

A Boots Story of Hill 362

Thirteen of us who were in the same platoon in boot camp were pulled out after staging battalion and sent to Camp Hansen, Okinawa, as replacements for 3/5. After a week they sent us to Subic Bay to wait for 3/5 to return from Deck House One. We barely had 6 months in the Corp and 30 days at home to say good-bye for 13 months.

We were untested, still wet behind the ears, and it took time to gain trust and respect from those who been tested and trained together for so long. I ended up in I Company, first platoon, first squad, Skip Cory's fire team. I can remember like it was yesterday, standing on the deck of the USS Pickway looking off to the shore of Viet Nam and thinking what in the sam hill am I doing here or words to that effect. The beach landing was tough. They dropped us off at the first sand bar they hit, which was about 100 yards from the beach; good thing there was not any enemy on the beach. Deck House Two was a real test. I am only 5'-8" and those rice paddies that were all sand were just far enough apart that I could not step from crown to crown. So that meant one step down and at least two steps up. It was on those first few days that I wished in boot camp, ITR, and Advanced Infantry Training, we were carrying a couple of 25 lbs weights so I could have been in better shape.

Little did I know as we entered Hastings, things would get worse? It seemed like forever when I jumped off that chopper until I hit the ground, what a jolt! As we set up that first night Skip and the squad leader wanted me to go to the CP for a can of night vision. Knowing what was up I told them I was not going. Skip said you refusing an order in a combat zone? I did an about-face and headed for the CP. They let me get about 20 yds down the trail before calling me back.

On the 22nd I was Tail end Charlie. I had not really noticed the secure feeling when you are in the middle of the ranks. It was a little spooky for this boot that was starting to get acclimatized. When it hit the fan that evening I first thought it was H or K Company that we were trying to meet up with. When we finally got up this trail it was dark and I heard they were trying to stop the artillery because it was getting to close. It was nothing but rocks just off the trail where they had us set up for the night. I do not know how I did it but after my watch, I somehow managed to shift around between the rocks and crashed.

On the 23rd, we seemed to be getting regrouped. It is going to hit the fan that we had been told since we landed happened, and it seemed everyone had a greater sense of awareness. Skip and the squad leader took me over to see the enemy KIA, my first. There was a Chinese adviser, 6 foot 180 lbs, and I was told all during training the VC were 5'-2" and 90lbs soaking wet.

That night my position faced hill 362. I had second watch and had trouble getting to sleep on my break. As I started my watch it seemed like everything was moving and after a while I was fighting to stay awake, then I remembered what I had heard somewhere in my training about putting your bayonet on the end of your rifle, your thumb on the end of your bayonet and your thumb nail on your chin. You put the stock between your feet and

rest your chin on your thumbnail. I had no trouble keeping awake while I was doing that.

I have read a story or two that said we should have had some artillery soften up the hill before we went up. But I remember not starting off early because we waited for some jets to drop bombs on 362. I also recall someone commenting that they did not like telling them where we were headed. After the jets did there, thing my squad 1st platoon 1st squad started as point. I was sent out on left flank point.

The elephant grass was the thickest I'd ever seen. All of us on point were pretty well whipped by the time we crossed that valley and reached the bottom of hill 362. 1st squad was relieved by 2nd squad which was now lead by Skip Cory. He replaced the 2nd squad leader who was Medavaced with a hernia. After a short rest, we entered back into the column, and I was at the top of the hill when I think it was third squad caught two NVA.

It was shortly after that when All Hell Broke Loose. Before I left for boot camp I went to a close family friend, who was a WWII USMC Veteran, for some advice about going to boot camp. He told me that their job was to train us to take orders, and remember what ever they do it is for your own good. They did a good job, because when it hit the fan all the training we had was put to the test. My squad ran towards the front of the column, and when we reached what turned out to be the LZ we were to sent down the trail to bring back the wounded. About 75 yards down the trail Pittman was coming back up with one of his men on his back, I think he was hit in the knee.

We went a little further down and four of us picked up what I think was the other man from Pittman's fire team. He had a lung wound and we were carrying him in a poncho when someone yelled grenade! I was at his feet and before we could set him down the grenade went off behind me knocking me over him. We got up again and started back to the LZ when what some said was a 57 recoilless rifle went off behind me knocking all of us down again. After we returned to the LZ and the Corpsman, we headed back down the trail.

We had to dive off the trail when we heard the mortars coming out of the tubes. Still get a weird feeling 4th of July at the fireworks. Certain smells and sounds trigger the brain I guess. When we reached the point where we picked up the Marine with the lung wound they told us to go back and set up a defensive perimeter around the wounded, which turned out to be the LZ. When we got back to the LZ I saw some blood on my hand, thinking it was not mine I wiped it off and some more came. After taking a closer look I had a couple of small holes in the back of my hand and my watch took a hit right in the center knocking the hands off.

I was told to go fill any gaps north of the LZ. I was 20 yards from a spot to fill when I dropped down and started counting them coming out of the tubes again. I forgot how many they let go that time, but I do know # 10 got me. I was down on a little knoll and it went off right behind me. After checking the family jewels I felt the bottom of my right boot and everything seemed OK, but when I got up and put weight on my right foot I went down to my knees and had to crawl up to an open spot.

There was no digging in where I was at, nothing but rocks and roots. Lt. Williams came by and asked if anyone was hit and someone said Harris could not walk. He came over saw the hole in the side of my boot and told me to turn on my back. While on my back still looking down the hill I felt my laces being cut and as I looked back when my boot was being pulled off I notice some blood dripping from my boot. I did not know the shrapnel went in the side of my boot. Lt. Williams put a battle dressing on and said the corpsman would be by when he could. The corpsman came by shortly after Lt. Williams left. He checked my dressing and asked if I needed a shot. Before I could say the throbbing was not that bad, he said there were many guys who were going to be needing it, so I told him I was OK. He told me I could go out on the fifth chopper. After what sounded like the third chopper coming in I passed out my ammo, grenades, and C-rations to the guys around me, and started to crawl back to the LZ with my rifle, one magazine, and grenade.

As I reached the LZ I looked as a chopper tried to hover. It quickly left as ground fire was peppering it, but you have to give them credit for valiantly trying. They said on the two previous attempts the choppers took fifty hits if they took one. It was at that time I figured we had to hold the hill until help came. I spent that night just off the trail. In the morning when Bednar called for help, it was like something out of a John Wayne movie. A bunch of guys jumped up and started down the trail and someone said to hold up it might be a trick. After a few questions, they went down and brought him back to the LZ.

When the reporters came down from the chopper they had water and that really hit the spot. The Medavac started and they grabbed my rifle as I went up in the harness. It was a very uneasy feeling as I cleared the treetops until I was pulled back into the Huey. I went to Dong Ha, the hospital ship, Japan, Great Lakes Naval Hospital and was medically discharged in the following July.

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