



## TANK PLATOON COMMANDER 2ND PLATOON, CHARLIE COMPANY 1ST TANK BATTALION - 1966-67

Jim Ray

Upon leaving Quantico I attended the Tank Officers Class at Camp Pendleton. There were about 12 of us in that class that eventually made it to Vietnam. This is the class and I assume there are members of the VTA who may recognize some of them as their platoon commander.



Several of us went to Vietnam immediately and among them were Lou Dobbin, Phil Sauer, and Wayne Hayes who were KIA's near the DMZ with the 3dMarDiv. We were all on the same flight from San Francisco, and I was the only one who made it back home. The probable difference was some Remington Raider made a mistake and cut me orders to the 1st Marine Air Wing. Upon checking into the Wing and given I had not become a Naval Aviator at the Tank School, I was given the choice of which division I wanted to join. I had no idea what the tactical situation was at the time and chose the 1stMarDiv, because I had been a 106mm antitank team leader with the 7th Marines in my enlisted hitch. While we had our constant exposure to the VC, occasional NVA action, and of course land mines down south, it wasn't the meat grinder actions on or around the Hill Fights near the DMZ where the majority of the 33 of my classmates ended up on the Vietnam Wall. I have always wondered about those orders.

.....  
My assignment as Platoon Commander of 2d Platoon C Company 1st Tanks was followed up at the tail end of my tour with a few months as the Battalion S-5 Civic Action Officer. Both assignments gave me a pretty good perspective on what the war was or was not about. C-2 was the last 1st Tanks platoon to come into country off the Special Landing Force (SLF) on 3 August 1966 and was attached to the Battalion HQ and its initial assignment was in direct support of the Chu Lai Defense Command. Its parent Company C had already embarked to Da Nang where it was in direct support of the 1st Marines at Marble Mountain. I arrived in country shortly after it had come off the SLF and was its first platoon commander in country. The first couple of months were spent at Chu Lai where we spent most of our time guarding the airfield at night.



Our first major field operation took place on 3 October when I was assigned as Detachment Commander taking my Platoon, an Ontos platoon, Tank Retriever and a rifle squad and cut a new trail where no tanks had been before to link up with the 2d Korean Marine Corps (KMC) Brigade in the Binh Son area near where the 7th Marines conducted Operation Utah in March. While the operation didn't amount to much, we were taken under sniper fire several times on the way out and got our first VC KIA on 4 October at BS 728894. Since I was commanding the lead tank some sniper rounds were clearly coming my way, because I was hearing the same "snapping" sound I remember when pulling butts as a boot at the Camp Mathews rifle range in 1957. This was our first opportunity to operate independently, and we gained a lot of experience on the way back using the Tank Retriever and daisy chains to pull both tanks and Ontos' out of a quagmire of red mud during a monsoon.

On 26 October, we embarked on an LST and rejoined C Company commanded by Captain Phil Weigand at Marble Mountain. The C Company CP was adjoined with the 3/1 CP and was just across Route 538 from MAG-16 at BT748052. The 1st Marine TAOR was south of Marble Mountain and was relatively good tank country with sand bottomed rice paddies, extensive sand dunes, and a beach allowing us to move south in the surf then crossing inland at Viem Dong BT101658. The map below is an extract of the one I carried around in the field which was a composite of 4 other maps because the principal terrain of the 3/1 TAOR inconveniently landed right in the middle of them. There were several landmarks in the area. Marble Mountain was the most prominent and it straddled Route 538 at BT072700 and was visible throughout much of the TAOR. The second was a dirt road which became our MSR starting at Nui Kim Son BT072406 and was a spur off 538 which ran south directly in the middle of the TAOR. The third was the "horseshoe" at BT095635 which later Marines called the "Riviera" where we would often find ourselves getting action and hitting landmines.

The platoon during my tour spent most of its time in support of 3/1 under LtCol DeAtley, but sometimes, we supported 1/1 under Lt. Col Van "Ding Dong" Bell. We participated in several battalion sized operations as a platoon, but most of the time were farmed out as heavy and light sections in various company and platoon

.....

.....

size sweeps as well as independently cruising around the 3/1 TAOR when they were on operations across the Vinh Dien River. My role as the principal Armored Officer in battalion level operations gave me a unique perspective that most lieutenants would not get. My role was similar to that of a company commander in the planning phase of operations, yet gave me the opportunity to act as a platoon commander in the execution phase. I would often have elements of other armored units such as Amphibious Tractors (Amtrak) or Ontos Anti-Tanks assigned to me and would act as a detachment commander for a particular operation.

Much of my time however was spent as a section leader on Tank C21 supporting a platoon or smaller unit operation either in a base camp or somewhere on the prowl within the TAOR which meant I spent most of my time in the field. Given what I had been trained to do at Quantico, I believed I was more useful in the field and Gunny Jones who knew more about tanks that I would ever learn in my tour was more useful making sure the troops had what they needed and the tanks were being properly maintained and supplied each time we got back to the CP.

From the time, we arrived in late October until I left my tank platoon in March, we were involved in almost constant skirmishing actions as well as large scale Operations Arcadia, Glenn, Searcy, Stone, and Teton II. About two days after bringing the platoon up from Chu Lai, we found ourselves near the hamlet of Khai Tay (1) at BT053684, which is about 1 1/2 miles southwest of Marble Mountain. We conducted an informal County Fair to support a civic action team whose mission was to get the villagers out and provide medical assistance to the children and drill them with a little government propaganda. Well the local VC didn't care too much for this so they decided to bring our unit under fire from the hamlet of Man Quan (2) at BT046685 which was about 500 meters west. We had a pretty lively firefight going and the end result was we killed one of them and one of my tank commanders, Sgt Maddox was wounded. It was a relatively minor affair in which we had our hands tied behind us because we couldn't leave the lightly armed civic action team to pursue the bad guys.



**MAP OF 3/1 TAOR 1966-1967**

.....



.....  
On 8 November, we were assigned to participate in Operation Arcadia which took place in an area west of the S. Vinh Dien River which was inaccessible by tanks. Our role was to maintain constant patrol throughout the 1st Marine Regiment TAOR to interdict any enemy movement throughout the area while the bulk of the infantry was engaged in the operation. We operated as two sections running patrols by day and setting up at night in patrol bases. The principal purpose was to prevent the TAOR from being traversed by large-scale enemy unit's intent upon either attack or escape from the operational units engaged in Arcadia.

I had one significant encounter during these patrols. There was a semi-permanent patrol base located on the east side of the Song Hiep Stream at BT129618 near the hamlet of Ha My Tay (1) which was manned by a platoon from Alpha Company 1/1. My two tanks were moving in a southerly direction on the West Side of the stream when we heard a very active fire fight going on near the patrol base. It was difficult to see exactly what was going on but I could tell that the Marine unit was firing across the stream into a dense hedge grove on our side of the stream. I left my other tank on the high ground to cover me while I moved down to the river and up the west Bank to position myself to bring fire on the hedge grove. We fired about four rounds of main gun canister and a lot of 30-caliber machine gun fire into the hedge grove and the enemy fire came to an immediate halt. I closed the loop on the firefight by contacting the infantry platoon commander on the radio and he said they were already on their way in force across the stream. We continued on patrol but the next day we passed by the area again and I stopped over to see the platoon commander to find out what he had discovered across the stream. He told me that the four canister rounds accounted for six VC KIA's and a perfectly innocent water buffalo which had been grazing in the wrong place at the wrong time. They also captured some VC who had been pretty demoralized by all the canister fire flying around.

I was very familiar with this particular patrol camp because we spent several nights in the field at this location. One memorable incident that occurred when we were posted there continuously for a couple of weeks was a particularly annoying local VC who had a habit of sneaking up on our position from thick undergrowth down the hill from our position for several nights in a row and lobbed a couple of grenades at us only to swiftly disappear. We did a little "outside the box" thinking and brought up a flame thrower tank. Since a flame tank closely resembles a gun tank, our persistent grenade tossing VC returned that night thinking there was nothing different and proceeded to throw another grenade at us. The flame tank immediately fired a couple of short bursts of flame down the hill and the next morning the infantry sent a patrol down and found one crispy VC whose days in the pitching rotation for the National Liberation Front was finished.

During the last two weeks of November and early December, it rained almost constantly and while it doesn't affect combat operations it does make them even more miserable. In early December, we participated in Operation Searcy where we conducted a County Fair around the hamlet of Tra Khe (2) at BT075681. On this operation, we left the command post at 0400 in the morning and since it had been raining all night, it was thoroughly miserable. As we approached the hamlet to link up with the infantry, we found the VC had surrounded it with concertina barbed wire to tangle any vehicles that might approach. Since I was in the lead tank, I left my vehicle and approached the wire to cut it so we could get into the hamlet area. Just before reaching the wire, I felt the ground give way below my right foot. I immediately fell on my back to keep from stepping further into the hole. Everyone froze because it had all the appearances of a land mine. One of the tank commanders came over to me with a bayonet and probed the hole to see if there was a mine in it. What he found was a punji trap that fortunately didn't have a mine underneath as many of them did. The punji trap had three sharp barbs attached to a wooden board and it had just barely penetrated the sole of my boot. We carefully searched the area and found 8 more of them.  
.....

.....  
As we linked up, I assumed my role as the armored detachment commander and had seven armored amphibious assault vehicles (LVT) assigned to me as well as my five tanks. Our role was to hold down about 1,500 meters of the cordon while the infantry swept through the village removing all of the non-combatant women, children, and old men and placed them within a hastily constructed barbed wire enclosure where we had erected tents. The infantry then began making a detailed search of the hamlet looking for spider holes, tunnels, and other Viet Cong hiding places.

The day went uneventfully until about 1400 in the afternoon at which time the VC attacked one of the Marine units and managed to shoot down a helicopter. The attack came from the West Side of the Vinh Dien River and we responded with rocket firing helicopter gunships, artillery, and air strikes. I moved a couple of tanks over to the eastern bank of the river and we fired a number of 90-millimeter main gun rounds. The direct fire from the tanks seemed to have had some impact because they ceased firing across the river. This was a pretty typical action because they had the advantage of knowing the terrain, knowing where we were, and then melting back into the countryside once we brought in firepower.

That night when we returned to the cordon I got my first taste of what is known as "friendly fire." The cordon around Tra Khe was a triangular affair with my armored detachment of tanks and Amphibious Tractors (LVT) on the west, Mike Company 3/1 on the east, and Kilo Company 3/1 on the south. We knew we had at least some VC holed up in the hamlet because we had captured three of them with hand grenades earlier in the day. At about 2100 that night we took a few rounds from the hamlet and returned the fire. Unfortunately, all sides of the cordon lost fire discipline and began pouring fire into the hamlet. Unfortunately, some of the fire was ending up on Marine units on the opposite sides of the cordon. One of my tanks took at least 15 rounds of direct hits, all from Marine units. Luckily no one was hurt and we got it under control after a few minutes. The bottom line is that a cordon can quickly become a circular firing squad and the VC was good at starting a confusing situation with a few well timed shots. We had a pretty successful "county fair" there for the next several days and even had a few visitors. Among them was an Army general, a couple of Colonels from Headquarters Marine Corps, and if you can believe it, the governor of North Carolina who must have been trolling for votes from Cherry Point and Camp Lejeune.

On 17 December, we participated in Operation Glenn which involved a cordon around a Leper Colony at Ha My Dong (2) BT 135617. While a bona fide leper colony it doubled as a VC hospital and the area was controlled night and day by the VC and we always got action when we went there. While there we picked up 3 wounded VC and transported them back to the CP for interrogation. After leaving the colony we cut inland and surrounded Hai An (1) at BT058678 which was a hard-core VC hamlet looking for a reported VC unit holed up in that area. The grunts went through the hamlet pretty thoroughly and located a number of VC tunnels and spider holes and blew them up. They didn't find the unit they were looking for but they were accounted for the next day.

It seems that as Marine ground units were combing through the area, the VC unit had hidden among the reeds in a nearby rice paddy and when the ground units got close were lying down breathing through reeds. They had probably been trying to escape to one of their underground tunnels, which often had entrances in or around rice paddy dikes. While they managed to evade detection by the ground units that were sweeping through the area, they didn't anticipate the "bird dog" spotter aircraft that was circling overhead who saw them. The bird dog called in a nearby A-4 Skyhawk who dropped a load of napalm on them which ensured that the hard-core VC who floated to the surface wouldn't be around to fire on Marines again.

.....

.....  
One of the features of operations within this TAOR was the incidence of landmines. Most of those we stumbled across only required “short-tracking” around the damage and limping it back to the CP. An example is on 10 January one of our tanks participating in a routine sweep inside the “horseshoe” at BT109647 detonated a mine and we began receiving fire which was returned and resulted in 5 VC KIA and 3 probable. The damage was moderate and the driver was injured but did not require evacuation.

The 1966 Christmas, New Year, and 1967 Tet “truces” were pretty murky affairs to those of us on the ground. The only thing we knew about them was when it was announced by our units that we would stand down for certain periods but we had no idea who had negotiated them and with who and what the exact terms were.

All we knew about the Christmas and New Year celebrations were most of us got a chance to chow down on hot turkey, ham, and mincemeat pie with a few trimmings. The Charlie Company officers were invited across the Route 538 to share Christmas dinner with the MAG-16 helicopter pilots, and we took advantage of it. We got to see a few NFL football games on film and it was the first time I got to see the Dallas Cowboys who were contenders for the first time and were sporting a high school contemporary of mine, Don Meredith at quarterback.

A few days after Christmas, the field Marines got to go into DaNang and watch Bob Hope go through his paces. While he was a genuine American hero whose quips we really enjoyed, it was the dancing and gyrations of Joey Heatherton and the Korean Kittens that brought down the house. He also brought Anita Bryant, Phyllis Diller, Vic Damone, and the reigning Miss World of the time. Phyllis Diller said she was the only girl that didn’t get roses when she stepped off the helicopter. They gave her a machete and a map of the jungle.

This was Tet 1967, the one before the big Tet offensive by the VC the next year in 1968 and a “truce” was supposedly in effect. In any event, a Marine unit from 3/1 was administratively patrolling in the area on New Year’s Day near Khai Tay (3) at BT048669 and was ambushed. One of the Marines was killed and we had to go out and bring him back on one of our tanks.

That night we received intelligence that high-ranking VC officers were having a big meeting in the same hamlet where the ambush took place. Khai Tay (3) was known to be a VC stronghold, so the battalion command decided to form up a platoon-sized operation to go on another unofficial “administrative” patrol. I had my entire platoon of 5 tanks with me and we took the infantry platoon we were escorting north of the hamlet where we dropped them off. We then took up a blocking position in a lightly wooded knoll in the sand dunes on the east overlooking the rice paddies surrounding the hamlet. In the meanwhile, the infantry platoon circled around and behind the hamlet on foot and began sweeping through from the west. It appears our intelligence was on target, because about 50 VC began streaming across the rice paddies directly towards our blocking position in the woods.

They had no idea that 5 tigers awaited them in the woods, but we had them zeroed in our sights all the way. They began crossing the paddies on the dikes, and we waited until they were in the middle before we began firing canister rounds with our main guns on them. After picking up that dead marine the day before near this very same hamlet, we were making the same exception to the “truce” they had made the day before. While they all dropped into the water as soon as we began firing it is clear we got a lot of them but it was difficult to distinguish between the KIA/WIA’s from those hiding behind the dikes. Given the “unofficial” nature of the operation, we linked back up with the infantry and expeditiously returned to our Marble Mountain command post satisfied that some degree of justice had been served. Since this was during the  
.....

.....  
so-called "truce" period, neither the infantry platoon commander nor I submitted an official after-action spot report.

One of the most looked forward to events of the Vietnam tour was the 7-day Rest and Recreation (R & R) trip. The single men usually went to the exotic places, and the family men like me met their wives in places like Hawaii. I took the very first R & R trip I could because I had experienced enough close calls to prompt me to take it while I was still around to do so. Our trip took place from January 11-18 and we stayed in the Reef hotel on Waikiki beach.

An interesting event caught my attention while there. I read an article in the Honolulu newspaper describing a ferocious battle that had taken place south of DaNang, but it didn't mention tanks. I knew that it probably involved the 1st Marines and maybe the tanks, because of the location near Marble Mountain. When I got back to my unit on the 18th, I discovered that my platoon had been involved, and I was now commanding one with several heroes in it. The battle has been better described elsewhere, but in summary, a heavy section of C2 under Sgt John Bartusevics responded to the call to come to the aid of a K/3/1 patrol base at Hai An (1) BT058678 that had been overrun by an NVA Sapper Battalion. The section was supposed to wait for the arrival of an infantry company, but the battle could be heard and seen as the sky was lighting up at a location that C-2 tankers were familiar with. Sgt Bartusevics made the first of several crucial decisions that night. After waiting about 20 minutes for the infantry company and they hadn't shown up the section departed unaccompanied which under normal circumstances we wouldn't do. There was nothing normal about this night and Sgt Bartusevics elected to approach the patrol base by crisscrossing down the Main Supply Route (MSR) to turn west at BT067676 rather than chancing an ambush approaching across the obvious wide-open sand dunes just south of Nui Kim Son at BT071701.

Upon arriving at the patrol base, alive with red and green tracers crossing back and forth, he led the tank section at a right angle directly across the concertina wire in order not to get it tangled up in the tracks. He directed the section not to button up to avoid running over wounded Marines and to use only their machine guns. Each tank was then on its own and they began moving around the camp and effectively became mobile foxholes in high silhouette with the tank commanders firing the machine guns and the drivers and loaders their personal weapons. Sgt Bartusevics noticed an enemy machine gun firing away at the Base CP and ordered his driver to hunker down and run right over the structure it was firing from. After fire slacked, one of the tank commanders took his tank back across the wire to bring back 4 Marines in the Listening Post that had been overrun during the attack. The decision Sgt Bartusevics made not to wait for the infantry company was justified by his having to go back across the wire after the Sapper unit was fleeing toward the Vinh Dien River at BT027675 and escort the infantry company that had gotten lost in the dunes north of the patrol base. The tanks were credited with 20 VC KIA and 10 probable. Given the "political correctness" that had already infected the way the war was being presented to the public, Stars and Stripes reported that a Marine patrol had ripped a VC Battalion and had only "light" casualties, rather than the 17 KIA's and 33 WIA's it had actually suffered. Sgt Bartusevics who made the crucial decisions and led the section was awarded a Silver Star. Corporals Soncrant, McNally, Boyette, and the driver on Sgt Bartusevics tank got Bronze Stars. Given the capricious nature of who gets and who deserves or doesn't deserve appropriate military awards, every one of the tankers out of their hatches and exposed in high silhouette probably deserved some kind of award.

On about the 25th of January, Charlie Company moved its command post from Marble Mountain deeper into Indian country near the hamlet of Cau Hai (1) at BT073658. It was a good move tactically because it put us closer to where all the action was taking place. It was operated as a combat base camp which meant  
.....

.....  
that many of the amenities we had come to enjoy at the old command post were no longer possible. We had done a lot of nice things to our old command post and were comfortable there. We now had to uproot the entire camp and re-establish it on top of a sand dune. Since it was right out in the open, it was also subject to occasional sniper fire from local unfriendly hamlets. The engineers had bulldozed a ten-foot high sand wall around the perimeter but it did little to deter snipers who could fire down on it from higher elevations outside.

On The 1st of February, a sniper killed the Sergeant Major of the First Battalion First Marines (1/1) as he was riding in a jeep on the MSR adjacent to Tra Khe (2). Since we had already conducted several operations in this hamlet, and by this time was conceded to be hostile, a decision was made to level the hamlet and move all the people out into a government controlled area. My platoon was assigned as part of the operation and spent most of a day knocking down concrete houses with the tanks as the infantry torched the wooden structures. As it turned out, this was my next to last activity, because I was half-way through my tour and the 1st Lieutenants were being rotated elsewhere as needed to make room for the arriving 2d Lieutenants.

My last operation in the field as a platoon commander took place in the middle of February about six miles Southeast of Dai Loc in the Go Noi Island area. This was Operation Teton II and was a complicated and poorly executed operation taking place in an area I was unfamiliar with. The objective was a heavily fortified Viet Cong staging area south of the Song Thu Bon River. The scheme of maneuver had the Navy taking my tank platoon across the Song Chiem Son River in "Mike" boats. We were then to expeditiously proceed down Route 537 where we were to knock out concrete reinforced bunkers to support the infantry which was right behind us on Amphibious Tractors. It was not to be. The first tank to cross was my command tank, and the Mike Boat did not get the tank close enough to the bank to get enough traction, and both the boat and tank were stuck. It took about five hours to extricate the tank, which was in the water up to its fenders.

Meanwhile, the infantry crossed the river in their amphibious tractors and proceeded down the road without us. In order to maintain liaison between the infantry and tanks, I took a radio operator along with me and moved out with the infantry command element on foot. By the time I linked back up with my tanks, I had gained a better appreciation of what it was like to operate on the ground without my armored "home away from home." We were also in a heavily wooded area with thousands of tropical birds and the little crawling things they fed upon. I got an even better appreciation that night when we spent a cold and wet night shivering in a foxhole without C-Rations or a poncho to protect us from the rain. The next day the tanks finally got across the river and life became bearable again with the little pleasures of home like dry clothing and C-Rations. Although we exchanged a few mortar rounds with the enemy, there was very little combat activity because the noise and clatter at the river and failure to get rapidly across gave them all the warning they needed to speedily vacate the premises.

When we got back to our command post from the operation, it was time for me to pack up and travel to the Battalion command post and take up my new duties. I went to the troop barracks and spent some time with them reminiscing about some of the things which had happened during my watch. They had only one operation behind them and no "hats" (VC KIA's) on their turrets when I picked them up. By the time I left them some element of my platoon had been in the field almost continuously and we had 52 hats painted on our turrets. I was fortunate that my first command had contained some good troop leaders. Gunnery Sergeant Jones did a good job helping a young platoon commander just out of the Basic School learn his job. Staff Sergeant Gant was an experienced tanker from Arkansas who provided much needed maintenance and operational experience, and I had a good set of tank commanders in McNally, Bartusevics, Soncrant,  
.....



.....  
McNally and McDonald. Sergeant Bartusevics, and Corporals Soncrant and McNally more than demonstrated their leadership abilities as tank commanders under fire in the field. I wasn't particularly happy to be leaving my men, but was thankful that I had done my duty, and gotten myself and all of them through alive.

.....