



Mike St Clair

## OCS - BASIC SCHOOL AND FIRST COMBAT TOUR

.....

I checked into Officer Candidate School on Sunday evening. The Corporal duty NCO advised me to come back in the AM and in the meantime get a room at the SNCO club. That way I would not have to take my stripes off and act like a candidate that evening. I thanked him and did just that. After getting a room I went to the bar and ordered a beer. Who should walk in but one of my old DI pals—SSgt Yoder. We said hello, and I bought him a beer. I knew he was an instructor at OCS, and I did not want him to know that I was going to be a candidate. He asked me what assignment I had and I told him “I am going to be the General’s driver”.



Yoder spent the next hour giving me advice on how to do the job—I was squirming the whole time. The next morning, I checked into Officers Candidate School and began ten weeks of officer “boot camp”. That first day we were marched down to clothing issue. As I already had all my uniforms, I was told to stay outside at parade rest. A few minutes later three Sergeant Instructors came walking by and one of them was SSgt Yoder. He got right next to me and uttered some indistinguishable swear words in my ear. I replied “Don’t blow my cover Yoder”. For the next ten weeks, he kept his word. Our platoon Sergeant Instructor was a SSgt supply-type that was a poor excuse for an NCO. I guess with the expansion of students due to the war, the Corps was hard up for instructors. Our officer in charge, Captain Maresco, was a fine officer. I

found myself showing the ropes to members of the platoon after hours. The former enlisted Marines, and now officer candidates such as myself, were evenly doled out amongst our class. I never thought much about it, but as a former DI and experienced SNCO, I had much to pass along to those with no prior training. Time went by quickly, and after 10 weeks we were commissioned as Second Lieutenants in the base auditorium. Upon exiting the auditorium, all the Sergeant Instructors were standing outside by the exit to salute and receive the traditional silver dollar. I kept my cover off, as Marines do not salute without a cover on. When I passed my Sergeant Instructor, he saluted me and I just gave him a greeting—this turkey was not going to get my first salute and silver dollar.

I got in my car and was the first arrival at Basic School. There was a Corporal MP who showed me where to park and gave me directions to Barrett Hall. He pointed the way and saluted me. I returned his salute and gave him my silver dollar. The Corporal said in a salty way “Lieutenant, you do not have to tip me!” He thought I was another dumb Lieutenant. I told him in my best command voice to put it in his pocket. He

.....

.....  
probably told his pals that night about this new Second Lieutenant that actually tipped him. Basic School was a bit of a disappointment. I thought the school's instruction could have been better especially in tactics, but perhaps, I was too critical. We had not fought a war since Korea in 1953 and most company grade officer instructors and senior NCO's had no combat experience to draw from. I was a seasoned Recon Marine and U.S. Army Ranger School graduate, so my perspective was a bit more critical than the average inexperienced lieutenant. A fellow Detroiter, Bob Stimson, was in my platoon again—we were also in the same OCS platoon. He became a good friend and is still one today. Bob would come over to my apartment on some evenings, and we would study together. He did very well in the subjects taught in the classrooms, and I was amazed how quickly he picked up on subjects that took me years to learn.

Our Platoon Officer Instructor was Captain Dennis O. Gallagher, a very fine officer. The Company Commander was Major Woodring, who was also a former enlisted officer and a Korean War veteran. Interestingly, he would be the one to write my first fitness report and many years later, my last. Time flew by, and we finally graduated. I received orders to my old outfit, the First Marine Division, which was deployed in Vietnam. Bob Stimson was assigned to the newly activated 26th Regiment which was being formed up at Camp Pendleton. After a tearful farewell to my then-wife, Betsy, Bob and I drove across country in his car to the west coast. He dropped me off at Treasure Island, and then, he headed south to report in at Camp Pendleton.

I ran across an old SNCO pal (from Amphibious Recon School), Lee Eakins, who was now a newly commissioned Second Lieutenant. The Marine Corps urgently needed officers so they gave instant temporary commissions to hundreds of SNCO's. Lee told me all they gave him were Second Lieutenant bars and \$200 for uniforms. As a recent graduate of the Basic School, I was pleased to show him a few ropes about being an officer. He had taught me so much about being a Recon Marine, and I was happy to return the favor. After a few days we were flown to Okinawa where we stored our belongings and issued combat gear. We then flew to Vietnam and reported to Division Headquarters for assignment. I went in first to the S-1 and got orders back to my old outfit, the First Recon Battalion. Lee went in second and got orders for the Fifth Marine Regiment. I asked him why he didn't ask for a Recon assignment. He replied that he was just following orders like a good Marine. I talked him into going back in and requesting Recon. He did and got reassigned. We both reported into First Recon Battalion together.

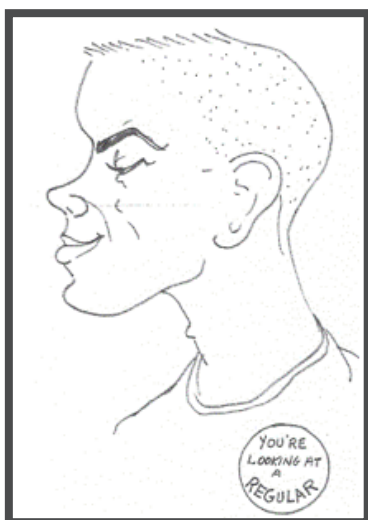
The Battalion was headquartered south of Da Nang next to the Chu Lai airstrip. The battalion headquarters was located right on the beach. I reported to the Battalion Commander in his tent and the first thing he said to me was "It's about time you got back home—we leave on an operation tomorrow". It felt great to be back among all my pals—Recon Marines are a close-knit bunch. The next day, we choppered-out southwest to a hill where I observed there were Vietnamese 105mm artillery pieces. The Colonel briefed me on his operational plans. He was sending foot patrols out from the hill to locate the enemy and once spotted, to call in artillery on their positions. I was assigned as an observer to accompany an Alpha company patrol. It was commanded by SSgt Billy Armor, an old Recon SNCO pal.

The weather was hot and humid during our patrol. All my past running and physical training paid off so I had no physical problems. We stayed in the jungle overnight, watchful for the enemy, but did not detect any. The next day, we were ordered back to the hill. After a debriefing by the S-2 officer, the Colonel asked SSgt Billy Armor if he thought I was ready to take over the platoon. The answer was affirmative, and I became the Platoon Commander of Third Platoon Alpha Company. SSgt Billy Armor was reassigned to battalion headquarters, and SSgt Pope became my Platoon Sergeant. He was a fine black Marine SNCO, and we made a good team. My pal Second Lieutenant Lee Eakins was assigned to Charlie Company. On his first helicopter insertion, right after insertion, he was severely injured by a booby-trapped explosive device.  
.....



Second Lieutenant Lee Eakins died a few days later at the Charlie Medical Aid Station. I have always wondered what would have happened if I hadn't persuaded him to get his orders changed. He was one hell of a Marine and family man. Second Lieutenant Lee Eakins may be gone, but I will never forget him. After Lee's passing, I had no sympathy for our enemy.

Many of my old Staff NCO pals had become temporary reserve officers in my absence. I took quite a bit of ribbing when my augmentation to regular officer came in. This meant I would not be reverted back to enlisted rank after the war was over. Most of them were eventually reverted but eventually received retired pay for their highest rank held. It was an unusual time for the Corps, brought about by the large expansion from peacetime to wartime. The Corps needed leaders, so they commissioned as fine a bunch of SNCO's as the Corps has ever had.



A good pal of mine, Temporary Second Lieutenant Earl Darlington, made a sketch of me. It is my profile with a snide look on my face. A caption under it says: "Look at me, I am a Regular". Not wanting to let him know that he had irked me, I told him that I liked the sketch very much. I said, "If you ever come to my home after this is over, you will find it on my wall - in the bathroom!" To this day I have kept my word.

For the next 8 months, I led patrols west of Chu Lai. Most patrols were 4-5 days in duration, with insertion by helicopter. My platoon sergeant was SSgt Pope for the first few months, and then, SSgt Strzelecki for the following months. SSgt Strzelecki was a real professional, and we worked well together. We had as fine a platoon of Recon Marines as I ever served with. Preceding most patrols I would try and make an over-flight by helicopter. Most times, I would accompany another platoon on its insertion and then remain in the helicopter and direct the pilot to fly near the area of my next patrol. My priority was to find a suitable landing zone. This could be any clearing that was large enough for a helicopter to safely land and take off. For the first few months, we were inserted by the H-34 Sikorsky Helicopter which was limited to a maximum of 6-8 Marine passengers. So, our insertion and extraction required two birds as I usually had 12-15 man patrols. We were really happy when the Air Wing began supporting us with the new CH-46 Sea Knight Helicopter. It took only one bird for the entire patrol due to the 46's greater capacity. Also, we didn't need a large clearing as the bird could insert and extract

---

.....  
us by backing in to any grassy hillside, as long as there were no trees. The grassy hillsides were safer for landings, mainly because these areas were not normally booby trapped.

After my mission briefing by the Battalion S-2 and pre-mission over-flight, I would plan how to carry out the patrols mission. Most reconnaissance missions were for observation of selected trail networks or suspected enemy locations. Quite often, I was able to find the enemy and destroy them by calling in artillery fire support. If within range, we were well supported by our superb Marine Artillery. On those missions where we were outside artillery range, I would call-in helicopter gunships. For fixed-wing, air strikes, we needed the assistance of the "Bird Dog", an airborne observer and fire-support coordinator. These were USMC or Air Force light planes that could direct artillery and air strikes. More times than I care to remember, the flying "Bird Dog" got us out of some tough spots. When under enemy fire or chased by a large enemy force, all I had to do was mark my position by a colored air panel and let "Bird Dog" reduce the threat with fixed-wing bomb and rocket runs. "Bird Dog" pilots saved me and my patrol from being wiped out many times. We were in the enemy's backyard, and we were not welcome guests.

Some patrol missions were to capture prisoners. We liked these prisoner missions, because most times, as soon as you accomplished a snatch, you could get lifted out. The Division G-2 gained much intelligence on the enemy by interrogating prisoners. I think it saved many Marine lives in the long run.

Another type of patrol would be to accompany the infantry on a sweep of an area and stay behind after they departed. Recon patrols could also be under the operational control of an infantry battalion. I didn't



care too much for this type of mission as we were not as well supported or deployed. The only time I had men seriously wounded was when I was under the operational control of an infantry battalion. On one such stay-behind mission, my platoon had established an observation post on the high ground to warn of any advancing enemy. During our watch, a large enemy force was observed approaching, and I called in Naval Gunfire as our operational area was located not too far from shore. The Naval Gunfire was very effective, stopping the enemy in their tracks. I'm sure it saved many Marine lives. The infantry battalion commander liked the protection my Recon platoon had given him so much, he extended our stay in the same position. Recon Marines in the middle of the enemy's backyard normally survive by constantly moving around. We were stuck on the same hill mass longer than the original planned 4 days duration, and I knew that if we didn't move soon, we were going to be detected and attacked by the enemy. I presumed the enemy had figured-out where we were by that time. By now, we were nearly out of water, and there were

no nearby sources. I had no choice but to radio Recon Battalion to resupply me with not only water and food, but also with entrenching tools, helmets, flak jackets, Claymore mines and hand grenades. I figured that the enemy already knew our location, and I wanted to be ready if we were attacked. After the resupply was completed, and after sunset, I moved my patrol 100 meters up the hill mass, still on the high ground, and dug in. We got hit by the enemy at first light, and fortunately, we were ready and able to fight them off. Still, I had two Marines wounded who needed to be medically evacuated by chopper. One Marine, a squad leader, was shot in the arm, and the other wounded Marine, my radioman, received a grazing round to his head. The Med-Evac chopper came in and extracted my wounded Marines. Fortunately, both survived. My wounded squad leader came back to Vietnam a few years later. My wounded radioman is a permanently disabled Marine. His recovery and subsequent story is quite inspiring. Even though he only has use of his

.....



.....  
arm and leg and is confined to a wheelchair, he has accomplished more in life than almost anyone I know. He was invited as a guest to our Basic School Class Reunion dinner in 2017.

Some time later, my platoon was given a prisoner-snatch mission, the type my Marines most enjoyed, because we would normally be lifted out early with the prisoners. The first prisoner-snatch mission only took us only a few hours, and we were back on the beach the same day. A few days later I was given another prisoner-snatch mission, but this time it turned out to be quite a bit more difficult. After being inserted and moving to the trail where I hoped to capture a prisoner, we set in and waited. I deployed scouts up and down the trail to warn us of any enemy walking the trail. It was only a short time when the right scout gave the signal of an approaching enemy. Just before we were intending on jumping the lone enemy, my scout reported a large enemy force coming right behind him, so we froze in place and waited. As we waited in hiding, 20-feet from the trail, and for a considerable time, we witnessed a long column of NVA soldiers marching by with a variety of heavy weapons. While it would be impossible to grab one enemy soldier as a prisoner and survive, I at least wanted to inflict some damage on the enemy. My map showed an abandoned village a few hundred meters down the trail, and I figured that's where they were headed. I wrote out a message and had my radio operator drop back away from the trail and send it, requesting an artillery barrage on that area. It took only a few minutes before the artillery rounds started landing. The enemy soldiers in front of us all jumped off the trail. Several of them were only a few feet away. We were camouflaged with shrubbery, and to a lesser extent, so were the NVA. One of the NVA soldiers waved at me and smiled. I waved back. He probably thought we were his pals. It was then that I witnessed command leadership by one of the braver enemy leaders. He came walking down the trail yelling at his men. Not speaking Vietnamese myself, I still understood his intentions. He was berating them for being so jumpy and ordering them to get back on the trail. My smiling pal got up and waved for me to come also. I thought this was a good time to get the hell out of there so I gave the signal to pull back to our objective rally point. We hustled out of the area and met up at our rally point. Everyone made it back, but I knew it was only a matter of time before the startled enemy got over their surprise and figured out we were not one of them. I presumed they would be coming after us, so I called for a chopper evacuation and headed back to our original landing zone about 500 meters away.

Our extraction point was an abandoned rice paddy. I placed an M16 command-detonated mine at the trail entrance. The M16 was much better than a Claymore mine, because when it is detonated, it springs up several feet before exploding, making it much more lethal. This was one of the few good lessons I learned in Basic School. The platoon then took up defensive positions in the paddy. As I anticipated, we were pursued by the NVA, but we held them off with rifle and grenade-launcher fire. At a critical moment, I set off the command detonated M16 mine, and as suddenly as it started, the enemy firing subsided. I asked for an air strike on the enemy's position, and the supporting aircraft arrived on station very fast. The "Bird Dog" spotter plane asked if I could mark the enemy position, and I was most happy to oblige. I fired a white phosphorous rifle grenade towards the suspected enemy's main force to mark the target. It wasn't long before the first attack aircraft came roaring in and dropping its ordnance of every description on the enemy. When our extraction choppers arrived, the first one loaded half of my team. When the second chopper came in, the rest of us ran towards it. Everyone else had clamored aboard except myself and my radioman, whom I thought was right behind me. I looked around and was shocked to see him 25 yards back, his feet stuck in an old rice paddy fertilizer hole. I immediately dropped my gear in the chopper, ran back firing my M14 for cover, and yanked him out of the hole, gear and all. My radioman was so relieved to be rescued that he kept yelling "thank you—thank you" all the way back to the chopper. Safely inside the chopper, I couldn't stop laughing even though we started receiving small arms fire from the enemy again. The chopper crew chief cranked off a few bursts of his M60 machine gun, and we were airborne without

.....

.....  
receiving any hits.

Safely back at our base camp, I debriefed the battalion commanding officer on my platoon's harrowing escape. Impressed by the success of our mission, I was told to accompany him the next morning to the regular Division Commanders meeting. This I did and I gave an account of the patrol with emphasis on a description of the enemy force we had encountered. I was convinced these were NVA troops. The Division Commander disagreed stating "There were no NVA units in our area." He asked me to describe them. I



**Lt St Clair's M-16 next to  
NVA fresh footprint**

pulled out a life size picture of a typical uniformed and armed NVA soldier that had been distributed by his Division Intelligence Section. The Division Commander appeared angry with me for my forthrightness. To this day, I think he just did not want to admit he was wrong.

Later, my Recon commanding officer tried sending other patrols back into the area but none were successful in landing without enemy opposition. Lt Earl Darlington's team tried three times and had to fight their way out each time with a few wounded Marines. We had found the enemy, but the Division Commander never did send in the infantry to clean them out. In my humble opinion it was a mistake. Perhaps it was politics.

I just did not understand the passive response to the NVA presence. The Division Commander's inaction made me very skeptical as to just why we were in Vietnam in the first place!

Between patrols, myself and other lieutenants stood watch at the Division Communications Bunker. We monitored all the deployed Recon Teams activities to assist and coordinate artillery and air wing support. In so doing, we got a much better perspective on the "big picture" of the war effort. After 8 months as a Patrol Leader I was reassigned as the Battalion Intelligence Officer (S2). My job was to recommend patrol routes and missions to the Operations Officer (S-3). I briefed patrol leaders on their upcoming patrol routes and the enemy situation. After the patrol came home, my job was also to debrief them and write up a report. One critical task along with Operations (S-3) was to recommend areas for B-52 air strikes. Whenever there was an actual B-52 strike within the Division TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility), I would lead a small recon team to land by chopper and evaluate the damage. I enjoyed these missions, as I was back out on the battlefield instead of the rear area. These B-52 follow-up missions proved to be disappointing and frustrating. It was obvious the enemy had always recently moved from their base camp just prior to the air strike. Years later, I found out that a Vietnamese spy in Saigon gave warning to the enemy about upcoming B-52 strikes. All the United States Air Force efforts of flying B-52's from Guam loaded with bombs for arc light missions were a waste. We were bamboozled by the enemy within our ranks!

One of these post-strike missions was a bit more eventful than the others. I was in a helicopter some distance from a scheduled B-52 strike area when the pilot and I saw the smoke from all the bomb hits. We headed into the strike area, and when we were about ready to land, we saw bombs dropping all around us. It was a second flight of B-52's dropping their bombs, and we were right under them! The pilot made a hard left turn to escape from the area. Because I was sitting in the right door ready to leap out when we landed, I found myself thrown from the aircraft due to the inertia of the turn. Luckily, one of my team members grabbed my gear harness and managed to pull me back into the chopper. The pilot landed us on a nearby hilltop whereupon, I suggested that we might wait till we were cleared by air control that all the B-52 strikes were complete before going back in. The pilot enthusiastically agreed. When we finally made

.....



**Lt St Clair's view while dangling  
outside the chopper**

to the to the drop zone, I again found evidence of a recent base camp but no bodies.

When it came time to leave Vietnam, with my tour of duty complete, I was happy to come back to the U.S., but sad that so many of my pals had paid the ultimate price and would not be coming home with me, flying in a comfortable, commercial jet, passenger seat. I received orders to Force Troops Camp Lejeune, which meant Second Force Recon Company. I got promoted to Captain soon after arriving. Many in our class, including myself, became Captains within 23 months of being commissioned, a testament to the urgent need for filling company-level positions during the height of the Vietnam War.