



Fred Frey

## SELECTED RECOLLECTIONS OF A PLATOON COMMANDER

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### JULY 13, 1966 – 5TH DAY IN COUNTRY – FIRST BLOOD

The Pan American flight landed in Da Nang on July 8 after the flight from Kadena in Okinawa. The trip had been an odyssey of sorts for the rather naïve twenty-two-year-old fresh from his upbringing as a missionary's kid, college student and the abbreviated but vigorous training as an officer in the United States Marine Corps. Becoming a Marine officer was not what I had planned on. It was the Navy that first appealed to me, seeing the world from the bridge of a destroyer or cruiser. Then, in my senior year at West Chester State College, I read Leon Uris's "Battle Cry" and plans changed. Creeping into my letters to my parents, still missionaries in Thailand at the time, were references to Vietnam. "Things seem to be heating up over there near you" I wrote in all innocence, not aware of how prophetic my observation would be.

The climate outside the airplane in Da Nang struck me like a physical blow. The heat and moisture became like another layer of garment, the sweat immediately destroying any vestige of personal hygiene, a condition that would linger for the next thirteen months. That first night was sleeplessly spent in a tent about fifty yards from the airfield taxiway. At one point, I wandered right out to the runway and watched the Crusaders and Phantoms roll by heading for their takeoff points. Next morning, I boarded a prop plane for the short hop south to Chu Lai and the First Marine Division.

The next three days were spent getting new equipment, orientation sessions, and an excruciating conditioning hike to a hilltop outpost adjacent to the air base, known as 'the perch'. My new unit, the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, had just moved from its perimeter defensive position to a site deeper into the countryside. On July 11th, exactly nine months after arriving at OCS in Quantico, I boarded a truck and headed out to meet the men of the first platoon of Lima Company 3/7. I met SSgt. Randall Walker, my platoon sergeant, and Sergeants Fitzmaurice, Desaire and Jordan, my new squad leaders, flesh and blood veterans of previous battles who replaced the book-learned NCOs of Quantico days. To my everlasting gratitude, these men proved to be able and amiable mentors to this very fresh and newly minted junior officer. The very next day some of us were helo-lifted to the Tra Bong outpost, an Australian fortified position surrounded by trenches and barbed wire several miles up the Song Tra Bong River. The briefing we received was given by confident and very professional Aussie officers, and truth be told, that was the last I ever heard of this particular outpost. Like the thousands of other isolated posts scattered throughout Vietnam's four Corps, they survived or were overrun or ultimately abandoned, obscure little paragraphs lost amid the bigger stories.

On my fifth day in country, the war began for real. The battalion was charged with sweeping an area along the Song Tra Bong River inland from Binh Son, the town situated where Rt. 1 crossed the river. It was the

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area southeast of Binh Son, towards the coast, that had recently seen the ferocious battles of Operation Starlight, the Marine's first major offensive against the enemy. The Viet Cong were heavily invested all along the river with the destruction of the Chu Lai base among their major objectives. Our job was to find them and eliminate the threat. Lima Company, along with the other maneuver units of 3/7, was trucked to the Binh Sonh area and then started patrolling up the river banks towards the higher hills to the west. As we hiked along a well beaten trail between hedgerows of bamboo thickets, I noted holes spaced on each side of the trail. Spider holes, I was told, there for villagers to jump into when the crap hit the fan, which it did almost immediately. "Crack, crack, crack" sounded right by my ear, followed very soon by the reports of weapons discharging in the distance. How close is a "crack" sound, I wondered, as I sprinted up to the head of the column to find out what was going on. It seemed that as I ran, equipment was bouncing all around my waist and my helmet didn't feel secure and I felt very much the new guy in the platoon. The VC snipers had found their mark and one of my men was hit. First week and first patrol and I'd already lost a guy. This was the first time I witnessed the skill and fearlessness of the Navy corpsmen assigned to the grunt units as 'Doc' Dodson (they were all called 'Doc') stopped the bleeding and applied first aid. I called in the first med evac of my tour, including the direction of any enemy fire the pilot might encounter. We were fairly close to Chu Lai and the response was very quick and soon we were headed west again. More fire came our way from across a rice paddy where a finger of land jutted out into the paddies. We lined up along the edge of the paddy and blasted away at that spit of land. I fired away with the M-14 I'd been issued three days earlier, and I noted spurts of water leaping up about half way across the paddy. Sgt. Walker tapped me on the shoulder and calmly said "Lieutenant, you might want to raise your aim a bit". Those were my rounds spraying the paddy! Fitzmaurice fired off a rifle grenade and someone yelled they'd seen a body flip up though my eyes really didn't register anything remotely successful. Later that afternoon we did sweep the area where we thought the VC had been and we found a blood trail. My initial spot report claimed one, no, make that two WIA "probables".

We bivouacked that night on a low hill not far away, and I dropped off to sleep rather readily, utterly exhausted despite all the excitement of my first live firefight. What I missed while sleeping were the opening salvos of the VC attack on Mike Company that night. Mike had a defensive perimeter on Tien Dao Hill having spent its day much like we had. That night the VC chose them and hit the hill hard, overrunning several of the hastily dug fighting holes and causing numerous casualties including several Marine KIAs. I did wake up in time to see the tracers and hear the explosions and listen to the excited chatter on the radio. The Mike Marines successfully counter attacked and secured their perimeter. The next day, as Mike Company consolidated its position, Lima and India Companies swept the fields and villages along the river. The first dead VC I saw, featuring a massive head wound, was lying amid a cluster of huts, near a litter which



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had obviously been abandoned in haste. In the dead enemy's pockets were some documents which later showed the dead soldier to be a unit leader and the documents of some value to our intelligence people. India would find five VC corpses stuffed in a culvert nearby. Mike Company would memorialize its battle on Tien Dao Hill with a ballad and a documentary titled "The Face of War", shot by a camera team that had accompanied the operation.

## **OCTOBER 17, 1966 – 101ST DAY IN COUNTRY - OPERATION PRAIRIE**

Operation Hastings, conducted just south of the DMZ in the summer of 1966, was the first major encounter between the Marines and the NVA. The NVA had no qualms about violating the demilitarized zone, and the job of the Third Marine Division was to stop them from coming south. Hastings was considered a success in that the NVA retreated back to its bases to lick its wounds. Hastings was planned to be of limited duration, and Operation Prairie continued its mission into the fall. In October of 1966, the 3rd Bn 7th Marines was op-conned to the Third Division to help with the final phases of Prairie. On Sept. 30, my platoon flew aboard a C-130 from Chu Lai to Dong Ha and then trucked to Cam Lo. From there we were taken up the hill to Camp Carroll, the largest Marine artillery base in Quang Tri Province, where we spent a sleepless night under the barrels of US Army 175s that fired throughout the night into North Vietnam. The next couple weeks we provided security for engineers who were repairing bridges and culverts along Rt. 9, Khe Sanh was not yet fortified but definitely in the planning stages. On one memorable day, we were in the shadow of The Rockpile, surrounded by elephant grass that towered over our heads, as we guarded the engineers who were replacing a bridge that had surely been destroyed by the Viet Minh many years before. Even with the reassuring presence of a section of tanks, I wondered how we could stop enemy infiltrators from getting very close to us in that seemingly impenetrable grass. The evidence of war was everywhere, but our initial patrols were uneventful. We developed a false sense of well-being and soaked up the beauty of those very green hills and valleys.

The one year anniversary of my arrival at Quantico found the platoon back at Camp Carroll but destined to be lifted north the next day, into an area ominously referred to as 'Helo Valley'. The valley was actually the Song Ngan River, and at one point, we patrolled through the streambed, surrounded by trees that joined overhead to prevent any observation from the air. Dozens of rectangular holes were dug into each bank, not unlike the catacombs of Rome. It became readily apparent how large numbers of NVA soldiers were making it south. Several helicopters had been shot down in this valley during Hastings, and one of our missions was to try and find the wrecks and ascertain what had happened to missing crew members. We did find one in a heavy bamboo thicket, an H-34, but no crew members. In a field nearby we found three freshly dug graves. Given our orders, we dug up the graves only to find the deteriorating remains of three NVA soldiers and a fearful, never-to-be-forgotten stench. Also, nearby were areas covered with brass, witness to fierce fighting that had taken place during Hastings and earlier phases of Prairie. We were mortared almost every evening, usually late enough to make counter- battery fire and med evacs difficult.

My platoon was given the task of leading the battalion after leaving the landing zone. In my mind was the fate of another Second Lieutenant on Operation Jackson whose map reading erroneously took the entire battalion down a wrong trail for about two clicks, only to have to turn around and trudge back to the right trail. My map reading skills came into serious question when we came to an intersection in a village that was clearly marked on the map. The maps were pretty good, all things considered. We were to take the trail to the left, the trail in the village, but there was no village. With growing trepidation, I ordered my guys to look around a bit, and tried to figure out where the hell we were. Shortly I heard a shout "Over here Lieutenant" and raced over to find the foliage covered ruins of a flimsy hut. Soon another shout and another  
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hut uncovered until we had the evidence that there had indeed been a village there. War and the jungle obscure simple habitats quickly. We trudged on, passing several massive 500 lb bomb craters, big enough to build small houses in. The platoon arrived at its objective, the base of a steep hill and ridgeline north of the river. It had been reported that an NVA regiment had been headquartered on that ridgeline during the previous couple months. We had no idea what was up there now.

Lima Two, under the command of OCS and TBS classmate Steve Sims, got the order to go up the hill first. My platoon hacked its way through the elephant grass to a point where we could support Second Platoon. Sims led his Marines up the hill but soon took heavy fire from the crest. Among the several Marines hit was Lt. Sims, shot through the stomach. The Second Platoon came back down the hill, carrying all its wounded except for Sims. Steve is a big man, and rather than have his men hump him to the med evac chopper on a stifling hot day, he walked, his hand held tightly over the hole in his gut.

First platoon got the order to attack the hill, but first we called in artillery and air strikes. Two Marine Phantoms made runs on the hill top, and as the dust and debris settled, we started up. This was one time when I actually used the training I received in small unit leadership classes. Using hand signals, I directed my three squads up that hill in squad rushes until we got to the top where we found a well-used trail leading further up the hill. With every sense alert, we pushed forward.

I was number four in line with my radio operator right behind me. I was very surprised, being number four in line, to be the one who noted a clearing to the right of the trail and two enemy soldiers 'looking' at me, their weapons pointing in our direction. A warning, and then a second look indicated that these enemy soldiers would be no threat to my Marines. The clearing had been created by F-4 ordinance and the near miss had twisted these two would-be assassins into human pretzels, wedged with their rifles into their ambush site. We quickly called in the two enemy KIA (confirmed), shouldered their weapons (I still have one of the bayonets), and moved up the trail. Only later did I think about what might have happened had those pilots not done their job perfectly that day. We all know that a favorite enemy target was the Marine in front of the Marine with the antenna.

A little further up the trail we passed what had obviously been an aid station, complete with rudimentary beds and litters, camp debris and bandages fresh with blood. We followed a blood trail north until we came to a lateral ravine. I prepared my platoon for a tactical crossing, one squad several meters to the right, another fifty or so to the left, the third squad and weapons to cross with me in the middle. I radioed the situation back to Lima Six, the CO, and very shortly the word came back "Stop. Don't go any further". A quick look at the map showed we were getting too close to the DMZ and our forces still observed the neutrality of the zone at that time. We returned back to our starting point at the base of the hill and then humped several more days, spending a couple days at Con Thien and eventually catching trucks at Gio Linh for the ride back to Dong Ha. On the way between Con Thien and Gio Linh, we passed an intersection noted simply "market" on the map. Nine months later, on July 2, 1967, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines would experience a day in hell at that innocent looking little intersection.

## **JULY 15, 1967 – 372ND DAY IN COUNTRY – THE FIRST ROCKETS**

In early January, I left my platoon with Lima and became the Executive Officer (XO) of Kilo Company. It was a sweet/sad day when I said farewell to the guys I had grown to really like and depend on and a job as platoon commander I thought I was finally getting a handle on. I moved over to Hill 41, in the shadow of Charlie Ridge about seven miles southwest of Da Nang, and assumed duties as second-in-command of a 200+  
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man rifle company. I also came under the command of Captain Dale "Deacon" Dorman, a career Marine whose command presence and military knowledge surpassed mine by millennia. Very shortly Kilo Company joined the 3/7 task force and embarked on Operation Desoto in the very southern edge of I-Corps, below Quang Ngai city. Our mission was to deny the NVA the rice-rich areas between the sea and the mountains. The NVA held this area, no doubt about it, despite the spotty presence of ARVN units that rarely left the security of their enclaves. The operation lasted several months, claimed the lives of almost one hundred Marines, finally turning over a more secure area to the 1st Cavalry Brigade that swooped in and did everything with helicopters that we had done on foot. At one point, shortly after getting the inevitable and very quick promotion to First Lieutenant, I ended up commanding Kilo Company for a few days after the company commander was shot. My old Lima One also took it hard, losing several KIAs including the man who had mentored me through those difficult early months, SSgt. Walker. I honored him with a brick on the memorial walkway at the USMC Museum at Quantico, and I visited his grave at Jefferson National Cemetery in St. Louis this past Veterans Day.

Upon returning to the Da Nang area after Desoto, my time in-country began to run short. I spent several weeks performing XO duties which included such mundane tasks as paying the troops but also the far-from-mundane task of identifying our dead at graves registration in Da Nang. In early June of 1967 I was surprised to be assigned back to Hill 10 as a fill-in platoon commander. I knew the area from my Lima days and no other qualified officer or NCO was available. Hill 10, a low treeless promontory, jutted out at the end of a mile long ridge pointed straight from the Da Nang-Dai Loc road towards the mountains to the west. Situated about a half mile along the low softly rounded ridge was a slight high ground that housed an ARVN post. Between the two positions, easily viewed and within supporting distance of each other, was a large village hugging the southern slope of the ridge. This was emphatically identified to us as a "friendly" village, and in fact many of the ARVN soldiers' families lived there. We were forbidden to patrol the village, leaving it strictly in ARVN hands.

On July 12, a small relief unit came in and Kilo Company embarked on an operation conducted in the area between Dai Loc and An Hoa, an area dubbed 'Arizona Territory' because it was, in essence, the wild wild west. Civilians had been evacuated from this area and it was considered to be a 'free-fire zone'; if it moves, shoot it. I vividly remember the death of a young woman, shot by one of our snipers as she ran down a trail near the base of the hill we had set up on. VC messenger or innocent villager? We never found out, but she lay out on that trail for two days, visited by our patrolling Marines who didn't quite know what to do with her. The third morning she was gone.

The radio call came in early the morning of June 15. "Saddle up; we're moving out". Helicopters picked us up from Arizona Territory and took us the short distance over Dai Loc and towards Da Nang, landing us just south of that 'friendly' village between the ARVN and Marine outposts near Hill 10. As we circled to land, we could see plumes of smoke rising from the airfield, six miles to the northeast. The airfield had provided earlier excitement as just six days before a crippled B-52 had tried an emergency landing, overshooting the runway and blowing up amid the minefields of the defensive perimeter. The smoke plumes we saw the morning of the 15th were from rocket strikes that had very accurately pummeled the airplane revetments, destroying several fighters and support facilities. Our mission that morning was to find where those rockets had been fired from. It was assumed that the enemy was long gone, the attack too well planned and the aim too accurate to have been done by amateurs.

We quickly pushed through the village and up the slopes of the ridgeline between the two outposts. The sight that greeted us near the trail that traversed the ridgeline was chilling yet awe inspiring. There, laid  
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out in a row along the ridge, were about sixteen charred pits, maybe three by ten feet each, shallow blackened depressions in the ground, each one pointing directly at those plumes of smoke six miles away. A few bamboo sticks lay about, but the only substantial evidence of the first rocket attacks on the Da Nang air base were those blasted pits. Of course, the brass descended on that ridge and the mission of the First Division quickly included defending the 'rocket belt'. Hill 10 soon became a battalion HQ, crammed with bunkers and support units, all necessitated by a small cadre of very brave and accomplished enemy soldiers, taking advantage of our naïve and benevolent rules-of-engagement, who brazenly infiltrated a friendly village, dug pits, set up their rockets, and fired them off, and were probably gone before the rockets even landed in those revetments, all right between the supposedly watchful eyes of the Marines and ARVN. You've got to hand it to them; they were good.

I visited our wounded Marines on the USS Repose, lying peacefully in Da Nang Bay, at the end of July and a few days later flew home via Okinawa and El Toro. My tenure with the USMC continued as a company commander with 2/2 at Camp Lejeune, a Med cruise aboard the USS Monrovia (the Monrovia was landing Marines at Tarawa on the day I was born), and a summer training Midshipmen and Naval ROTC cadets in riverine and amphibious warfare at Little Creek. I became a civilian again in January of 1969. These three days and the other 393 of my Vietnam tour remain among the highlights of my life.

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