



HILL FIGHTS AND 881 SOUTH, 1967

Joe McDavid

While I had been serving with Mike Company 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines as a Forward Observer, in February of 1967 I was transferred up to become the 3/3 Battalion Artillery Liaison Officer. I served as the Battalion Commanders Artillery Operations and Planning Officer. I would now only go out on Battalion sized operations. This was a relief, since working with a company you had the possibility of being sent out anytime a squad or platoon patrol anticipated enemy contact.

We made a number of Search and Destroy Missions all along the DMZ and engaged in a number of slugfests with the 324th B Division of the North Vietnamese Army.

As March began, 3/3 was located north of Cam Lo and tasked with moving into a blocking position north of 2/3, which had been hit hard by the NVA. On March 2, Lima Company was leading 3/3 to the Regimental Objective and the Battalion CP was moving with them. As we moved up this road I looked across at the column moving parallel up the road with me. I saw 1st Lt. Forrest Goodwin, an officer who was from Tylertown, Mississippi and a former basketball player at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. He and I had been in Basic School together at Quantico, VA and had become friends because we were both from Mississippi. He had recently joined Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines after being transferred from Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines because the 3/3 had lost so many infantry platoon commanders. He and I talked about getting together the next day to talk about old times. Forrest's Company secured the objective and a subsequent patrol encountered the NVA outguards of large enemy base camp. Unbeknownst to me, Captain John W. Ripley, the CO of Lima Company had tasked Forrest with searching the base camp. The platoon encountered heavy resistance and as Forrest drove his platoon into an assault, he and his radio operator were hit with machine gun fire. The next morning, I went through his platoon and asked his platoon sergeant where I could find him. I was directed back down the road where I found him dead on the side of the road with three bullet holes in his helmet. I promised that if I survived this conflict I would find his grave when I returned home and have that visit with him. I later would indeed visit his grave at the Hillcrest Memorial Gardens in Walthall County, Mississippi.

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We had our base at a position named Payable Hill which was adjacent to the Rockpile. On the morning of April 24th, I was in my bunker enjoying a wonderful "C" Ration breakfast when Major Long, the Battalion S-3, came in and told me to get my gear and my radio operator, Cpl. Felix Soto and report to the Landing Zone as soon as possible. Soto and I grabbed our gear and ran down to the LZ. Within minutes the Battalion Commander and Operations Officer and I were picked up by an CH-34 and were soon on our way flying west, further into Indian Country. We arrived at a single paved, airstrip located on a flat plateau surrounded by beautiful high mountains covered in green jungle and trees. Nearby was a small hamlet located close to the Laotian Border whose name would become famous- Khe Sanh. Little known to the rest of the world it was peaceful, tranquil and looked like a place where you would go to vacation. It appeared to be an abandoned air strip, as there was not much activity when we first landed. We observed a command bunker a few yards away from the runway that had been built by Special Forces several years earlier. We got off the helicopter and strolled off the runway and walked to the old bunker that was made of concrete and dug half way in the earth. It served as the Khe Sanh Combat Base's Combat Operations Center. It was old and had obviously seen better days. We were greeted by the Marine Senior Officer Present (SOP), who was being relieved as the responsibility for Khe Sanh was being shifted to the CO of the 3rd Marine Regiment. He was none too happy to see us. They seemed to think that our presence we would attract too much attention to the area. We were escorted into an underground briefing room, where Col. Wilder told us that we would await another party which was to come in for the briefing. While waiting, we were given a short briefing by Col. Wilder who indicated that two platoons of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, was engaged with an unknown number of North Vietnamese on Hill 861 just northwest of the airfield. They had been ambushed by a superior force and were unable to evacuate their dead and wounded.

A few minutes later the Commanding officer of the Third Marine Regiment, Colonel J. P. Lanigan, walked in. He was an older man with silver hair and his utility uniform was starched and clean. He greeted us and then pulled out a map and started pointing to areas on the map. Each time he would say "Recon got shot out of here". He advised that intelligence teams could not land anywhere within thirty miles of us without running into NVA. He then said the words that made my blood run cold. "We are surrounded by two or three divisions of North Vietnamese". He then told us that the remainder of Kilo Company and Mike Company would be arriving soon and joining us. He ordered us to reinforce the remnants of Bravo Company and take Hill 861. This was the beginning of the "Hill Fights".

On the morning of April 25th, Kilo Company from the Battalion arrived by helicopter. After Kilo Company arrived, the Command Group and Kilo started toward 861. We moved off the airstrip on the northwest end and started up the foothills leading to Hill 861. We had moved about 2000 meters when we were taken under fire by a North Vietnamese unit of unknown size. As I ran forward to seek cover, I suddenly lost all feeling in my right leg and immediately thought that I had been hit. I fell in a small depression in the ground. As bullets sailed just over my head I started feeling around to see where I was wounded. I then
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realized that a new pair of camouflage underwear that I had been issued had ridden up and cut off circulation in my leg. This underwear was given to us the day before and since most of our utilities were rotten, some of us thought it would be a great idea to wear them. It is a strange fact of life that in combat nobody wears underwear. As I lay on the ground, I unbuttoned my utility trousers and then proceeded to take out my K-Bar Knife and cut off the underwear. The enemy fire stopped. I wonder what was going on in the Vietnamese soldier's minds as they saw me cut off my underwear.

It took us almost ten hours to work our way to Hill 861, all the while receiving incoming fire. After we arrive in the vicinity of Hill 861, Kilo Company, 3/3 immediately attacked, but met stiff resistance from entrenched NVA near the summit and sustained heavy casualties. The hunkered down for the night and awaited additional units to break contact and evacuate their casualties.

It became a struggle to find and remove the Bravo Company survivors and casualties. Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines who had been chopped to 3/3 was the next unit to arrive in Khe Sanh. On the morning of April 26th, they were dispatched immediately to assist Kilo 3/3. Late on April 26th, Kilo 3/9 was similarly dispatched to locate Bravo 1/9 and assist them in evacuating their casualties. When Kilo 3/9 and Bravo 1/9 arrived at our CP at dawn on April 27th, it was shocking how badly Bravo 1-9 had been hit. There were few Marines that were not seriously wounded. All of the walking wounded and casualties had to be moved off the hill through the Command Group. It was a gruesome task for the Kilo Company 3/9 Marines to recover the bodies and wrap them in ponchos to be carried back to the rear. It was during this time that I experienced one of the worst moments of Vietnam. I had finally got a chance to eat a can of C-Rations and found that I only had a can of Ham and Lima Beans, which were disgusting. I was so hungry that I sat on the side of the trail and began to eat the "Ham and Mothers". As the bodies were being moved down the trail, past where I sat, a boot fell out of the poncho with the lower part of the leg still in it. Without thinking I picked up the boot and leg and placed it back on top of the poncho and continued to eat. Suddenly, I realized that I was no longer in the human race.

After retrieving all the Kilo 3/3 and Bravo 1/9 Marines off of Hill 861, we moved back down off the hill and then for the next two days we used artillery and airpower to blow that hill to the pieces. As the Artillery Liaison Officer, I plotted fires, but normally did not initiate fire missions. However on April 27th and April 28th, I did fire a number of missions at specific targets. The NVA was dug in so well that we had to blast them out.

Mike Company 3/3 arrived at the Khe Sanh Combat Base around 1600 on April 27th. I was glad to see many of my old friends in Mike Company. I had a special affinity for the Marines in Mike Company since we had gone through a lot together. I was introduced to Captain Ray Bennett, who was in temporary command of Mike Company.

Kilo Company 3/3 had been hit hard during the fight for Hill 861 and was to retire to the rear. We were told that another battalion would be replacing us and continue the attacks for Hill 881 South and Hill 881 North. I was elated because we would be getting out of this hell. The scuttlebutt was wrong. 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines did arrive at Khe Sanh and took over the mission of capturing Hill 861, but we stayed in the fight, too. After pummeling the summit of Hill 861 with air sorties and artillery fire on April 27th and 28th, 2/3 secured the summit unopposed.

Our mission had changed. Col. Wilder called the Command Group together on the side of Hill 861 and told us the news that we would make up a command group for a provisional Battalion which was to be made
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up of Kilo Company 3/9, Mike Company 3/9 and our own Mike Company. We were going to take Hill 881 South. While we were busy taking 881South, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines would move to the base of Hill 881 North and be ready to assault it once we were successful. Hill 881 South which was to the west of our position looked daunting. It was filled with NVA and they had been looking down on us during the fight for Hill 861. The Command Group moved into a position where we had a total view of the summit of Hill 881South. Capt. David Prue our Forward Air Controller and I had adjacent foxholes where we could coordinate both Artillery and Air Support. It was to be my job to plan the Artillery Prep on Hill 881 South, while Captain Prue handled air support. Shortly after we had taken our new position we received a number of mortar rounds in our area. Captain Prue got a small flesh wound from one of the mortar rounds. It was his second Purple Heart in a month.

As we observed the summit, almost every inch was covered with fortified bunkers and spider holes. We could drop a shell anywhere on the hill and hit a fortified position. Mike Company 3/3 sent two platoons to the summit on April 30th. They encountered stiff resistance from the fortified positions and took heavy casualties. They broke contact and we shelled the hill constantly for two days. Airstrikes were constantly being brought in to hit targets and destroy the fortifications. The first night Captain Prue called in "Puff the Magic Dragon" and they plastered the hill from every angle. It was the first time most of us had seen a demonstration of this kind of firepower. It was awesome.

After relentlessly hitting Hill 881South with everything we had, we attacked. Two companies attacked. Kilo Company 3/9 and Mike Company 3/9 conducted the attack. They were unopposed as they moved to the summit. The heavy use of supporting arms had driven the NVA off the summit and to the west.

I had been replaced as Mike Company 3/3 Forward Observer by 1st Lt David Rodgers and I didn't envy him and his task. Mike Company led the assault on Hill 881 South on April 30th. The Command Group watched in horror as the Marines advanced and were shot down by NVA hidden in "spider holes" and automatic weapons fire. Reports started coming in about the dismal failure of the new rifles we carried, the M-16s. All our artillery and air had not killed all of the defenders. The North Vietnamese were hidden in bunkers and spider holes and had survived the artillery and bombs. Mike Company 3/3 attacked up a draw and stumbled into an NVA Regimental Command Post that was finally destroyed. This was fortunate, because it helped to disrupt the communications and command of the units defending Hill 881 South. As the attack moved forward many Marines died because their newly issued M-16's jammed and became useless. Many of them took captured AK 47s to fight with. It became a free for all.

Due to the heavy casualties suffered by Mike Company's two lead platoons, the third platoon and Kilo 3/9 were sent up to support the two lead platoons. When they, too, sustained heavy casualties, it was Col. Wilder decided to pull everyone back and hammer the Hill with artillery and air. After two days of heavy bombardment, Kilo Company 3/9 and Mike Company 3/9 were sent back up. They secured the summit of Hill 881 South without opposition. The 3/3 Command Group split up and some of us moved forward on foot in trace of the attacking companies. We found dead Marines with broken down M-16s as they tried to fix the jammed weapons. Many Marines were found with AK 47s taken from dead enemy and used them until killed. After what seemed like days we finally fought and climbed to the top where we found elaborate bunkers and defense works. We pulled dead NVA bodies out of the bunkers and took them ourselves for cover. Most of us were physically and mentally exhausted by the time we took Hill 881 South. Just because we had reached the summit did not mean that the fight was over. The next few days were spent clearing out pockets of resistance in and around the hill.

As we got to the top of Hill 881 South, a Marine about 50 yards in front of us was suddenly struck by a bolt
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of lightning. This was so odd and out of place.

Shortly after we had solidified our positions on Hill 881 South, and as 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines were fighting to take Hill 881 North, we were ordered to take cover because an "Arclight" B-52 bombing strike was going to take place within 2000 yards of our position and it would be dangerous for us to be in the open. While taking cover in our foxholes and bunkers we observed the contrails of the B-52s. We watched the bombs empty out of the aircrafts and slowly float to the earth. Suddenly a rumbling and wave of explosions enveloped us. It was followed by shock wave which stunned most of us.

On May 2nd, I was notified that I would be replaced by 1st Lt David Rogers as the Artillery Liaison Officer and left Hill 881S on a helicopter to the rear. This would not be the end of the "Hill Fights" but it concluded my part in the effort.

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