



Mike StClair

Back to Vietnam – 2nd Combat Tour

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The war raged on and in 1970 I received orders back to the First Marine Division. Betsy wanted to continue her college studies and remained in Virginia. It was a tough time for her to say goodbye again to a husband going back to Vietnam. The war was probably tougher on her than me.

Traveling by the same old route via Okinawa, I reported in to the First Marine Division headquarters and requested duty in a rifle battalion. I did not want Division Recon again as Captains do not lead combat patrols. Besides, it was always my ultimate ambition to be a rifle company commander in combat. I lucked out and was assigned to First Battalion, First Marine Regiment in the Da Nang area. Initially assigned as the Intelligence Officer (S-2). I soon became the Commanding Officer of Delta Company.

My biggest task as S-2 was to recommend a battalion size operation in the Charley Ridge area. I knew much about it from my Recon days. It was a good operation but was highlighted by a sad happening. The Division Commander was Major General Wheeler. Years before, he was the Basic School Commander when I was a student.

The General was in a helicopter heading to our Charley Ridge CP when the pilot erred and a rotor blade hit a tree. His chopper crashed and everyone was OK except for the General, his hip and leg were badly injured. We called for a medical evacuation and our



corpsman gave him a shot of morphine. After he departed his briefcase was found. The Colonel ordered me to catch the next chopper and deliver the briefcase to the Assistant Division Commander (ADC) back at the Division CP. This I did. The ADC was in his quarters and was unaware of the accident. I congratulated him on becoming the acting First Marine Division Commanding General, a post he unofficially held for a few days before Major General Widdecke arrived to take over. The above top photo shows the crashed helicopter and the bottom show General Wheeler being carried up the hill in agony. If you look closely you can see his face showing the pain he was suffering.



The war was winding down for the Marine Corps. Peace talks were going on with the North Vietnamese and the Marine Corps was down to only one ground division in country. My regiment (First Marines) wound up as the last Marine regiment in country. The 5th and the 7th Marines were leaving shortly after I arrived.

Rifle Company Commander in Combat



I took command of Delta Company, First Battalion, First Marine Regiment (D/1/1). It was not in very good shape at first, but with the help of some excellent NCO's and Officers, it improved. I had to relieve one Lieutenant who was just not a good leader. He failed to follow some simple instructions, and I found I could not trust him. The icing on the cake came when his platoon sergeant came to me with a complaint. He said the Lieutenant knew he was not doing very well and asked the men to vote on keeping him as their platoon commander. I could no

longer tolerate this and I worried what would happen if his platoon came under enemy fire. He was relieved and sent to Regimental HQ for duty away from leading troops. His replacement was an excellent officer Bill Spittler, who is a good friend to this day.



Delta Company was given an operating area of several square miles to patrol with emphasis on preventing 122mm rocket attacks aimed at Da Nang (see group picture above and officers and key NCOs below). I accomplished this by deploying my platoons in widely separated areas with orders to patrol during the day and set up ambushes at night. I spent most of my time deployed with them and stayed away from the fixed position battalion headquarters. Once we found a large cache of enemy ammo and demolitions. I carried the only blasting caps and crimpers in the company so as not to allow an inexperienced Marine to get hurt setting up a charge. I collected some C-4 explosive from my men (we all carried this as it doubled as fuel for our c-rations) and set the charge with a long fuse.

I instructed Lt. Nick Woods to light the fuse in 20 minutes, and in the meantime, I moved my command group and one platoon south some distance away. When the time came



Lt. Woods lit the fuse and scampered a safe distance away. About the same time a Huey helicopter flew right above the cache as it blew. A chopper door flew off, and the pilot quickly left the area. I informed battalion of the incident, and I was informed it was the general's helicopter! Lt. Woods asked what should he do with the door. My reply was "leave it and get the hell out of there!"

Burdened Company HQ

We began to get encumbered with radio equipment. As Company Commander, I needed 3 radios: one to talk to Battalion, one to talk to my platoons, and one to talk to the FSCC for artillery fire and air support. This radio equipment, along with extra batteries, was quite a burden and everyone (including myself) carried extra, fresh batteries including the old ones. (Discarded batteries were used by the enemy to set off explosive devices!) This was normal for a rifle company. BUT someone came up with the idea that communications needed to be more secure at company level so the enemy could not listen in. We became overly burdened by scrambler devices for talking to battalion and artillery support. These were heavy and attached to the PRC25 radios. They required their own batteries and had to be re-keyed with a different code each night at midnight. The device to do this was a large puncher that must have weighed 10 pounds. The puncher had to be set each night with the new encryption code. The codebook was classified, and I kept it.

The radio operators could not carry all this and their own gear anymore, so I needed more men in my command group. To do this, I had to take infantrymen out of platoons that were already under-strength. Back at battalion level and above, I wondered just what they were thinking to burden down rifle companies with all this. Because message traffic was now encrypted, conversations with battalion were more like phone calls with almost no correct message procedure. I have often wondered if we would have won past battles with this communications nightmare.

Hill 52

There were some fixed positions on fortified hills, such as Hill 52, that Delta Company took over for a few weeks. It was the last friendly outpost before the Laotian border and the Ho Chi Minh trail to the west. When we first arrived on that hill there was a small almost uninhabited village near us on the eastern side. Young village kids showed up several times with enemy ordnance they had found. We gave them C-Rations as a reward. One time I noticed that the oldest was not amongst the group. When I asked I was told "He went boom!" This meant he was killed trying to dig out a VC/NVA explosive device. Lots of the ordnance had Chinese markings indicating they were helping the North Vietnamese. Prior to this, most of the ordnance we found was Russian.

Across the river and high up on the ridge, we sometimes received ineffective fire from an enemy artillery piece. I have always thought that it was probably an old pack 75 Howitzer the NVA got from the Chinese who captured it, probably during the Korean War from us! The enemy would fire a few rounds every few days and then pull back into

a safe position. It was out of range for my 81 mortars and Division artillery. I tried using a 106 recoilless rifle but even that fell short.

To help us with this nuisance, battalion sent me out an Army ½ track Duster with twin 40 mm cannon. The soldiers manning it had never been under fire before, and the first time we received incoming they scrambled under their vehicle. I didn't chide them for this behavior. Instead, I manned their gun myself, with my Gunny as loader, and ask them if I could fire off a few rounds. After the soldiers crawled out, I asked if they wanted to take over and to also thank them for letting us play with their gun. From then on, we had no problems with them, but the enemy gun still remained still out of range.



I had been assigned a Marine pilot as my Air Liaison Officer. He made a suggestion we try air strikes if possible, and I agreed. He set up a scenario for all aircraft coming back from North Vietnam that still had a bomb load would drop them on our enemy instead of jettisoning in the ocean. It solved the problem. Soon after, the mountainside was reduced to yellow clay rubble. And the enemy artillery? My guess is that it was well buried.

Not long after, the Army Duster crew left us. At last report, they were wearing USMC gear and talking about joining the Corps when their Army enlistments expired!

Marine Corps Birthday in Combat

On the Marine Corps Birthday November 10, 1970 it looked like we would not be celebrating with the traditional meal and cake. The weather was pretty bad and Marine helicopters were not flying. The troops didn't complain, but I knew they were disappointed. About 11 am we heard a helicopter heading toward our hill. It was the

regimental commander, Colonel P.X. Kelley, in an Army helicopter. He brought mail, hot chow and a birthday cake. The Colonel confided in me that he could not get a Marine helicopter, but he knew this particular Army pilot and he would do anything for a bottle of scotch. P.X. Kelley was a great leader, and he eventually became the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

A Tiger Ambush

Each evening, I would send out ambush patrols and most of the time there was no contact. One evening, we heard a patrol open fire. It was over quickly. The patrol reported a tiger had walked into their ambush kill zone, and they shot it. The next day these proud Marines carried the tiger back to Hill 52 where many photos taken. I made a report to battalion, and before long, a chopper came out from Regiment and picked up the tiger.

Years later, I was contacted by Bob McClean, one of my men who had been on the patrol, and he asked whatever became of the tiger. I told him I didn't know but I would try to find out. Mind you, I was now a retired Marine, but I sent an e-mail to General P.X. Kelley inquiring about the tiger. His answer went something like this: "Mike I wanted to keep the tiger, but Division made me give it to the Vietnamese District Chief. They ate the tiger and kept the skin. The bones were ground up and used as an aphrodisiac." I forwarded the message to Bob.

Racial Strife

The Marine Corps had been fighting an unpopular war much too long and some units had serious disciplinary and drug problems. Headquarters troops in rear areas especially were acting up. In my opinion many should never have been in the Corps to begin with, but enlistment standards had been lowered by the politicians. This was Secretary of Defense McNamara's war, and I blamed him for most of our strife.

Back in the states there was much racial discord and some of it filtered over to Vietnam. I am proud to say that Delta Company didn't experience any of it. I was fortunate in having some fine officers and NCO's that led their men properly and kept them busy when not engaging in combat operations. Back at battalion headquarters this was not the case. Idle Marines, especially the black ones, were causing all sorts of problems. The Battalion Commander was in a bind and to solve it, he transferred one of the ringleaders to Delta Company. I was given a warning about the transfer. We were in a fixed position on Hill 52 about 5 miles from Battalion Headquarters.

My Gunnery Sergeant came into my bunker and said a new black trooper had arrived on the resupply run. The Gunny brought him into the bunker, and I welcomed him to Delta Company. I was interrupted by him stating "I don't fight no white mans war!" I replied that if he wasn't going to fight then he didn't need his rifle, helmet and flak jacket. I said "give them to the Gunnery Sergeant" which he did. He seemed happy and probably thought he was going back to his buddies at headquarters. I told him I couldn't

use a “non-fighter” and for him to leave the hill. The Gunny took him to the barbed wire gate and put him outside.

It was getting dark and this young man realized he was on his own with no transportation back to headquarters. He was in the middle of enemy country, and it was a long way home. He spent the night outside the wire. While I don't have the details of what all happened, the next morning my Gunny said there was a Marine who wanted to talk to me. The young black Marine said he wanted to stay in Delta Company and that he would try and do a good job. This he did, and while I will never know just what occurred that previous evening, I am sure that his transformation was the result of some good USMC NCO leadership.

A few months later Colonel P.X. Kelley told me that he had heard the story, and while it was successful, he wanted me to “never do that again”. We both had a good laugh.

Hawaii Rest and Recuperation (R&R)

I had a 5 day R&R in Hawaii where I met Betsy. We stayed on Kauai, and it was a pleasant time. She did appear a bit apprehensive and nervous. I guess that was to be expected as this was my second combat tour in Vietnam.

Back in Country

Delta Company was selected to execute an air ground assault. This was in the waning days of Marines in Vietnam, and it is my belief that the Air Wing initiated the operation. While my troops were at a five day break at China Beach for “Stack Arms”, I participated in the planning. One of my platoons was to land on a hill after it was prepped with bombs and rockets. Then I would lead another platoon onto a nearby hill after it was prepped. This we did with very little opposition. I radioed Battalion that the objectives were secure. The Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Rose flew in, and I gave him a briefing on the operation.

A Close Call

I remember several officers standing in a circle at the top of the hill. It included myself, the Battalion Intelligence Officer (S-2) and Lt. Col. Rose. I don't know why, but I was a bit bored and began looking down at what looked like a small root near my boot. I absent mindedly began kicking it. The S-2 looked at what I was doing and yelled “stop Captain !”. He thought it was the prongs of an explosive device, and he was right! Instinctively, we all jumped back, but Lt Col Rose's jump was world class. He actually cleared a two foot bush and landed at least six feet away!

I told him that I would take care of the explosive device, and he left by helicopter. I placed an explosive charge next to the prongs and cleared the area. The resulting blast left quite a crater. My guess was that it was an old dud artillery shell rigged up as a

booby trap. I had my troops line up with bayonets as probes to check out all the hilltops we were on. Nothing else was found.

Lt.Col. Rose sent me a radio message asking if we found his glasses. They must have fallen out of his pocket when he jumped. We found and got them returned. He was a first class Battalion Commander, and I enjoyed being in his command.

Vietnamization of the War

One of my last missions was north of Da Nang in a mountain area called the Hai Van Pass. This was the main artery connecting the northern part of the country with the south. The Marine Corps had always maintained security over the pass with a detachment of Marines. My job was to relieve the 5th Marines security unit, and in a week, turn the job over to the Vietnamese Army. When making liaison with the Marine detachment, I ran across one of my old Recon Marine Sergeants named Sepulveda. The last time I had seen him was when he was wounded in the right arm and evacuated over 3 years before. I asked him how his arm was, and he replied that it was OK, but "I just can't do as many pull ups!".

Leaving Delta Company and becoming a Staff Officer

Not too long after that operation I was transferred to Division Headquarters and turned Delta Company over to another Captain. For me it was a sad day, as I had become so attached to my men. They were great Marines. My First Sergeant presented me with a small toy tiger. I had been in the habit of addressing some of my men using the term "Way to go Tiger!". It was his way of letting me know he enjoyed being under my command. I never had any of my men seriously wounded or killed while commanding Delta Company. Once, I was ordered to send a platoon to be attached to Charlie Company for an operation. It resulted in one of my Marines being killed and several wounded.

Colonel P.X. Kelley informed me that he had been ordered to select his best Company Commander for a special job by the Commanding General of Marine Pacific Forces (FMF PAC). He selected me, which was quite an honor as I always respected the Colonel. The war was winding down and the Marine Corps was shrinking back to its peacetime size. We wanted to retain the best combat experienced officers in the Marine Corps. My job was to visit every unit and find out and evaluate who were the best young officers. I would approach them privately and let them know how the Marine Corps valued their service and wanted to retain them. I asked what duty station they and their wives would like to go to after leaving Vietnam. That evening I would telephone via a direct line to Headquarters Marine Corps and confirm the assignment.

One day I received a call from Colonel Kelley. He said "Mike I wanted to let you know that SSgt Marty's promotion came thru. I'm going to the ceremony. You can ride in my chopper and come with me!" The Colonel was referring to one of my platoon sergeants that I had recommended for a meritorious promotion to Gunnery Sergeant. I went and

was very proud to see SSgt Marty make Gunnery Sergeant. He was a Marine who took care of his men. Colonel Kelley also informed me that the Commandant was going to pay a visit to the Regiment in a few weeks. I was put in charge of arranging a seminar for him and his Lieutenants. It came off well, and I received a personal letter of appreciation from the Commandant.

A Trip to a Hospital Ship

I did have a medical problem about the time I was transferred to Division Headquarters. It was a severe case of diarrhea. The medics sent me out to the hospital ship, U.S.S. Mercy, where I was examined. They inserted a steel rod up my rectum and took a snip of my intestines for testing. I think they were testing for Amoebic Dysentery. The results were negative, and I came back the same day. After a short period of mess hall chow my stomach got better. I did find out that Major General McCutchen, the 3rd MAF Commander was aboard that same day. The doctors found he had stomach cancer. The General was transferred home and died not long after that.

Time passed quickly, and when my 12-month tour was up, I received orders to the Inspector-Instructor Staff, Golf 2/23 located at NAS Los Alamitos California.