

Perhaps there is a pattern to recollection. Over the years I have written a page here and there trying to reconstruct the essence of my four years of life in the Marine Corps. Among the fine documents that are now the records that detail the events of Operation Starlite the first battle of the Vietnam War, Major Andrew Comer uses two interesting phrases. "One vaguely recalls." and "One distinctly recalls." The useful phrases characterize the nature of recollection. The passage of nearly thirty five years leaves memories to be carefully sorted into these two categories. As I have written and rewritten certain pieces, vague recollection magically transformed into distinct recall. I can recall the odor of diesel fumes from an [amphibious landing craft](#). Or in the tense hours of shipping out again back across the Pacific to certain combat, I can suddenly remember listening to the haunting lyrics of a Bob Dylan song, "Can you tell me where we're going to Signor?" Vietnamese fishermen seal their basket boats with a acrid black tar like sap, an odor I first noticed near Green Beach only a day or two after the attack began in the early hours of August 18, 1965. It was an odor I remember. In understanding these categories, the reader might gauge, as a juror, the quality of the reports I and others give here. The narrative is likely filled with clues to help distinguish vague from distinct recollection. But, in conflicting accounts, I doubt there is intentional revision, a tap room temptation one must always suspect. Rather, it is how Marines depolyed in a tiny plot of hot dusty earth to face an uncertain fate, remember their feelings and observations. This is a broad brush account of my own discoveries about the beginnings of a conflict as well as an accounting of my whereabouts between the year 1963 and 1965, a half way point in a four year enlistment. It is a prolog to the more closely focused stories, Vietnam: Day One, The Party and Red Eye. The photographs used in the site I took along the way and stored in my parents attic for many years .



THE GENERAL



Camp Fuji, Japan-winter 1964

February 1963: Fast Forward - My sight groups at Parris Island were tight until pollen on the winds of early spring blew in over the marsh from Beaufort causing me to tear. On the second day of live firing, each time I squeezed the M-14 trigger the target became a blur resulting in the inevitable "maggy's drawers." Before the wind kicked up I was a "dinger" but now the once boastful DIs were swarming over me trying to diagnose my problem. In the end I got mess duty, a non-qual washing mountains of pots and pans for the battalion. Soon we were proud Marines, marching before our still stunned parents. To lend some historical chronology to this time, newspapers even in small town America included an obscure news article June 1963 about Thich Quang Duc the Buddhist monk in Saigon who had defiantly committed self-immolation in front of the French Legation. Orders for boot Marines of this period had already been cut.

Early summer of 1964 I, along with many of my new acquaintances fresh out of Parris Island, with 0311 infantry MOSs and orders for the FMFPAC Fleet Marine Force Pacific, reported to Pendleton's Camp San Mateo. The "old guys" Reyes, Anderson, Gindowski, Wheat were all waiting for us, sitting around the barracks squaring away. George Jones whaled a heart breaking country song on a transistor radio. I was assigned to weapons platoon in a line company. Even before I was able to unpack my sea bag, Anderson a smooth talking Black private with an ivory smile from LA said with his best poker face "Hey Malsbary, you're in our squad so here's my dress shoes. Have them ready for morning formation."

Everyone watched for my response. Some hint. Would I spit shine Anderson's shoes? Would I get nasty? "I don't have to shine your shoes." I said "Your a private just like me.", quite unsure of my exact legal position, to be truthful. To my relief everyone howled with laughter. Anderson's con hadn't worked. Anderson became a fun loving, buddy with a great sense of humor. Later he accused someone of breaking into his wall locker and shinning his shoes. But it was not I.

On a late hot afternoon prior to liberty, someone said

"Fall out, the new Lieutenant is coming."

The new LT was fresh out of Annapolis-gold bars gleaming upon freshly starched olive dungarees-head shaved- wearing a perfectly blocked cover- boyish complexion- his uniform creases cut the dry dusty air as he walked over the gravel on immaculate spit shined field boots. Speaking in a lowered deliberate voice- he introduced himself to his first platoon. Platoon Sergeant Scott stood close and behind the Lieutenant looking us over. This was a time when canned C-Rations were issued during field maneuvers. Ham and Limas, which sergeant Scott equated to a perverse sexual simile, turkey Loaf and the likes with fruitcake, date loaf, peaches and my favorite, apricots. Sergeant Scott, a freckled faced, skin headed NCO would zero in on each of us boots, finding our weakness, probing our unique personalities. The "old guys" would train with us, transfer the skills of warfare during the next overseas tour. Most of them would be discharged and afterwards we would be the "old guys". For now, though, we were the "new guys" and we constantly caught hell for it. I became the Lieutenant's first PRC-6 radio operator.



It was with this unit that I was forged into the real Corps. When I had hesitantly asked Corporal Baines, my Drill Instructor back at PI, what exactly we would be doing, he said tersely stated, "You will be working your fucking ass off Marine." Then, as if to end his expert nine week tutorial, he walked away from me forever leaving only his unique brand upon my personality which I would carry for the rest of my life. So that's what we did. We humped the hills of Golden Meadows and all that surrounded it.

As a kid I had watched Poncho and The Cisco Kid on our black and white TV as they rode the range out in these hills. Now our troop columns wound upwards through the same choking dust and cactus patches into the canyons and across the saddles, us Marines puking slobbering and sweating and passing gas like pack animals, as "lock-on" training whipped us into better condition than we would ever know again. You know that ad on TV today? That's what we did day in and day out transforming into high grade, high Rockwell steel troops that could work together and get a job done. Far up at the head of the column swaggered the fit and able Second Lieutenant and I behind him with my PRC-6 to my ear puffing madly to keep up. Soon after lock-on which was the term for preparing troops to be combat ready, we were at sea headed for the land of the dragon. It was around mid year 1964. Technically, Lock-on lasted the entire year as we trained in the historic theaters of a past war.

I took on the appellation of "the clown", because of my usual good sprits and ability to impersonate Vaughn Metter the entertainer who impersonated JFK and was very popular at the time. In the middle of a forced march I would chime up with a J.F.K. voice and order the men to "Close

it up with Vigaah!" often getting a good laugh from my fellow Marine privates in the column and a swarm of sergeants searching for the source of the wise crack.

These were long painful marches fellow vets will surely recall. I had trouble keeping the column closed up because of my short legs. I had to take two steps for every one step the taller Marines around me took. The overweight Company First Sergeant driving up and down the long column often yelled from the jeep.

"Close it up Malsbary before I get out of the jeep and kick your ass!"



Not long after we began *lock-on*, we were to have the Battalion Exercise. It would include debarkation from a troop ship, down the nets in the fashion of the Marines in the movie *The Sands of Iwo Jima* starring John Wayne. We were to climb down the nets into the bobbing Papa Boats circling around till we were all loaded then head for the beach at San Onofre.

The exercise called for each company to assault a bunker at various intervals down the beach, all being observed by the CO, Colonel Bodley, a bird Colonel sporting huge artillery binoculars way the hell up the beach. We hit the beach at sun rise.

My company went down the nets into the gurgling papa boats guysers of sea spray upon us as the bo'swain gunned the engines in a nauseating plum of black diesel exhaust. The front armored doors dropped onto the beach and we moved out firing blanks and rolling this way and that to evade imaginary fire. I was told by the platoon sergeant in the heat of the exercise to carry a satchel charge which in reality was a haversack full of sand, up to a bunker and throw it in. That's all. I was to move up the hill in front of a fellow Marine, a French Canadian we called "Frenchy" who humped a huge tank on his back. As we drew near the bunker, I ran past "Frenchy" throwing the haversack into the window and stopped to enjoy the show. I looked around and saw Frenchy holding a nozzle and a hose attached, sparks shooting off the end.

"Move out off der way!" he yelled. I casually walked over a yard or two.

"MOVE OUT OF DER WAY!" he yelled again. I stepped over a few more feet.

Then it happened. Frenchy released a stream of napalm flame which passed my front and the heat I swear singed my eyebrows. I staggered backward, way backward until I gained some relief. After the exercise, we all hiked up the beach to hear Colonel Bodley's critique. "... and by the way Marines, I was watching one private up there nearly get barbecued by a Flame Thrower. Lets be careful out there men. We're using some dangerous equipment here." At that moment I, glasses face Private Malsbary, felt all of the eyes of my company staring directly at me. It was almost worst than the heat from Frenchy's Flame Thrower.



After a full and complete Far East tour of a year we were deposited once again back in the dry brown treeless hills of Pendleton. This time Camp Las Pulgas was our home. Now the "old guys" had sung their last short timer song and danced down the gang way doing that little surfer hang-ten pose that suggested they had caught the wave back into civilian life for which they had yearned so long. Now, at last we were the "old guys." It was we who were in charge. It would be six short months before we, quite unexpectedly, would head out once again, this time for "Down South" as was the euphemistic reference to Vietnam. By now, sitting around the barracks, we had all seen Larry Burrows pictures in Life Magazine. I had bought a camera in Japan and made photography my intense preoccupation, after cleaning my rifle, my rocket, scrubbing my web gear and belts, polishing my belt buckles, ironing my uniform and cover, making my bunk, cleaning the head to include the toilets, showers, wash stands, floors and windows, I would spend the few precious hours left on my cameras. Then in April, we shipped out for the second time.

Prior to shipping out on the USS Valley Forge around April of 1965- out a Long Beach- some of us had motorcycles- Triumphs. We'd tool around Oceanside and up and down the coast highway soaking up the Southern California life. The 'haps' Anderson had called it. Fresh back from Okinawa, we'd gotten an apartment, an aqua-marine cinder block flat out in Oceanside. Triumphs were parked around all the time unless we were out humpin' the hills again. Originally assigned to a line company, my new assignment was a new unit in which I force marched with the only Marine Corps artillery without wheels, the 81mm Mortar. After an impeccable field-day of the barracks and a weapons inspection we'd bee line for town. Come the weekend, unless I caught duty I'd join the mass exodus from Pendleton to the apartment and seven to ten Marines sitting around the aqua-marine apartment drinking Coors, bullshitting, eating bologna sandwiches and watching Johnny Carson; nothing else in the frige but Coors, bologna and several loaves of bread.

"Belch. Hey who ate that whole fucking loaf of bread I just bought. Jesus Christ!"

Then came word to pack up our gear and be ready to ship out in forty eight hours. All business had to be taken care of in town.

After receiving a rash of immunization shots I took off to San Clemente to pay a surprise visit on my girlfriend and her family. The rest of the grunts, in a panic, went to find storage for their motorcycles and close out the apartment. Sitting at the dining room table in a fashionable golf course community in San Juan Capistrano, I suddenly puked on the floor and pass out, probably a reaction from the shots.

Next thing I know, my girlfriend, not too happy, is hauling my delirious ass back to Pendleton. She delivers me to Sick Bay at 2 AM by rolling me out of her convertible and pulling away ending her year long tutorial, leaving her brand on me for the rest of my life. In the hours before dawn, on a gurney in Sick Bay I awoke the next morning soaked in a sweat and wondered over to the 81s barracks where heavy loading was well underway. I'm AWOL! But not for long. I'd missed 0400 morning formation and was considered over the hill, but the Gunny, verifying with Sick Bay duty Corpsmen, ordered me to rejoin my gun crew.

The rest of the gun crew had found a service station that would keep the bikes. Then we loaded onto the Valley Forge, eastbound again into the setting sun. For the next year spent in Chu Lai, amidst all of our worries about staying alive, perhaps in denial, seldom a day went by without a discussion of what route these guys would take back East on the Triumphs when they got out. Rt 66 was still vivid in our minds fantasy wonderers. Endless, agonizingly detailed discussions at every conceivable event, waiting to head out on a UH-34 search and destroy, a full night of firing the 81s, in a chow line with mess kit clanging, waiting for UH-34 to pick us up, out in the holes locked and loaded, "so how many miles can we get on a tank of gas, Otto?" Second only to these discussions was a floating card game that is probably still going on to this day.

Before our second departure the Lieutenant was battalion adjutant, a 1st Lieutenant. Then overseas into South Vietnam we went. After Operation Starlight out on the beach near the deserted village of An Cuong, cleaning our guns, I looked up and saw the Lieutenant's head pop out of the bamboo hedge row. He had become a Captain! His old radio operator as a private, I had become a Lance Corporal. I said hello-walked up and I think shook hands but Lance Corporal's don't shake the hands of Marine Captains-so I could be wrong about that recollection. That was the last time I saw or knew of him for thirty years.

Thanksgiving Day- around 1995, a fire crackled in our fireplace as I read the Philadelphia Inquirer and note the Commandant of the Marine Corps had uttered some politically incorrect statement. Someone acting as his spin-doctor was sent in to straighten it all out and was clarifying the matter to the wire service reporters. At the end of the quotation the article concluded

"... said the Commandant's spokesman," naming the source. The spokesperson was that same officer, my first Platoon Commander upon reporting to San Mateo in 1963. But the Lieutenant had done pretty well for himself. He had reached the rank of Major General and had retired from a magnificent military career. Guess he made it out okay. That's the way it happened back then. Marines you knew just disappeared as the units shuffled to new deployments, units broken up in mix-master fashion leaving one with only snap shot recollections, long buried as you got on with your duty and upon discharge, your life. For me it was not a struggle until death, dao trung as the enemy knew as a part of their culture and life. It was a simple reality that became a major strategic difference from our enemy.

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