard incoming rounds except back at PI where he had pulled butts at the range. It was a popping sound, like paper or better, linen being ripped.

Upon arriving at the stake, he realized two hands would be needed to drive the poles deeper into the baked earth so he holstered the weapon. The little red lights were somewhere in the scrub bushes but where. He searched the blackness for the tiny lights. Then he saw them.

Poplar reached down and plucked the poles from the underbrush. Suddenly his bowels began to growl and shift and there was no greater priority in politics or war than getting his dungarees down. His first crap in days.

“BANG!!” another illumination went off farther out. “CRACK!!!” another concussion from a fragmentation grenade. Still indisposed Poplar had again pulled out his .45, and unlocked safety. Suddenly to his left facing his mortar but up on the ridge line. “CORPSMAAAAAAN!!!! CORPSMAAAAAAN” voices screaming from out in the darkness.

“GUN THEE DIFLECTION...ONE THREE ZERO...ONE ROUND ILLUMINATION CHARGE THREE...FIRE WHEN READY...”

“POW” round away. Weaver had taken Poplar’s position while he worked his way back to the gun from the aiming poles.

The round hissed through the light rain and popped skyward to shed its light swinging from its parachute that held it aloft. There was activity up on the line.

“There’s a wounded man up there. Get another illumination ready yelled Myers who had moved up from the FDC to keep watch over his guns.

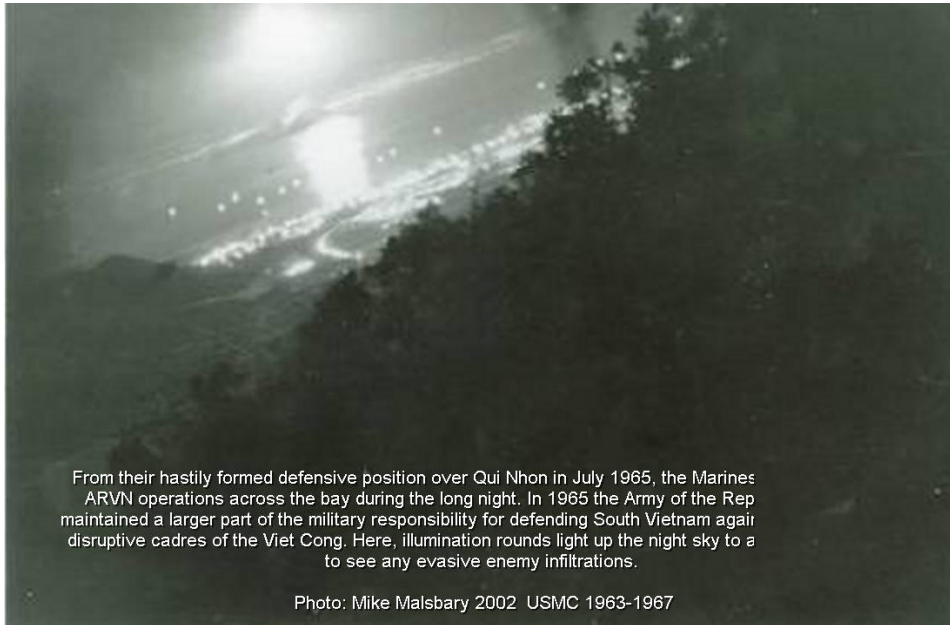
“Gun One...One Round Illumination...Booom!” Another lumi sailed skyward with a bang. They were getting better. Down the line a Marine threw another grenade down the mountain. CRACK!! An ear splitting thump ripped back through them. The fading light of each dying lumi gave hint of smoke hanging in the air. The smell of burning white phosphorus drifted though the air.

“CEASE FIRE. CEASE FIRE GAT DAMMIT” yelled the Gunnery Sergeant. Get a chopper in here to evac this Marine NOW!!!”

“Jesus Christ!” a voice thorough the blackness. There was a strobe of dark silhouettes, men running thorough positions and jumping across underbrush to expedite the Top’s command. Then the dim light and smoke faded to black.

“Hey Top,who was wounded? What happened”

“Knock it off...carry on Marine!!” bellowed the Top to the faceless voice. Then the hill fell quiet again to only an occasional round squeezed off by a jumpy rifleman. A shaky private praying for morning. They all were keenly aware of their jagged nerves by now.



Dawn. The sun made its appearance on the gray, then violet, then flaming orange horizon of the South China Sea and the Marines busied themselves with the humorous discovery that the scrub, or rock or shape of ground that was in front of them was not the enemy after all. But surely it had moved. There was an occasional giddy crackle of relief that came from being alive and basking in the morning sun. To the east they could see the great desolate sparkling ocean as the heat steadily rose.

The Marines of K Company and their attachments spent several more nights on this mountain, but each night was increasingly marked with the fire discipline the essence of *élan* commanders strive for in training their units. Soon, after three, perhaps four days, the Iwo Jima appeared far below. The stink of their sweat soaked uniforms and 782 webbing, the smell of fear still lingered, their scraggly unshaved faces all converged to accelerate them into adulthood, into brotherhood. Around the gun pits mortar round canisters lay about evidence of the all night execution of their skills as infantry combat Marines.

It is unclear exactly when the story of the Marine surfaced. It was characteristic of this time, when patrols would be decimated by a land mine or an ambush or friendly fire and little detail of the action would reach the other units. Each fire team, squad or gun crew kept to themselves awaiting orders and practicing the art of war as best they could, hoping each day to come through it alive. But on that mountain over Qui Nhon in that early July of 1965, those Marines experienced the sobering reality of the perils of their business.

Weaver sitting on the edge of the gun pit, took a pack of Luckys out of his pocket. Tapping the cigarette upon the bezel of his watch he watched Platt busily cleaning his aiming device. Lighting the cigarette and skillfully puffing as he spoke. "Platt. What was that the other night? What the fuck happened?"

Platt emitted his usual funny expression, which was a smile but they knew it really wasn't a smile. There was a serious air about him and they knew

he used the smile to mask a more urgent side of himself. Hilton had called him a “lifer” because that’s what they called Marines who reenlisted, shipped over to become career Marines.

“Did you know the password on that night?” Platt asked Weaver.

“Yea.”

“What was it Weaver?”

“Blue Dog.”

Platt, laughed in his funny suppressed way. The other members of the gun were listening. Langford was flipping through his notebook preparing for re-embarkation back aboard the Iwo Jima.

“The Marines name was Lance Corporal Chester. Al Chester. You remember him?”

“Yea, he was one of the Indians right? Guys hung around together back at Pulgas, Yazzi, Pete and several others. Talking in their Indian language. Yea. I remember him. It was him?”

“But what the fuck happened?” Weaver pressed for an answer.

Langford a man of few words, looked up from his notebook to watch Platt.

“Well Lance Corporal Chester went out in front of the K Company lines to take a piss from what I hear. He was out for a while and when he tried to come back in he was challenged by the riflemen in the holes up there. He didn’t answer. You heard all that shit the other night? It’s a wonder there weren’t more of us that got our asses shot. After that all calmed down, they sent out a patrol but didn’t find anything.”

“Jesus Christ!” Weaver exclaimed. “Shot him dead. Gat damn! “Where is he now?”

“Alright Weaver,” Langford snapped, “You and Poplar pack up those unused canisters and get ready to saddle up. We’re pulling out of this fucking place some time or other. Hilton get those ammo cans policed up. We’re leaving this area as clean as it was when we arrived. Butcher pick up those C-Rat cans and boxes. You see any Luckys in them, I want ’em understand.

“Okay Akabu,” said Butcher a Private from upstate New York. They had begun to call Langford “Akabu” at some point back at Pendleton because he drank a lot of water on field marches. He had broken all of the rules of the forced march and was never fazed by the amount of water he drank.

“I can feel that shower on the Iwo now.” Langford exclaimed to no one in particular. Then they looked skyward to see and hear the squadrons of UH-34s, tiny specks approaching the sweet sound of liberation from this place.

They had expected Guadalcanal, Bella Woods or the forest of the Ardennes. A Marine, one of their own, was now dead. KIA by friendly fire a danger they now knew was an ever present risk in their new lives as combat Marines. Langford counseled that it was why they got combat pay and everyone seemed to quickly and giddily accepted the risk.

The LPH Iwo Jima and several other ships including the U.S.S. Galveston had now formed what would be recorded as RLT-7. Regimental Landing Team. The Marines bound off the choppers onto the wooden deck of the Iwo Jima feeling invincible. Some no doubt pretended a thousand yard stare

while others, those who had experienced the loss of their buddy, were among the first among them to possess a true thousand yard stare.

RLT-7 chopped onward to Subic Bay where the Marines continued their training, soon to make port of call Hong Kong. A short respite soon dissolved into an urgent convergence upon the deadly region known as the Batangan Peninsula just south of the newly constructed Chu Lai Airbase, where Operation Starlight, the first major Marine amphibious engagement with the 1st Viet Cong Regiment would commence August 18, 1965.

COMMAND DIARY:

Entry 5 July: "One man was killed by friendly fires when he advanced forward of the defensive perimeter without authority and without notifying anyone. He was killed when he did not respond to a challenge upon returning to the friendly lines.L Company landed by helicopter to relieve I company which returned to the USS Iwo Jima.

Personnel from I Battery, 11th Marines, along with personnel from the Tank, Anti-Tank, Motor Transport and Amphibious Tractor Platoons landed, without heavy weapons and equipment, to man defensive perimeter in order to gain experience under such conditions.

Entry 6 July: One man died of encephalitis while being evacuated by air to Clark AF Base, Philippine Islands.

Entry 8 July: the BLT was embarked aboard the original shipping upon being relieved by BLT 2/7

Entry 9-20 July: The BLT remained at sea off Qui Nhon, RVN as reserve for 2/7. Units of the BLT hold beach parties on 10, 12, and 13 July."



"In September of 1965, when you landed at An Khe, our commanders in the Central Highlands studied how to cope. We foresaw that the coming battle would be very fierce. First, we evacuated the population and prepared training camps. We improved our positions, dug shelters, and prepared caches of food and underground hospitals. We knew that sooner or later you would attack our zones, and we tried to prepare positions that would neutralize you. We knew that it would not be enough just to make propaganda saying that we were winning. We had to study how to fight the Americans."

**Hong Phuong, Major General
Vietnamese People's Army- 3**

Authors post script:

It is with solemn respect in this of dedication to Lance Corporal Alvin Chester his family and his fellow Marines who have bore the burden of this night for all of their lives, that I have attempted recall this week on the mountain over Qui Nhon as carefully and as detailed as memory and letters would allow. The names of my fellow gun crew are unchanged except for my own; I used the name "Poplar" for myself, after a lovely shady main street in the town where I grew up. It's easier for me to write in the third person. In actuality, our units remained upon the mountain for a week. The night of heavy firing and mortal wounding of Lance Corporal Chester occurred on the second night. In all there were two casualties due to friendly fire on the mountain. The other was a Navy Corpsman evacuated to the States and referred to in Colonel Bodley's -Diary.

After a time at Subic Bay, and liberty call at Hong Kong, the Iwo Jima returned us to Qui Nhon and her shore boats delivered us to the beach there where we enjoyed ice cold Sapporo Beer and steaks. I wrote a letter home on an old typewriter there in an old school house while a Vietnamese ARVN soldier, holding a child, watched me. He taught me to say and write good bye in French. "Caio Tu Biet" The photographs included with this manuscript were taken by me over the week 3/7/3 was in position. I am also grateful to my son J.M. Malsbary ESQ for his help in editing this manuscript.

An estimated 30-35% of deaths during the Vietnam War were the result of friendly fire, the largest percentage from small arms fire. The fate of Lance Corporal Alvin Chester or any of us remained as a dreaded possibility among green troops and a new combat exposure. Their names appear on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. as a testament to their service as active duty marines who accept deployment to dangerous situations anywhere in the world. We must never forget those who served, especially those who served never to return home again. The possibility that there were no enemy probes into our position those few days haunts me to this day.

I am mystified by those authors of news and magazine articles today, and by despots of rogue nations who before and after 911 have expressed Vietnam as America's Achilles heel. It is a dangerous notion. There is no shortage of bravery and willingness to serve if the call is out and the lines are drawn. The watches in our military change year in and year out and keep essential fires of national defense burning brightly. The purpose of this 4th of July story is not only to recall for my fellow veterans and other visitors to this site those first days of our entry into a long and bloody war. Perhaps of greater importance is that it is a testament to the service of the ordinary citizen who agrees by terms of enlistment and commission, to serve his and her country with duty and honor most often under very adverse conditions.

Mike Malsbary
USMC 1963-67

July 4, 2024

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3. *We Were Soldiers Once, And Young.* Gen. Harold G. Moore U.S. Army Ret. & Joseph Galloway, New York, Random House, 1992.