



Lonnie Myers



## FIRST TOUR OF DUTY IN VIETNAM

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### Quantico, the birthplace of Marine Lieutenants

Our six months at The Basic School went quickly as the new 2nd Lieutenants were transformed from candidates, afraid of every loud voice and trying very hard to sharpen understanding of what was expected of a leader of Marines, to young officers who thought themselves invincible and saw themselves as the strongest, fastest, smartest, killers on the planet. In this process, I became friends with the finest men I had known to that time in my life. Jacquie and I enjoyed this time learning to navigate the social and economic process of this new life and became anxious to move on to the next adventure. Next, the lieutenants were assigned a military occupational specialty (MOS) and would prepare to be sent into battle. I became a basic artillery officer (0801) and would go to Fort Sill, Oklahoma to the U.S. Army's artillery school for eight weeks to learn the workings of field artillery weapons, how they fired, how they were aimed, what ammunition they fired, how powerful it was, how the weapons were employed, and the destruction they caused. After school, most of my classmates found themselves in receipt of orders to Vietnam.

### Quantico, the birthplace of Marine Lieutenants

My wife, Jacquie, and I were to travel to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to join the artillery regiment of the Second Marine Division, the Tenth Marines.

We stayed at Camp Lejeune for one year, during which I served as the fire direction officer in "Whiskey Battery", a 4.2 inch mortar unit of six mortars, each mounted on a 75 pack howitzer frame, pulled behind a  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton truck and fired by dropping the projectile down the front of the barrel. I hadn't seen one before I arrived at the gun park. Another new experience, but I survived. After a few months, I was reassigned to Battery E, 2nd Battalion, Tenth Marine Regiment. During the year in North Carolina, I was sent to a four week embarkation school, to learn how to load weapons, Marines, and vehicles aboard ships for transport to landing beaches around the world. My first assignment was to load my battalion on the U.S.S. DONNER, a navy landing ship (LSD) with a helicopter landing pad, a mezzanine deck and a huge well deck for carrying and landing all of our vehicles, weapons and equipment. We sailed to Vieques, Puerto Rico for a week of shooting at targets on the island, a couple of days of liberty at the small village of Ponce, and the four-day trip home. An excellent and enjoyable experience, but the fear in the back of my mind was that I might get assigned as an embarkation officer on one of the Navy's troop ships and do this job for two years. My tendency to get motion sickness on occasion had been with me from childhood. I escaped that assignment unscathed with no mishaps. Later that year I was called by the Battalion Commander and asked to fill a quota to attend Tactical Aerial Observer School, at nearby New River Air Station. The Commander explained that the school was ten weeks long and taught officers to fly as an observer, in UH-1 helicopters,

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or other small aircraft and communicate with Marines on the ground to gather intelligence, call for supporting fire and in other ways assist them in their mission. The Job would provide flight pay, non-pilot flying experience, and a ticket to Vietnam after the school. I told him that I knew that I would be going to Vietnam sooner or later and I would like the chance to make more money and the other reward of seeing the battlefield from the sky. Before graduation from AO School, I was in receipt of orders to be at the First Marine Division, in Da Nang, South Vietnam, in June, 1967.

Jacquie and I loaded our household items in a moving van, our bodies in the '59 bug and drove back to Oregon, where she would spend the year, while I was away, working on the third year of her teaching degree. We found out before I left that we were expecting our first baby, due in January, 1968. We renewed our contact with our families, found an apartment for Jacquie and our expected arrival near my parents, and I prepared to depart for 13 months of warfighting. We were thinking that we would meet for a break sometime during the year.

### **On to RVN**

I arrived in Da Nang in mid-June, 1967 and, after spending a couple of days, checking in at the First Marine Division headquarters, and then at the 11th Marine Artillery headquarters, I was sent to Marble Mountain Airstrip, along the coast near Da Nang. I was assigned to be attached to the Air Observer unit of the Division G-2 (Intelligence Section) based at the air strip. There were seven AOs assigned to the unit, relying on an aviation squadron, O-1C Detachment, from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, to fly with us in small, single wing, single engine, 1950s vintage aircraft, called "Bird Dogs. Our living quarters, "hooches", were screened-in structures, which were along the beach and accommodated 6 AOs.



**O-1C**



**O-2A**

There was a mess hall, showers, and a maid, who kept our clothes clean. We flew one or two flights a day of 2 or three hours duration in the Bird Dogs or occasionally we were supported by the 220th Aviation Platoon, of the U.S. Army with their O-1G newer aircraft and the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron of the U. S. Air Force, in their Bird Dogs and the O-2, twin engine air craft. In either case, we worked mainly with Marines on the ground, directing Marine air, naval gunfire, and Vietnamese Artillery on enemy targets as requested by supported forces. In September, I was ordered to move to the 11th Marine headquarters, near the 1st Division command post, to stand watch for part of each day in the regimental fire direction center. The Marine units and the main air base at Da Nang had been receiving 122 mm rocket, mortar and small arms fire from enemy weapons located in the surrounding hills. We began flying three flights a day in UH-1 aircraft around the "rocket belt" near Da Nang.

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I was able to meet Jacquie in Hawaii for R&R for New Year 1968. We enjoyed a week of time on the beach, taking in the shows, like Don Ho and Rosemary Clooney for New Year's Eve. Jacquie had a checkup before her flight back to Oregon to ensure safe travel. She survived the adventure and our baby, Nichole, was born on January 16th.

Back in country, during January and February, 1968, we flew observation missions 24 hours a day during the Tet offensive to stop the attacks on the air fields at Da Nang Main and Marble Mountain, as well as attacks on the logistic and headquarters sites in the area.

### **My First Command**



In February, I was transferred to 2nd Battalion, 11th Marines, North of Da Nang, near the village of Phu Loc. I was assigned to be the logistic officer (S-4) for the battalion for one month, then, assigned to be the Commander of Battery E. We were in support of 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine (infantry) Regiment during their battle to recover Hue City from the North Vietnamese invading forces. We continued to support 2/5 until I left to return home in July, 1968. My artillery battery became the center of attention for Vietnamese enemy mortar attacks and road mines along Highway One. We lost two Marines killed and several wounded during the months at Phu Loc. It rained every day during the month of March and it seemed that each day, we were required to dig or pull vehicles out of the mud and place trenches for drainage around our bunkers. A couple of experiences I

find worthy of relating, since they have haunted my mind for the past 50 years. Both involve death resulting from combat action. I received word one morning in early May that one of my radio operators, serving as a member of an artillery forward observer team with Company E, 2nd Battalion, a few miles South of Phu Loc, had been killed the previous night by friendly fire. The Lance Corporal was observing a U.S. air strike on an enemy position about 200 meters from his location when he was struck by shrapnel from one of the bombs dropped by a Marine A-4, attacking the target. First Sergeant Vaughn and I went to the morgue in Phu Bai the next day to identify the remains of our casualty for the official record. As we examined the contents of the body bag, we were both on the verge of emotional collapse from the horrible sight and order. There were other body bags in the hard back tent set up for a temporary morgue. Some were partially open, giving an odor and view of decaying remains of casualties from the ongoing operation. The sight added to our shock and, after making positive identification of our Marine, we went back to our jeep and began the very quiet ride back to our battery position, a few miles away.

On a very dark night in mid-May, I was catching some sleep on a folding cot in the open air outside the battery fire direction center, when I heard the familiar "thump, thump, thump" of enemy incoming 82 mm mortar rounds. I rolled off my cot and jumped through the open bunker door of the Fire Direction Center just as a mortar round hit a five-gallon water can, which was sitting next to the cot where I had been sleeping. I took another leap into the bunker as another round exploded next to the outside wall of the bunker. Small pieces of shrapnel zinged through the sandbags, breaking the kerosene lamp which was hanging from a tent pole hook. Everyone in the FDC was unhurt, but I could hear and feel other rounds impacting throughout the battery area. There was a lull in the attack, and I dashed out to get some idea of what the damage might be and what counter-battery action we were taking. As I ran past gun one's position, I could hear moaning from inside the sandbag wall. I jumped over the wall and located a cannoneer, lying on his side

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on the ground, not moving, but still moaning. I yelled for the corpsman and pulled the Marine onto my lap. He had his steel helmet on, but there was a hole through the top of it. Two other cannoneers arrived with lights, exposing the blood from the head wound. It was bad, and the Marine was continuing to moan, with no other movement or communication. We carried the Marine to the battery aid station, where the corpsman removed his helmet and began preparing him for vehicle transport to the landing zone for airlift to Phu Bai. The Marine was on his way to the medical facility within 20 minutes. We learned the next day that the Corporal had died in route to Phu Bai. The mortars had caused several wounds among my Marines, damage to vehicles and structures, and another lasting memory imprinted in my mind that will stay with me for a lifetime.

We made a trip to Da Nang once a month to pick up a pallet of beer, a pallet of soda, and a “sundry” pack of candy, cigarettes, and toiletries to help make our misery take a pause. One of my gun section chiefs, Sergeant Kresse, was an immigrant from Germany, and had been in Vietnam for over a year when I arrived and was seeking U.S. citizenship through his combat service in the Marine Corps. He was a strong leader, demanding proficiency from his howitzer section through intimidation and example. He was the only Marine in my battery that enjoyed drinking warm beer. When the Vietnamese owned ice plant in the nearby village was destroyed by enemy mortar fire, the E Battery Marines would willingly trade Sgt. Kresse their warm/hot beer for his cigarettes and a little kinder treatment. Battery First Sergeant Vaughn kept tabs on Sergeant Kresse, to insure that the ration limit of two beers per day was not exceeded.

## **Home**

In early July, 1968, I turned the command of Battery E over to 1st Lt. Johnny Davis, who had been the Artillery Liaison Officer with 2/5, got a ride to Da Nang with the 1st Sergeant and prepared to fly out to Saigon and on to the continental U. S. (CONUS) and home. I had received orders to report to Marine Corps Recruiting Station, Denver, Colorado, by the first of August. While in RVN, I had taken part of my flight pay and purchased a new, two-door, 1968 Pontiac Le Mans, with a Hurst conversion kit and “4 on the floor”, through the post exchange system in Da Nang. It was waiting for us at the Pontiac dealer in La Grande, Oregon, when I arrived to pick up Jacquie and my new daughter, Nichole. The car was a dream, but my family had almost outgrown it by the time we took ownership.

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