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## THE BATTLE FOR HILL 3 6 2

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### Operation Hastings ~ July 22 ~ 24, 1966 (Vietnam)

By Former Sergeant John F. Harris

**Foreword:** I don't know why the 'hill' has had such a grip on me over all of these years. I was involved in a lot of other actions during my stint with Lima Company 3/5. Maybe it was because it was the first action close to being considered 'conventional'. Everything before the hill had been petty little fire fights with the Viet Cong (VC). They were always sniping at us, but you'd rarely get a chance to duke it out. They'd hit, run, and vanish.

Or, it might be because it was the first time I was seriously wounded over there. It was probably due to all of the action leading up to and during the battle for 362. And then too, there were the terrible atrocities committed by the enemy on India Company, who had first ended up on that worthless mound of earth ~ and had been chopped to pieces.

Every year our company ~ Lima 3/5 ~ was in Vietnam, there was at least one battle that stood out above the others. Usually it was because of the losses we suffered on any given day. Or over several days ~ such as the 'Mother's Day Massacre' May 11 ~ 12th 1969 ~ 15 KIA. {Killed In Action}

The worst loss we suffered was on Operation Union 11 ~ on May 26, 1967 ~ 18 KIA. Don't know how many wounded. I once asked John Presnall (who was a platoon sergeant at the time) what happened...

"They was waiting for us, dude", he simply said. "It was a bad day at Black Rock ~ on that day. Left a lot of mothers crying. I can tell you ..."

Never went any farther than that. Didn't have to.

\_You see ~ we all know you can end a battle decisively ~ in spite of your losses. But you will

live 'with it' for the rest of your life ...

In 1966, as with previous and continuing years during the Vietnam 'Conflict', the United States Marine Corps was bound to uphold the Geneva Convention's 'Articles of war'. Basically it said, in part ~ or applied to us in this way:

Prisoners of war will be taken alive whenever possible, and treated in a civil manner. They need only to volunteer their name, rank, and service number.

They will be taken care of and treated humanely ~ until such time as hostilities are resolved ~ or exchange of prisoners facilitated...

(It was supposed to apply to both adversaries...)

This will come into focus later, and with this thought in mind, I will begin the story of 'Hill 362' ~ as I knew it.

It was hot! We were cruising off the coast of Vietnam, from Cam Ranh Bay to the DMZ. up and down. Probably twenty miles or so offshore. You could see 'Indian country' vaguely through the shimmering heat.

We were on board the LPH (Landing Platform Helicopter) USS Princeton. We were the FMF (Fleet Marine Force) Special Landing Force 3rd Battalion; 5th Marine Regiment; First Marine Division. Two companies ~

Mike, Lima and a third Weapons – a support company – were stationed aboard this ship. The other two companies – India and Kilo were on board another ship, an LPA (Landing Platform – Amphibian) the USS Pickaway.

When we went into action, Lima and Mike Companies would fly off the Princeton. India and Kilo Companies would be put ashore on ‘Mike’ boats and amtracks. Weapons Company would be divided amongst us. We (Mike and Lima) would usually be the driving force (The Hammer), and India with Kilo, would be the blocking force (The Anvil). During these ‘operations’, we would all hump the various support ammo for the weapons platoon attached to us. One day it might be mortars, the next day machine-gun belts, or maybe rockets. On top of our usual sixty to eighty pound packs, we would add the weight of this support ammo.

This too, comes into focus later ...

We had already pulled a couple of ‘operations’ in Vietnam. Deckhouse I and Nathan Hale. Both of these had basically been against the Viet Cong – a rag tag bunch of unprofessional so-called ‘Soldiers of the People’, that although inflicting some damage upon us – were more of a pain-in-the-ass than a lethal threat.

We had gone back to the Philippines after the first two operations. Had a symbolic funeral along the way. I was supposed to attend services, but chose to keep to the ‘catwalks’ (walkways that led outside the ship – just below the flight deck). Here I would meticulously tear down my weapons, sharpen my knives (had two German daggers, a K-Bar, and bayonet), and generally prepare myself mentally for the next battle.

We’d been in the Philippines before going into the ‘Nam’. We had trained hard there.

When we went back – we were ready to party. And we did {another story}.

{After arriving back on station in the China Sea, the Princeton would speed back and forth, off the coast of South Vietnam. But now it was about the 12th of July, and it was hot! It was always hot in Vietnam. We had been running wind sprints on the flight deck of our ship ~ in spite of the heat. We were honed to a razor's edge. All of us were tanned into leather ~ not an ounce of fat among us.}

At about 1400 ~ Captain Tatum, our Commanding Officer, along with Gunny Ross and the other staff NCOs and Officers ~ gathered us up on the 'flight deck'.

We had all been there before. Hell, we were old salts by this time. It doesn't take long ~ if you're in a survival mode ~ to pick up the pace.

The 'Skipper' outlined what the next operation was to be about. Deckhouse II ~ a piece of cake. We had the usual lectures on safety, health, and hygiene. Afterwards, we hove to and prepared for the start of this operation, which would kick off in the early hours of the following morning.

Deckhouse II turned out to be ~ a piece of cake. We spent three days walking through the sand dunes along the northern coast of South Vietnam. Reminded me of what the Sahara Desert must be like. In fact, I don't think a shot was fired the whole time. Rumor even had it that we had crossed into the DMZ at one point. The only thing I can remember about this uneventful three days ~ is that we all got the runs from eating some small melons discovered laying amongst the dunes.

Towards the end of this major campaign, we found ourselves camped along the Song Ben Hai, a river running through and near the DMZ. I can remember coming up from the river after taking a dip, and hearing the 'words'. "FORM INTO HELO TEAMS! 'SADDLE UP!' WE'RE MOVING

OUT!”

Unknown to us peons of the lower order (I was a PFC at the time - Private First Class) - we had just been committed to ‘Operation Hastings’...

Within minutes, the sky became cluttered with the ‘Give a Shit’ squadron.

These were the helicopters with which we flew into battle. They weren’t the fancy “Huey’s” that the Army possessed - no, these were dilapidated old CH-34’s. I’ve maintained over the years that the Marine Corps was so cheap - they couldn’t afford engines for those flying buckets of bolts. We had to will them to fly! Swear to God! You’d be bumping along at four thousand feet, or so, and all of a sudden - you’d drop a hundred and fifty feet! You’d look at each other in fear and someone would say - “Come on! Let’s concentrate!”

Painted on the tail section of these flying crates was a picture of a black rat giving the ‘finger’, with the words ‘Give a Shit’ painted below. {Over the years I occasionally see a poster with this little mouse giving the finger to a giant eagle that’s about to swoop down on him - with the words ‘THE LAST ACT OF DEFIANCE’ - and think of these choppers.}

First I knew of trouble was when the door gunner of our chopper started yelling and cursing, and firing his M-60 all over the place. I’d never been in a ‘Hot LZ’ (hot landing zone) before. I, being a point man, was usually first out of the chopper and, therefore, closest to the door. And so it was that day ... bailed out of the chopper, right into turf being ripped apart by automatic weapons fire!

Didn’t take me long to assess my situation - and figure I’d better get out of there quick! Common procedure was that as each chopper landed, we’d jump out and form a perimeter of protection for the following choppers and men. Each ‘helo team’ would have an area of responsibility.

Not so this day. The whole area was getting ripped apart by a machine-

gun up on the side of a hill, overlooking the landing zone. At first I didn't know what was happening. The noise of the choppers was masking the noise of the gun. But within seconds my brain registered a problem. The old log I had taken cover behind was starting to fall apart - was being blasted apart - by the machine-gun fire!

I rapidly ran, ducking and weaving, to an area that looked more secure. From this vantage point, I watched as the other choppers came in. Remember yelling at the top of my lungs, "TAKE COVER! IT'S HOT! IT'S HOT!"

Between the gunfire and the chopper noise - it was a feeble attempt. That was the 'Nam' for you ... Full of surprises!

At first I was scared shitless. I mean, you don't even think. You just react. Your mind hits the fast mode - out of survival - and you just do whatever it takes to stay alive. I locate where the fire is coming from. Up on the side of this very steep hill. Not even coming close to me anymore. I picture this gook getting his rocks off - trying to down our choppers. I start to scramble up the side of this hill. I'll get him, before he gets anymore of us. That's what I'm getting paid for ...

Another one of our guys gets the 'message' on the hot LZ, and ends up close to me. (I thought it was Gerry Hohol after all of these years, but he has since told me it wasn't him. Might have been Robert Lopez - he always seemed to show up when I was in a jam.) Whoever was with me, and I, try to work our way up this hill. Unknown to us, the power, with a radio - has already located the problem, and called in air support. Fortunately, we are a long way from taking our objective. An F-4 Phantom jet screams in from nowhere, and lets loose with twenty millimeter canons. Shit! Sounds like a farting giant! Right on our faces! A couple of minutes tick by. The machine-gun starts up again. Damn! And just as quickly - the Phantom is back. This time he lets go of a couple five hundred pound bombs!

After the twenty millimeter canons, whoever is with me and I decide to get

the hell out of there. But when those bombs hit ~ we weren't far enough. I don't know how close we were, but the ensuing explosions lifted me clean off the deck. Could feel the heat and shrapnel singing through the brush and trees. My ears were ringing for several days afterwards. We were lucky we didn't get creamed. Got the machine-gun though...

{And if I ever find out whoever was with me during all of the above, and we get together again ~ we will toast to our bravado... and stupidity!}

After surviving the helo-zone incident ~ the next few days brought much of the same. Action! With a capital 'A' ~ and plenty of it!

We found out later ~ we were up against the 324B NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Division. Caught them between us and a couple of other battalions.

Up until now the Marine Corps was fighting a so-called 'police action' ~ skirmishing with the Viet Cong, and so forth. Our primary objective was the 'pacification' of the lowlands. It all changed with Hastings... Operation Hastings took place in the mountain 'highlands' along the DMZ. From this time on (and, thanks to an Army general by the name of Westmoreland) ~ Marines would be taking the battle to the enemy.

{There were no less than three Medals of Honor awarded for valor in the first few days of fighting, during Operation Hastings. Incredible acts of valor. But for every one awarded ~ there were probably dozens of other acts of valor that went unrecorded. Not because valor was rarely recognized ~ it was displayed almost hourly throughout the operation ~ but because Vietnam in 1966, was still being handled as a 'police action'.

It was considered your professional duty to take out a machine-gun nest, or carry your brother Marine under fire, off the field of battle ~ to safety.}

For about twenty days we fought a superior force. A division of hard-core NVA against a couple of under TO (Tactically operational) Marine Corps

battalions.

Each day was a gauntlet ~ hitting hard ~ moving fast. We would literally catch the enemy with his pants down. Storming into his base camps. Finding laundry drying ~ fish and rice steaming on fires ~ ammo and guns of all sorts and types ~ and plenty of it! Captured weapons still had cozmoline on them. Our enemy in this fight was well supplied.

They'd usually leave a peon behind ~ with an automatic weapon to hold us back. Buy time. It'd work ~ briefly. We would eventually knock him out ~ and we'd be moving again. Literally running at times ~ with the heavy packs I described earlier.

I was pissed. The bastards were living better than us (had some well enforced bunkers all over the place), eating better than us ~ I found chickens in makeshift cages ~ same thing with pigs. They had probably been using this area for some time... filtering in across the DMZ.

Over the course of those first several days we were moving pretty fast. Faster than ever before. Companies were leapfrogging through each other ~ to keep the enemy at bay. Platoons were alternating with one another. Everybody was getting their share of action. But we were taking losses too. Don't know exactly how many were killed or wounded those first days before the 'Hill'.

A couple of times I came into Mike company lines (I was a 'pointman' during most of this time), and I would touch base with friends of mine that had been in Boot Camp, or ITR (Infantry Training Regiment) with me.

They would fill me in on what was happening within their ranks... Elf, or Jim Sprine would tell me of who we knew that had been hit ~ or killed.

"Childers, and Mortiboy ~ 'got it', when we landed." said Jim Sprine on one occasion. (I would see him years later as a San Clemente cop, and Laguna Beach Police Chief.)

“F--K!” I’d say bitterly ~ and move on. (Didn’t have time for any emotions other than anger.)

And it was building up...

Came across a really unique booby trap on about the third day out. Found a trip wire that led to a beautifully carved crossbow. It was situated on a path, and cleverly disguised so that an animal ~ human, or otherwise would get it right between the eyes! They would have to duck (as I almost did) to miss this large tree limb ~ and then ZAP! I was impressed, and carried it for some time afterwards.

By now I’m reading the enemy real good. Don’t like it one bit! Signs all over the place ... (Broken twigs and elephant grass, scuff marks in the dirt, leaves just a little out of place ... things like that ~ would catch my experienced eye.)

During previous operations, they had gone to great lengths to disguise their presence. Not so here...

They must have felt comfortable knowing they outnumbered us ... every time we overrun a base camp and take down their ‘delay of action’ ~ we stumble across lots of gear. {I’m thinking to myself ... How can they afford these types of losses?}

We find at one point, a cache of .50 caliber machine-gun ammo. Hundreds of galvanized boxes of it. Takes a couple of hours to off hand it to the rear ~ fire bucket style.

I have no idea who these guys are ...

On about the fifth day ...

I’m getting worn out. Hell, we all are. Constant action!

We send out our ‘dusk patrols’ ~ and ‘ambushes’. Each platoon rotates these

duties, every day and night, keeping one squad in reserve ~ to switch off on consecutive nights. Everyone is usually on either 50% or 100% alert. Which basically equals little ~ if any sleep.

I come off point one late afternoon ~ exhausted. Me and a couple of others hit shit in the base camps that day. Just miss getting creamed a couple of times. Bullets so close I could read the red labels ...

I buddy up with Bob Stewart for the night. I've known Bob, or as we called him 'Stu', since Okinawa. We picked him up as underage (Dropped from 2/5 for being underage ~ not quite eighteen, and eligible for combat), but he's a funny guy ~ a real comedian. Always has something positive to say. We always got along great ~ still do. {I found him again after twenty-seven years ~ another story.}

We no sooner start to put our 'C Rats' (C rations) out on the edge of our fighting hole (a gourmet ritual observed for decades), and Bob visits the fighting hole next door to do some trading ... (also part of the ritual)

When we get sprayed by automatic gunfire!

Bob levitates in.

"Didn't realize I was so hungry!", he quips.

"Jesus ~ do you always have to land on top of me!", I yell while letting off return fire.

"It's because, you're so cute," he retorts, letting off a burst with his automatic.

"Well, dinners shot ...", I say remorsefully, intending the pun. The cans are shredded. I mean, blown to pieces! No dinner tonight.

To make matters worse ~ they mortar the hell out of us that night. (I think

we lost two... Wounded or killed.)

Can't get any sleep...

"Ya know, Bob, you sure keep a messy hole here. Got cans scattered all over the place. Shit - ya don't even have a decent grenade sump."

"Well, there you go again - raggin' like a woman. If I'd known I was gonna be entertaining dignitaries tonight, I'd have cut 'ole Ho in on some of our wealth."

"There YOU go again - yappin' like a puppy on a full moon."

"F--k You!"

"In your sleep, asshole - you got first watch." I'm dead tired - and don't f--king care...

"What-da-ya want for breakfast, sweetheart?" He always has to get the last word in.

"Don't want leftovers (as if there are any) - I get gas, ya know," I reply with a yawn - it's going to be another long night.

{It was really that way. You found humor whenever and wherever you could - might be your last...}

### July 20, 1966 - 1800 hours.

Bob Sorenson's squad has ambush duty tonight. It's getting late to be going out looking for a site. All of us have been pushing it to the limits. We're dead tired, hungry, and every squad has had casualties of one sort or another. (if not from the enemy - then from the heat, and dysentery.) Water, for the first time, was not a problem. There were streams all over the place. Although on one occasion, I didn't drink for a day or two - after finding a

dead NVA soldier in the water ~ upstream from where I had filled my canteens earlier!

Sorenson gets his men together. Among them are Gerry Hohol and Tom Palardy. He can't get a machine-gun for some reason tonight, which leaves maybe one or two M-14s on automatic. I think there is a total of seven men on this team ~ not even two whole fire teams.

{Every night there would be at least one or more ambushes set up. They would usually be concealed along a trail or path, leading into the companies AOR (Area of Responsibility). A machine-gunner was almost always sent along to solidify the accumulated firepower within the team. The idea behind an ambush was to set in ~ in an area with good concealment ~ and hopefully an area that would leave little, if any, cover for the enemy. A rope attached to each man would be used by the team leader to make sure everyone was awake throughout the night. One tug (You awake?), two tugs back (Yeah), on down the line. You would only spring an ambush if the enemy could be seen, front to back within your TAR (Target Area of Responsibility). With the element of surprise on your side, and the right firepower ~ an ambush was a deadly tool. Course WE were taught that if WE were ambushed, our best chance of survival was to turn into the ambush and charge ~ hoping to psyche out our foe, and gain the advantage.}

Sorenson gets his team into a site just before darkness sets in. It's not a very good one, but with the only time available, the best he can do. Everyone ties up with the rope. It's a warm night. Bugs crawl into your nose and eyes, but you don't dare slap them, or make any kind of movement or noise. You hope a Cobra or other poisonous snake doesn't decide to make your body heat ~ home.

Palardy nods off to sleep, and starts to snore. A loud grating snore. Everyone attached to him tug the rope as hard as they can to try and wake him up.

Then it happens . . . The first NVA soldier enters the trap! Then another, and

yet another. Asshole to bellybutton, more and more are entering the 'killing zone'. With a final frantic tug of the rope, Palardy is finally yanked from his beauty sleep. Fortunately the enemy doesn't hear his last abrupt snort. What he sees in front of him causes his eyes to pop out, and his heart and breathing to stop. Hohol and the others also stop breathing. For by now the whole zone is full of NVA! They are filling the trail in front of them ~ not more than ten feet away!

Sorenson loses count after thirty or forty. He is torn as to what to do. It is with the firing of his weapon that the ambush will be sprung. With the firepower he has in his team, they might with luck get maybe a dozen. It's sheer suicide. There are too many ~ too well armed. The enemy has enough cover on the other side of the trail, to protect them when the shooting starts. The company is too far away to reach them ~ in the dark ~ in time. He starts to squeeze the trigger. He is a good Marine ~ he will fight ... to the death ...

Beads of sweat are pouring from Palardy's face. He's afraid the sound of it hitting the leaves close to him will be heard by the enemy. Hohol, too, is sweating profusely, and is worried that his thoughts can be heard by the enemy. "Don't do it, Bob ~ please don't pull that trigger ...", he's thinking ~ "We'll all die!" He has a grenade launcher, but it won't do much good at such close range (takes at least twenty feet for the grenades to arm). He tries to remember how many magazines he'd brought along for his pistol.

Sorenson re-assesses the situation. Can't see the last of them yet, and the first ones are already shuffling out of sight ~ no telling how many more are coming through. He relaxes his trigger finger ...

They spend the rest of the night afraid ~ to even blink an eye.

I wake up to the sound of Sorenson getting his ass chewed up one side and down the other. Can't remember who was doing the chewing. This after he reported back in ~ and was honest about his 'predicament'.

{Over the years, there's been a lot of controversy over this incident.

Many have felt he should have sprung the ambush ~ regardless. "Could have prevented Hill 362", some say.

I talked with every man on that ambush, and everyone said the same thing ~ suicide.

Everyone of those men were good Marines ~ there was no questioning their courage. And had they committed suicide on that ambush, our whole company might have gone down several days later in the fight for hill 362. Gerry Hohol and Tom Palardy ended up defending the fighting hole next to mine that day. And had they not been there (also defending their position with an M-14 on automatic) ~ we surely would have been overrun.

Corporal Bill Troy, several years ago during a phone conversation, pointed out the fact that we had been trained 'not' to spring an ambush ~ unless the enemy was totally within it's fields of fire.

My feeling then, as now, is Lance Corporal Bob Sorenson ~ made the right decision.}

### July 22, 1966 ~ 1900 hours.

We had just set in for the night. Our squad has ambush duty tonight, and some of us I'm sure, are thinking about the Sorenson ambush two nights before. I know it was on my mind. So I had made sure we found a site that had everything going for it. I would often pick out the ambush site, sometimes going out alone, and leading a team back later.

Corporal Troy was the team leader. It was dusk, but because of the inversion layer, it was getting dark rapidly.

All of a sudden across a narrow valley from us, a hilltop erupted under fire. Looked like the 4th of July! Tracers and mortar explosions all over. Major

battle going on. “Jesus Christ! Wonder who's getting it?”, I think to myself out loud. We all had friends spread out through the various companies within the battalion.

The fire fight lasts nearly all night. They can't get air support in ~ because of the inversion layer. I guess we're too far inland for naval artillery, and besides, whoever it is ~ is on the wrong side of the hill. Nobody sleeps that night...

We get back to the company area early in the morning of the 23rd, to find everyone is getting ready to move out. It was India Company of our battalion that got hit last night, and we're off to provide support. Normally our ambush team, because we had been up all night, would be able to pick up a couple of winks. We'd be in a reserve position. Not today... I volunteer for the point position ~ I've got buddies in that company. No way. They put us in the rear of the column.

We try for the shortest route. The gooks figure on this, and pin us down with machine-gun fire all day. We're stuck in this stagnate stream ~ and it's full of leaches!

(Always an excuse for a smoke break to burn the slimy little creatures off.) An occasional spent round slams into the brackish water around us. The whole time I'm desperately thinking, ‘Come on let's go. LET'S GO!’

We end up having to turn back. Everyone's depressed ~ we all have friends in India Company. We send out the dusk patrol along the way. Jim Yakubsin's squad ~ Bob Stallings at point...

{Through the years, I have run across what I call the ‘ghosts’ of India Company ~ men who had served and fought on Hill 362. We would talk, and through them I was able to piece together most of what had happened in the two tragic days it took for us to get to them. They lost

a lot of men over those two days ~ twenty-five men killed in action. Most on the first night. Just about everyone that would survive ~ was wounded.

Stan, who had been a platoon radioman, told me that they just made a lot of mistakes. They had been given orders to get up Hill 362, and use it as a radio relay station. There had been a lot of action in the area ~ not just within our battalion AOR, but with 3/4 and several other battalions. With high hills separating the various battalions, a communications link was needed ~ India Company on top of hill 362.

When they started up, it was already dusk and getting darker. There were signs of the enemy all over ~ foxholes and even com-wire. They were in a hurry, and weren't using normal scouting procedures.

The enemy hit them hard. First with an ambush that cut off First platoon. Then with an enveloping attack that pinned down the rest of the company. I'll go into it further, later ... }

We make our first mistake. We decide to set up in the same positions as the night before. Not having been in those positions because of ambush duty ~ my squad has to dig in. I buddy up with Stuart again, and grumpingly start to dig our fighting hole for the night. We hear a major fire fight off in the distance. Who is getting it this time?

As I'm digging, Troy suddenly shows up.

"Come with me, Harris ~ I need your help", he says hurriedly.

"Aw, Jesus ~ Troy", I complain, "can't you find someone else?"

"I want you!", he snaps, "Lets go!" (We are all on edge. No sleep ~ no food,

its getting on everyone's nerves.)

Once we're away from the rest of the squad Troy says, "That was the dusk patrol that just got hit. Staff sergeant Bishop is hit bad . . . And Stallings is dead. Got it between the eyes. Didn't want to tell the others just yet . . ."

"Mother F—king Son of a Bitch!", I curse between clinched teeth once again feeling the pain of losing a friend.

"Stallings was a good friend of mine!", I say trying hard to keep the tears from welling up in my eyes. A lump begins to knot up in my throat.

"I know", says Troy quietly. "I want to set you in by the trail down there ~ cover them (the dusk patrol) when they come into our lines."

"Make sure the gooks aren't following them in", he adds. "The password will be 'light ~ house'."

He walks with me down the hill to the main trail, and we pick a spot. Lots of cover, but close enough to see what's happening. It's almost dark by now, the inversion layer is going to make it a 'pitch black' night.

It's so quiet ~ you can hear a pin drop . . .

Suddenly ~ off in the distance I hear a sound, like someone hitting a tree with an aluminum baseball bat. Metallic 'thunks' ~ a bunch of them. F--k! Mortars! My heart pounds out the thought that is flashing through my brain . . . 'Where are they going to hit?!

Within seconds we get the answer ~ and hear the shrill whistle of the projectiles coming down on us! We have no fighting hole to hide in ~ and we lay as flat against the ground as we can get. The first one lands just feet away ~ the ear-splitting explosion blows the elephant grass around us ~ flat! Either a rock or shrapnel hits me in the knee. I yell!

“YOU HIT?!” I hear Troy yell, as the explosions continue, but are slowly being ‘walked’ up the hillside and away from us.

“YEAH!”, I yell back while reaching down to feel my knee. The trouser at the knee is sliced open. I can feel blood, but it doesn’t feel serious.

“Just a scratch”, I tell him. “I’m O.K.!”

The mortar barrage lifts for a brief moment. We hear blood curdling screams coming from the hillside just above us.

“Who’s up there, Troy?!” I’m whispering now.

“Holoka’s squad,” he whispers back.

“WE GOTTA GET UP THERE!” I yell, as the mortars start hitting again. “HE’S GIVING THEM OUR POSITION!”

And I start to take off up the hill.

Troy grabs me, “Wait a minute...” He says, “let me call the CP.”

Troy has a PRC-‘prick’ 10 radio with him, and he calls the CP (Command Post). I hear Gunny Dias’ voice answer.

“Yeah, get up there boys. Try and quiet it down ~ before we all get blown away. I’ll send help...”

We go racing up the hill ~ which is covered with elephant grass at least six feet tall and sharp! It’s pitch black by now. The only lights to see by are the flashes given off by the mortars exploding on the side of the hill!

I’m no longer concerned about getting hit ~ got to get up that hill ~ my buddies are hurt. As we get closer I see a tall slender figure silhouetted against an explosion. Shit! looks like...Nickerson!

We’re yelling as we near their lines ~ “DON’T SHOOT! IT’S TROY~

HARRIS!"

It is Nickerson, and we watch his contorted figure light up in the eerie light of a flare. He is screaming in an awful way that I have never heard before ~ nor ever want to hear again. Chilled my soul ~ and the blood in my veins ~ into ice.

I trip on something and fall into a fighting hole as I watch Troy grab Nickerson and hit the ground. The flare goes out and it's dark again. Close to me I hear Corporal John Holoka's voice mumbling, "Shut up, Nickerson ~ shut up, Nickerson ... " Like a broken record.

{Corporal John C. Holoka, USMC. John was new to our platoon ~ we were finally getting replacements sent in ~ and he was one of them. Didn't have to be on this operation ~ had like only two weeks 'til his rotation date. Nice guy. Everybody liked him right away. I shared a fighting hole with him several times. When you spend the night with someone ~ and you think it's your last ~ you get to know them, while you're awake all night staring into the dark. He had told me about the girl he was going to marry. About wanting to go back to school and finish college. He was about my size and wore spectacles.}

"John ~ are you O.K.?", I whisper.

"Shut up, Nickerson ~ Shut up, Nickerson ...", he keeps babbling.

I realize something is wrong. I slither up next to him in the dark. I can feel his body laying there ~ but it's so dark I can't really see him. I start to feel him from the boots up. My fingers come across a deep wound ~ gushing blood above his knee. I had left my pack with Stewart when Troy had come

to get me ~ all I had in the way of bandages was a field dressing, which I always carried in my shirt pocket. (A field dressing could be placed just about anywhere on the body ~ it was large with cloth straps.) I strapped this around his leg wound. At least it (the shrapnel) hadn't hit an artery. I continued to feel up his body. Again my fingers felt blood and a wound in his upper stomach. I needed more bandages, and feverishly started to feel around his fighting hole for his pack ~ and first aid kit.

I cut my hand on a sharp object. Turned out to be a helmet ~ which was all torn to shreds...

"Shit!" I exclaim under my breath. And bypassing everything else, I put my hand on his head ~ and pull it back as if it had been burned! He has a terrible head wound!

About this time some others come stumbling into the area ~ a corpsman among them. I grab him and say, "You gotta help me, Doc. This man's in bad shape ~ take care of him first. I don't have anymore bandages."

After he assesses the extent of the damage, in the dark and under fire ~ he does the best he can, and says, "I've got to get over to the next guy. Better get him back ASAP!"

Doesn't have to tell me that ~ I've managed to find John's poncho, and I'm yelling for someone to help me get him into it.

We carried John down first ~ he was in the worst shape. Stumbling in the darkness. Four men ~ trying to carry a man weighing nearly two hundred pounds, down a hill of sharp elephant grass. We were still getting sporadic mortar explosions in and around the area. At one point we were sloshing through a creek bed and canyon area, slipping in the mud. Sliding down the sides of the stream bed. Several times we lost our balance and dropped him ~ and he would moan. You could smell ~ feel his blood oozing around in the poncho.

“Sorry John”, I’d say ~ “we’re doing the best we can. Hang in there, buddy ~ we’re almost there...”

I think it was the most exhausting experience I have ever been through.

We finally got him to an area where they were going to try and med-evac the wounded ~ and went back after Nickerson.

They had given Nickerson some morphine to quiet him down ~ but he was still in a lot of pain (found out later, shrapnel had destroyed his pancreas, part of his liver ~ and collapsed one lung).

{In Boot Camp, we were taught how to die in battle. True! Sergeant Payne, one of our DI’s ~would gather us around him just about every night before ‘lights out’. And he’d say ~ “Most of you are going to be sent to war. Many of you won’t be coming back. You will be dead!”, he’d continue in his slow nasal voice, “Your eyes ~ will no longer see. Your heart ~ will no longer tick. You will no longer get a hard on. You will be dead! But when you die, you will die like Marines. With your mouths shut! You will not make a sound. You will not make a sound, girls because you will not want the enemy to target your area ~ and cause other Marines to die!”}

Three times I made the tortuous trek back through that stream bed and up that hill to help bring in the wounded. The last time was with Robert Lopez. Although wounded in the arm, and I believe the leg ~ he chose to walk out. Tough guy that Lopez, and a good Marine. Each time I came back to the helo-zone, I would check in on John Holoka.

The last time I saw him he was mumbling, “Sorry mom ... Sorry ...”

His mumbling was getting weaker, and I could barely hear him as I knelt

down to pat him on the shoulder.

He died on board the med-evac helicopter, on the way back..

He died like a Marine, Sergeant Payne. With his mouth shut ...

{PFC Nickerson (no relation to my mother's side of the family), horribly wounded and after almost dying several times, on his journey back to recovery - and eventually the States - would write us a letter afterwards - letting us know that he was going to be all right. Lopez recovered ... to fight again.}

There were a lot of other things happening on the ridge that Lima Company occupied that night. First and second platoons were also having their fair share of action. (The enemy had targeted the area from the night before. Never said they were dumb.)

In one incident - they (the gooks, or NVA - I was starting to have a little more respect for them) managed to acquire (probably from the two Marines that we had heard about - who had been separated from their outfit, and had been found bayoneted against trees with their cock and balls stuffed into their mouths) Marine uniforms, and tried to sneak into our lines. Didn't work! Someone called out the password. 'No comprende`?' They were terminated.

In another incident - a Marine took it upon himself to take a couple of flashlights and signal in, at night - with the enemy all around - the med-evac chopper that was to fly out the wounded. If seen, he along with the helicopter pilot - would be easy targets. Rumor had it this man was up for the Bronze Star for risking his life in the face of the enemy. {I found out a couple of years ago - it was Gunny Ross. Didn't get the 'Star' - but join the crowd, Gunny - you did a great job! There wasn't much that could be done

for Holoka, but saving even a few precious minutes probably helped save Nickerson's life.)

After helping to bring Lopez back to the helo-zone, I found the remnants of my platoon (already depleted in man power from various casualties, and now short one fireteam because of the mortars - the only one to walk away unscathed was Gerry Hohol) hunkered along side the trail in the elephant grass, close to where I had been originally - when the mortars were dropped. Someone handed me my pack, and I just laid down and went to sleep using the pack as a pillow. It was about four 'o clock in the morning. I got maybe an hour of sleep.

I was shaken awake by Gunny Dias, who said, "The Captain wants you on point, Harris. Good job last night." (Sometimes a pat on the back does wonders for one's morale.)

As I'm getting ready to move out, someone tells me what happened with the dusk patrol:

{PFC Robert E. Stallings, USMC - from Spokane, Washington - a 'tracker', and from the West like me, is at point. (We had become good friends, and used to trade off at point within the platoon - and later, company.) Two hundred yards out in front of the rest of the 'dusk patrol' - he runs head on into an enemy patrol! Both are startled at first - confused. Bob draws first, and kills the NVA soldier directly in front of him - then runs back to the dusk patrol who, when hearing the exchange, duck into the bushes. He yells at them, "Enemy patrol!", and starts to run back thinking they are behind him. He fires his rifle sporadically into the brush in front of him as he is running.

It takes a couple of seconds for the rest of the patrol to figure out what

has happened, and go after him. The enemy, in the meantime, have also ducked into the bushes ~ and are waiting in ambush. They're ready for PFC. Bob Stallings. He catches the first round right between the eyes!

The rest of the dusk patrol plow into the ambush ~ weapons blazing. Staff Sergeant Bishop is hit. They lay down heavy fire and manage to kill three of the enemy ~ the rest scatter. PFC Jim Yakubsin, along with the others, walks away unscathed. They hurriedly make for the company AOR, carrying dead Stallings, and wounded SSgt. Bishop in ponchos. It's almost dark. Within a very short distance of making it into the company's line, the mortars start to hit. They take cover and remain there until morning ~ when the rest of the company moves out in their direction.}

{To this day ~ I don't know why Stallings made the decision he did. To charge into the enemy. I know of a personal matter that had left him shattered ~ several weeks before. He had received a 'Dear John' letter from his wife, and proceeded to raise hell ~ with the rest of us ... in the Philippines.}

PFC ROBERT E. STALLINGS, USMC ~ Killed In Action ~ July 23, 1966. A good Marine ...

... Strange as it may seem ~ I felt fresh, even though I hadn't got more than two or three hours of sleep over the past thirty~six hours. I was ready to go. I was mad ~ I was pissed! I wanted them (the enemy), and I was going to even the score!

I followed the same trail we had taken the day before (when we had been

pinned down ~ seemed like days before). But this time we followed the trail farther to the North. I see signs of the enemy everywhere along the way. I can tell the difference between our boots ~ and their tennis shoes imprinted in the dust of the trail. Every where along the trail broken elephant grass, and bushes ~ a lot of traffic, theirs, has gone by here.

I'm maybe one hundred meters out from the others, and moving fast. Captain Tatum has to keep sending runners after me ~ to tell me to "slow down". I leave danger signs on the trail. Sometimes three rocks piled up, other times I would draw hash marks in the trail ~ three arrows slashed into the dust with my bayonet. Meaning ~ keep your eyes open ~ enemy everywhere!

I feel like one of Custer's scouts...

But it's going to be different this time . . . We aren't the Calvary. We're Marines! And you've really pissed this one off!

{When India Company's First Platoon gets hit, the company XO (Executive Officer), along with several others are killed instantly. The rest of the platoon dives for cover, but are overwhelmed by a superior force of NVA hardcore. As the remnants of this platoon are being picked off one-by-one, Lance Corporal Richard A. Pittman of the Second Platoon, snaps ~ when he finds out a buddy of his 'Pops' is caught out there, and wounded. At this point the company is disorganized everything has happened so fast. Every man is just trying to survive. He looks at a machine-gunner, laying on the trail not knowing exactly what to do.

"You mind if I borrow this for a minute", he says ~ grabbing the gun and a couple of belts of machine-gun ammo from the assistant gunner. He then rushed forward. Coming under intense fire from the enemy, almost immediately ~ he raked the surrounding area ~ momentarily

silencing it. Then other automatic weapons opened up on him. He destroyed them with his machine-gun, and rushed another fifty yards or so up the trail ~ until he reached the area where the leading elements of the platoon had fallen dead or wounded. Attacked by at least thirty to forty of the enemy, Pittman braced himself in the middle of the trail and raked them with machine-gun fire. When his gun finally jammed from the constant use ~ he picked up an enemy AK-47 and another Marine's pistol. Killing a few more with the AK-47, until it ran out of ammo, and then several more with the .45 ~ he forced the rest of the enemy to flee. Out of ammunition, he hurled grenades that he had on his person, and others from downed Marines. He tried to hide several of the wounded in the bushes before rejoining his platoon ~ hoping to get help.

Lance Corporal Pittman's incredible valor bought time for his company. Butchered, and caught out in the open and trying to reorganize ~ the company was having problems. The young Captain, Commanding Officer of the Company, was devastated by his initial losses. Two Staff Sergeants, with years of experience between them ~ as acting platoon commanders ~ took charge of the remaining men in their consecutive platoons, and tried to move them farther up the hill, all the while suffering casualties from enemy mortars.

Although Lance Corporal Pittman had done more than humanly possible to buy time for his company, and had managed to rescue a few, and in doing so, inspired the rest to dig in and hold (He would be awarded the Medal Of Honor for his actions above and beyond the call of duty.) ~ they were just too outnumbered by a superior force. Unable to provide cover fire and a rescue effort for those that had survived the initial attack, they were eventually overwhelmed.}

One person survived, incredibly ~ to describe what happened next ...

{“They came amongst us, and if we looked to be alive bayoneted us. If we screamed or cried out ~ they would take our own weapons ~ and finish it with a shot to the head . . . There was no mercy for those that might have made it (lived) . . .”}

A good many of those that died ~ on Hill 362 in the first two days of fighting ~ had been summarily (hastily, unceremoniously, and arbitrarily) executed . . . Killed in cold blood!

I could smell it ~ long before I could see it . . . Death!

It was around this peculiar bend in the trail, and over a slight rise and down into a ravine. An NVA bunker complex, between a couple of streams coming together in a draw. NVA bodies sprawled all over. Dead for maybe two ~ three days.

I send word back ~ something's not right here! (The enemy would almost always clean up their dead ~ many times denying us the satisfaction of a kill.)

We send in the tunnel rats to check out the bunkers. Nothing! Just dead bodies, about six of them ~ laying where they fell. Don't know who nailed them ~ I don't think it was us.

I get ordered to hold in a defensive position with a couple of other men while the company passes through. Someone else takes point. I lay in a prone position, smoking almost a whole pack of cigarettes to try and mask the stench. (The smell of decaying human bodies is the worst smell in the

world.) Waiting for the enemy to reclaim it's dead. Sure! I don't think so! Not today...

As I'm laying there, I'm looking at the dead. One of them is six feet tall or more. Gotta be Chinese . . . I think to myself. Maybe an advisor or something. The Vietnamese don't get that big. Well, Mao . . . maybe you f--ked with us in Korea . . . but not here, son! He'll rot here . . . This is my territory!

After the company passes through, me and the others pick up 'tale end Charley'. I'm not happy, but I accept my fate. I'm tired, and just plain beat.

We are working our way up Hill 362 - through the elephant grass that seems to grow on the east side of the hills in the area. We see a depressing sight - CH 46 Chinooks (larger copters than the CH-34) are lifting what I think are the dead of India Company off the hill by basket. No sooner does one take off - than another maneuvers in to pick up it's cargo of death. The gray inversion layer adds to the gloom.

No enemy fire - that I'm aware of - is taking place this late afternoon. Why? Chinooks are easy targets. Why not shoot up the dead. So far you've pulled out all of the stops - you little bastards...

About half way up - I get orders to take the point.

It's getting to be late afternoon. We get close to the top...

The first Marine I see as I carefully enter India Company lines - is carrying a machine-gun. His utilities are torn to shreds - but he's wearing a big smile. There are tears in his eyes. (I think later - years later, this might be Lance Corporal Richard Pittman.)

"Man, am I glad to see you guys," he says - his voice quivering.

"Sorry it took us so long - ran into a little traffic . . .", I try to explain.

"Yeah. I heard . . .", he says - shaking my hand. "You got any cigarettes?"

I hand him what's left of my pack ~ glad to be able to do something for this man, who must have been through hell...

{Years later I would have an opportunity to meet Richard Pittman, who by then was a Gunnery Sergeant stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. A mutual friend had arranged for us to have lunch together, but at the last moment it was canceled ~ for reasons that escape me now. Shortly thereafter, I moved from the area.}

I moved on, until I reached the top of the hill, where I was told to halt. I don't remember seeing any more men from India Company. The rest of my company had split up at about this time (I was told of this years later), two platoons First and Second, along with the CP group ~ moving up the hill on another path farther to the North (this later turns out to be a wise decision).

I notice as I'm standing there that the west side of this hill, as with others in the area ~ is covered with a lot of vegetation ~ trees and bushes. I spot a gook foxhole (you could always tell the enemy's foxholes from ours. They looked as if a backhoe had scooped them out usually deeper than ours, and more square) located on the far side of this ridge I'm on. Must be others around. I'm thinking to myself ~ the enemy once owned this hill... About this time, my squad leader, Corporal Troy, gets up to me.

"Our squad is to dig in temporarily ~ until the rest move in, and figure out a defense for the night," he tells me (by now it's about four or five 'o clock in the afternoon).

"I want you and Stu to dig in over there," he says, pointing in the general area of the gook foxhole.

"There's already a gook foxhole over there, Troy. Can't we use it? Doesn't make much sense to have to dig a fighting hole if we're going to be moving

again anyhow," I plead, so tired I can hardly stand.

"Oh, all right - get moving," he says, and walks away . . . heading in the direction of his own duel with fate.

I nod at Bob Stewart - tossing my head in the direction of the fighting hole.

{The terrain looks something like this: There is a well worn path leading from North to South along the top of this hill, or ridge. There are some tall trees interspersed with bushes on either side of the trail. jutting like a thumb from this ridge, and hardly visible through the trees and brush, is a neck of land with our hole situated on the West end of it - overlooking the steep side of the hill. The hole is a nice one - about four foot by five feet across, and about two and a half feet deep. There are several tall trees directly behind it - one tree directly in front of it, and a lot of bushes that are two or three feet high - all around the area.}

Usually Bob has something cute to say to me, but we're both so exhausted by events over the past few days that neither one of us says a word. We squirm out of our packs and toss them into the hole. We lean our M-14 rifles together at the back of the hole butts down. We sit down on the edge of this hole with our backs facing the downward side of the hill, and lean over to open our packs and rummage for whatever C rations might be left over - from being issued one or two days earlier.

I hear the sharp snap of a twig, and instinctively turn my head over my left shoulder towards the sound. Rarely have I seen the enemy face to face, but there - not more than fifty feet away, is an NVA soldier walking up the hill with his rifle under his right shoulder as if he's going duck hunting or something. My heart jumps out of my mouth, and without taking my eyes off

of him ~ I slowly reach over for my rifle. Just as slowly I bring it up to my shoulder, and take aim. Easy target!

Stewart becomes aware of what's happening, and also reaches for his rifle ..

The gook suddenly sees me, and tries to bring his rifle up! I squeeze the trigger...

{What happens next, even now ~ after all of these years some thirty years, still seems incredible. It's like, I'm in one of those tall trees that existed on the hill ~ looking down at a fighting hole with two Marines in it. Going through some strange kind of ballet of survival. Every movement, and every fraction of a second in time ~ choreographed into a duet of death, or destiny... Burned into my soul ~ only to resurface again and again over the years of my life.

The picture show will sometimes spring suddenly, and without provocation ~ from some hidden depth in my brain, and focus into my subconscious. The pictures flick across a blank stare screen.}

The sudden ten round burst of fire, and subsequent upward jerk of the rifle, takes me totally by surprise! (I had accidentally grabbed Stewart's rifle which was an automatic ~ M-14\_with selector.)

Had barely registered this in my brain ~ WHEN ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE!

Every cubic foot of air around us had bullets zinging through it. Pieces of trees, brush and dirt were flying in every direction. Bob and I hit the bottom of that fighting hole at exactly the same time!

“Jesus F--king Christ!”, I exclaim! (The enemy had been closing in all around us ~ and

we hadn't even noticed.)

I quickly jumped up and fired a burst ~ and got back down just as fast. Over and over again ~ each time firing at any thing that moved. Each time in a different direction because everything around us was moving! They were all over us.

It's like we're in the middle of a big storm ~ like a tornado had suddenly touched down over our fighting hole. Everything was flying through the air around us. Several times I was hit by ricocheting spent bullets. It felt like someone slugging me real hard, but they never broke the skin. I was going through ammo real fast. I'm yelling as loud as I can,

“GUNS UP! WE NEED A MACHINEGUN DOWN HERE! ~ NOW!”

“Take your rifle, Stu!”, I yelled at one point ~ ready to hand it over to him.

“Don't have time! Don't have time!”, he yells back. “Keep it going, you're doing good!”

A little bit later ~ he yells, “Slow it down! Slow it down! YOU'RE GUNNA BURN IT UP!”

“CANT SLOW IT DOWN ~ DAMN IT! THEY'RE ALL OVER US!”, I yell back. “If I burn it up (warp the barrel from the heat of rapid fire) ~ I'll toss you the selector!” (Meaning ~ put it on my rifle ~ which is semi-automatic.)

{They're throwing everything they have at us but grenades ~ at this

point, and the only reason they probably didn't throw those was because of the steepness of the hill and the dense vegetation. We have an automatic - a lot of fire power - and they want to silence it. We were taught to do the same thing ...}

I can hear the gooks swearing at us - both in Vietnamese and pig-English.

“U-DIE! U-DIE! MOLINE - U-DIE!”

“F--K YOU YA LITTLE GOOK BASTARDS! COME AND GET IT - YOU MOTHER F--KING SONS OF BITCHES!”, I'm swearing back at them at the top of my lungs.

And I hear this horn blowing - like a trumpet - from their direction. 'Custer's revenge' I remember, thinking to myself.

I carried about one hundred loaded rounds of ammo - or five magazines, loaded with twenty rounds each - on my cartridge belt, and one magazine in the rifle. I had another couple of loaded magazines in my pack. Same thing with Stewart.

At first Stewart would try to jump up, and fire a couple of shots from his (my) rifle. But after a few minutes into the fight - I heard him yell with pain.

“YOU HIT?!”, I yelled back - not able to take my eyes off the scene unraveling in front of me.

“Got my first Purple Heart!”, he yells. I quickly glance back. A bullet had hit the trigger guard on his (my) rifle, and fragments had taken a chunk out of his forefinger.

“Jesus!”, I almost sigh with relief, and open up again - catching movement out of my right eye.

Like I've said ~ everything we were doing was in unison. I'd spend a magazine ~ pop it from the rifle reach back without letting my eyes leave the terrain in front of me and there would be a fresh one slapped into my hand. Without saying a word ~ Stewart took the magazines from my cartridge belt, and from his ~saving me precious seconds ~ and had them ready.

I noticed as we were getting to the end of our loaded magazines, that he had taken my bayonet from its scabbard, and stuck it into the side of the fighting hole ~ ready if necessary, for hand to hand combat ...

I heard Stewart yell a couple of times ... "WE NEED AMMO! WE NEED A MACHINE-GUN!", but it fell on deaf ears. Everyone was busy ~ trying to stay alive.

But we lucked out that day ... We both happened to be carrying machine-gun belts, as support ammo for weapons platoon. Probably had some four hundred rounds apiece.

As I reached back to grab one of our last loaded magazines, wondering why they were no longer being slapped into my hand ~ I glanced back at Stewart. He was using his bayonet and fingers ~ clawing rounds out of the machine-gun belts ~ to re-load for me! Tearing his fingernails apart in his frenzy!

Then it happened! I was about to slap another magazine into my (Stewart's) rifle when ...

B-L-A-M!...

Everything turned dark green. Someone turned off the sound. And this bright fireball ~ like a comet ~ swooshes before my eyes ... Then everything went black!

Corporal William Troy, having placed the last of his men, PFC. Bruce Baker (and a man borrowed from the Second squad) into a good foxhole, was just making his way back onto the trail when the shooting began. (This foxhole was just to our left, and back a ways). The area suddenly erupted in a hail of bullets. Hitting the deck and quickly crawling to the nearest cover, an old log laying just off the trail, he was amazed he hadn't been hit.

He rapidly unholstered his .45 automatic, and just as rapidly realized the futility of trying to return fire. The ground all around him was being churned up by incoming enemy fire! Assessing the situation, his morale sunk even further when he realized how vulnerable his position was - out in the open of a saddle-like area on the ridge.

At the same time, Staff Sergeant Norm Koos, who along with other elements of the Second platoon including our executive officer Lt. Ed Conti (who was filling in as Second platoon commander - Lt. Jim Harrington having been shot in the shoulder a few days earlier during the 'hot LZ' landing), also had been caught in the open. Seeing the predicament that Cpl. Troy was in, he tried desperately to move to his aid. Firing his M-1 carbine on the run, he got to within a few feet of Cpl. Troy when he was struck in the head by a bullet. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Several minutes after the fight began, PFC. Bruce Baker, while trying to return fire by jumping up from his fighting hole, was shot through the heart and collapsed dead into his hole. His partner tried several times to return fire, but the withering enemy fire kept him pinned down throughout the rest of the fight.

Cpl. Troy, having witnessed SSgt. Koos's violent death, was now overwhelmed with fear. When the bullet struck him in the head, ricocheting off the top of his helmet, and causing a deep furrow in the steel pot - it knocked him cold!

First and Second platoons (Second had been divided for some reason, with the above mentioned linking up with the Third - us) had not had a chance to dig in when the shooting erupted. Although farther up the trail and to the north, they were also receiving heavy enemy fire.

It appeared to be a full on frontal assault! With the main thrust being directed at the positions held by the Third squad along with elements of the Second platoon, who had been caught in the open.

Another phrase evolving out of centuries of warfare known as a 'human wave attack' would apply here.

{The NVA were attempting to do to us - exactly what they had tried successfully on India Company...}

When the bullet struck my head, the fact that I had shoved my helmet back in order to take aim at the first enemy soldier probably saved my life. It hit the edge of my steel pot on the left side (there was a small dent there) and glancing off, went through the upper portion of my neck just below the knowledge knot. It exited the right side of my neck, again hitting my steel pot - blowing the right side of the helmet completely apart! The impact of the bullet hitting me caused me to bite down hard on my tongue!

When it knocked me out, I collapsed like a folding chair, landing face first into the bottom of our fighting hole. My shoulder came to rest on the sizzling hot barrel of the automatic. When I came to, after probably no more than a minute or so, my body jerked off of the rifle barrel. Dazed and kneeling, I grabbed at the burning sensation at the back of my head. My head was pounding, and seeing the helmet laying there all torn apart, I looked at Stewart who was sitting with his back against the hole - his face ashen. (Seeing the blood flowing from my mouth and down the back of my neck, he'd thought the bullet had entered through the mouth and out the back of my head.)

“Grenade?”, I mumbled, still dazed.

“No,” he said slowly. “You’ve been shot!”

“GOD DAMNED GRENADE!”, I shout, pointing to the torn up helmet laying there right in front of him.

“I said you’ve been shot, damn it!”, he said realizing that I wasn’t as bad off as he originally thought.

“How bad is it!”, I said, leaning towards him still clutching at the wound.

“Well, let me see!”, he says ~ knocking my hand away. “Oh ~ it’s just a scratch”, he says trying hard to convince me.

{It’s hard to explain in words what happens to a person when in combat of this nature. It’s more of an emotional thing that goes through you. Some people respond differently than others. In my case, I know that at one point I was so scared ~ I almost pissed in my pants. Then too, I remember incredible anger consuming me ~ as I would let off bursts of fire with that automatic. At some point I knew I was going to die, had resigned myself to it, but I was going to take as many of the enemy with me as I could before I went down. Again, this may be attributed to our training... Sgt. Payne “If you’re going to go down ~ take as many of ‘em with you as you can!” But I’d like to think it was because of my inherit gene pool ~ Irish, Indian and Viking and a history of warriors probably dating back to the dawn of mankind.

It was like the bullets and everything else flying around me, and whizzing by me ~ were part of some background in another picture. Since they didn’t effect me directly ~ my attention was focused on a more acute threat.

My mind stuffed the actual killings deep into my subconscious, probably never to resurface again. I saw the first enemy clearly ~ then rage took over. All I remember to this day are bushes moving. I'd let off a burst ~ and they wouldn't move anymore. From the bodies that were found below our fighting hole the next day, I had to have looked into some of their eyes before wasting them ...}

The rage again flowed back into me as I picked up the weapon, slapped in a magazine, and yelled at Stuart, "Where did it come from?!" (meaning the bullet that had hit me).

"Over there!", he said, pointing at a thicket of bamboo not more than a hundred feet away.

I used up the whole magazine blasting the bamboo into toothpicks ~ goodbye gook!

Everything that had happened, from the time I was shot until now, had taken place in just a few short minutes. The battle was still raging on ~ all around us. Why we weren't overrun in that brief period of time is beyond me.

As I start to go back to work with the automatic, I hear Stuart yelling, "CORPSMAN!" CORPSMAN!"

For the next few moments I just plain have my hands full. I may have been pissed before, but I was REALLY PISSED NOW!

My senses were slowly drifting back into my throbbing skull and I was becoming intensely aware of two things. Not only were we rapidly running

out of ammunition - but the enemy was trying to position snipers into my blind spots. Our fighting hole stuck out like a sore thumb which was good to some extent, because I could blast out at the enemy with nearly a hundred and eighty degree field of fire - didn't have to worry about hitting any of our guys. But I would have to try harder to cover the whole area at any given time. I would have to make every shot of every burst - count. Up until now I hadn't fired an automatic very much (there was usually one man in every fire team that was the designated automatic weapons man - this evolving out of decades of Marine Corps tactical thinking. Four fire teams (Consisting of four men, when at full strength.) per squad three squads to a platoon - a lot of fire power!). But I was an excellent shot. By working my four and five round bursts in a diagonal slash pattern from the top to the bottom of anything that moved, I knew I had to be doing some damage.

The enemy was still swearing at us - and I back at them just as much. I think I was gaining on it - didn't hear as much swearing, and the bushes weren't moving as much.

There were several times that Stewart probably saved my life that day - not just by tearing his fingernails apart to keep me loaded - but by physically grabbing me to keep me from rushing down that hill. I was so mad, I was starting to take foolish chances.

Another time - I had jumped back into the hole to reload after letting off a burst from behind the tree that was in front of us. I was about to jump back up and do it again - he grabbed my arm and pointed. The tree was starting to disintegrate! They were probably hitting it with a fifty! (fifty caliber machine-gun)

Sometime during all of this, the corpsman that Bob had yelled for showed up. He stops fifty feet from the fighting hole and takes cover - because of all

the shit still hitting the area around us.

“I can’t get to you! Too much fire!”, he yells at us.

“I’m all right,” I yell back ~ blood still streaming down my neck.

“Andy (Lt. Anderson, my platoon commander) sez I gotta check you out!”, he shouts.

“F--k it! Hang on Stu ~ I’ll be back!”, I yell, jumping out of the hole ~ bolting past the corpsman ~ and diving next to a log I had spotted earlier.

The corpsman lands next to me and starts to look at the wound. Directly across the trail from us are Lt. Anderson, PFC. Gil Velasquez and LCpl. Galloway, also laying behind logs. (The reason there are so many logs around is from all of the explosions during India Company’s fight.)

{Now think about it . . . I have over the years. I could have been killed doing this little maneuver just to get a wound checked ~ or Stu could have been overrun in my absence ~ I had the automatic. Such was our command structure ~ you did what you were told and you didn’t interpret it any other way ~ absolute authority ~ and absolutely necessary in these situations. ‘Ours is not to question why ~ ours is but to do or die.’}

“How bad is he, Doc?”, yells Andy from across the trail, and through the noise of intense fire.

“Just a scratch, Andy!” We really need ammo bad!”, I interrupt.

“He’ll have to go back!”, says the corpsman. And no sooner had he said this ~ than I notice Galloway, along with Velasquez and Andy, turn their attention down the trail and start firing their weapons.

I look in that direction in time to see two enemy soldiers, hell bent for leather, come racing up the trail towards us ~ with AK-47's blazing death! I struggle to bring my (Stewart's) rifle up to fire, and this corpsman shoves me down. He's still trying to look at my wound, unaware of what's happening. I shove him aside and start to point the weapon in the general direction of my immediate peril. But by then, the gooks are finally dropped not more than a hundred feet down the trail. I'm thinking my chances are better, back in the hole with Stewart.

“BULLSHIT!”, I yell, while I'm jumping up and running for the hole. I reach it diving in head first.

“What happened up there?”, asks Stewart ~ visibly relieved to see me back.

“Friggn' madhouse up there ~ I can tell ya!”, I answer, in picking up where I had left off ~ jumping up, and releasing a five-round burst down hill.

By now things are starting to quiet down a bit, and naturally you guessed it ~ they finally send us the machine gunner we had been screaming for. He positions himself about twenty yards to the right of us, and then just sits there.

“What are you waiting for?!”, I shout, letting off another five-round burst.

He doesn't say anything, just puts his hands up in an ‘I can't’ gesture, while shaking his head ‘no’.

“Come on man! Give us a hand here!” I yell at him, “You can shoot that thing in any direction, and probably hit something!”

We fight on for another five minutes or so, and then, just as suddenly as it had started ~ the enemy fire stops! Like in a heavy thundershower ~ the rain just passes by.

The machine-gunner never fired a shot. (Find out years later that he had burned up one barrel up on the trail with the Second platoon. With one left, having already used it 'til it was hot had to let it cool down, or lose it and the gun.)

Bob and I just look at each other, unable to comprehend that it might just be over.

“J-e-e-s-u-s K-e-e-ris!”, I say hesitantly, but relieved for even a moments respite.

“Amen to that!”, says Bob, still busily loading magazines.

For ten minutes we wait in that fighting hole, nervously loading the rest of the magazines waiting for the shit to hit the fan again. But it never did. An occasional shot now and then, probably from our side ~ nerves still reacting. But it was actually over. We couldn't believe it . . . Refused to believe it . . .

{For the rest of my time in the war, about two months, and through all of the fighting I would yet have to contend with, none were as intense, profound and desperate ~ as that fifteen or twenty minutes of fighting on Hill 362.}

“HARRIS!... Lieutenant Anderson's voice.

I jumped out of the fighting hole and ran to where I had last seen him on the trail, hitting the deck next to the same log. The corpsman was still there.

“Andy?”, I questioned. It should have been ‘Yes Sir?!’, but in the field, we were allowed to call him Andy ~ didn't want to identify his rank to the

enemy.

“You guys all right?”, he said with concern in his voice.

“Yeah, we’re O.K. It was close, but we’re all right,” I said, the fatigue once again starting to replace the adrenaline that had been pulsing through my body.

“We need ammo real bad”, I added automatically picking up where I had left off from before.

“You’ll get it. It’s on the way,” he said reassuringly, “I’m sending you back on the med-evac.”

“Aw, Andy, it’s just a scratch – I can’t leave Stu”, I said, pleading. My neck was all swollen, and I couldn’t move my head in either direction, but the pain had started to subside a little.

“Sure it is . . .”, he grinned, “but I can’t take a chance on it getting infected, and maybe losing you. Might need you again. You did a great job down there today”.

“But Andy, we’re sticking out like a sore thumb down there, and Stew . . .”, I started to say, still thinking the fighting might erupt again at any moment . . .

“Your going back, John!”, he interrupted, with authority in his voice. “I’ll set somebody in with Stu, but Doc here – needs to take care of that wound!”

“Looks like you had a pretty close call”, he added, looking at the torn helmet that I had put back on my head (couldn’t be out of uniform – even in the field). “Now, I want you to let Doc bandage that wound. When he’s done, you head on up the trail a ways. They’re trying to make an LZ for the med-evac chopper – Be On It!”

“I’ll see you when I get back to the ship.” he said grinning again, and walked off to check the rest of the men. {I don’t believe he was aware of our

overall losses at this time.}

“Hey, John!” – I hear a familiar voice from across the trail.

“Yeah, Gil?”, I said, looking over to where he was laying next to a log.

“You got any water? Mine’s shot...”

{Interesting little story here that I need to interject: I had known Gil Velasquez from the beginning. We had probably joined Lima Company at about the same time (February ~ 1966), but I really hadn't paid much attention to him until one day while training in the Northern Training Area (NTA) of Okinawa. It had been particularly hot that day when he came up to me asking for a drink of water.

“What happened to yours?!” , I chastened. (We had been taught to conserve our water – every man for himself – never knew when you'd really need it).

“Had to give mine to a heat casualty, down the trail!” , he said, obvious hurt in his voice, like we're supposed to be brothers, and help one another...

God, I felt bad while tossing my canteen to him. Swore from then on I'd give him water anytime he asked for it – without question. He was the platoon runner (we affectionately called him Mouse), and was always having to run from squad to squad, many times under fire, with messages from Lt. Anderson. He was constantly getting shot at.

On Hill 362, as it turned out, he and Andy had also been caught off guard when the shooting started. They dove for cover next to LCpl. Galloway's position. In the thick of the battle, he was struck in the

back by a bullet - the impact driving him into the dirt - face first.

“I’m hit!”, he screamed, feeling blood quickly saturate his back as he looked over at Andy. He was amazed and confused when Andy looking at first real worried, started to laugh.

“Why, he must be flipping-out. I’m dying, and all Andy can do is . . . LAUGH?!” he thinks to himself, as the final seconds flash in front of his eyes.

“You’re O.K., Mouse!”, Andy said, chuckling. “That bullet just hit your canteen!”

It was warm water that Mouse was feeling - running all over his back! His canteen . . . his water .. WAS SHOT!}

{We were talking years later about some of the close calls we’d had, discussing this incident and

others . . .

“Boy, I remember another time having the heel of my boot shot clean off!”, he said.

“Sure glad you never got hit (wounded), buddy.”, I’d said to him, amazed that through it all he had never got so much as a scratch.

“Hell ... Got to the point where I could see those bullets a comin', and would just step aside ...”}

“You got it, boy!”, I said, tossing him one of my canteens. “Keep it!”, (I knew I'd soon be in the land of the never ending water fountain. The ship!)

“Hey you gonna be all right?”, he said, unscrewing the top of the canteen.

“Yeah. Just a scratch”, I reassured him, and walked off down the trail. The Doc had finished with me, and orders were orders ... (As it was to turn out, it wouldn't be the last time we parted under similar circumstances.)

The LZ was about another eight hundred yards farther up the trail. We'd actually thought we had heard chain saws buzzing while in the thick of the fight. Now I understood why. The LZ was a mumble-jumble pile of logs scattered all over this clearing that had been made with chain saws! Where they had come from was beyond me.

Unknown to me at the time, one med-evac helicopter had already removed some of our wounded (I believe we had seven wounded altogether, including me).

I remember sitting down on one of the logs, taking my helmet off, and just looking at it. I think it was at about this time that it dawned on me ~ how close to death I had come. Couldn't believe ~ how one little bullet could tear up a hard steel helmet like that. Sat there for a couple of minutes, my rifle straddled between my legs, and my body sagging with fatigue ~ just looking with my head bent down ~ at the helmet.

Then I sensed the presence of someone near me, and looked over. There, not

more than ten feet away, a guy wearing khakis is aiming something at me! I grab my rifle up ~ then realizing it's a camera, wearily set it back down.

“It's O.K.! IT'S O.K. MARINE!”, he says hurriedly, at the same time.

I now notice the APA (Associated Press) name tag on his left breast pocket, and relax a little more.

{At least two people have told me in the past thirty years they have seen a black and white war photograph of a blond haired guy in utilities, sitting on a log, hunched over with a helmet in his hand and a rifle between his legs. Probably me, I'd like to see it sometime.}

He asked me how I was feeling and so on ~ can't really remember all that was said anymore. I just remember feeling a little irritated at him, like what the f--k are you doing here?

Then it hit me. My rifle! The rifle in my hands wasn't mine! It was Stewart's, and he needed it. So I made my way back along the trail. I hadn't gone far when I see Captain Tatum, along with Gunny Ross, standing next to the trail. Captain Tatum has a rope in his hand with an NVA soldier kneeling at his feet, his hands tied behind him. I don't know exactly what was going through my mind at the time, but I distinctly remember, after all these years, starting to point the rifle at the gook. And I remember Captain Tatum putting his right hand on his pistol holster saying,

“Keep moving, Harris!”

When I got back to the fighting hole Stewart's face brightened, visibly, when he saw me. He still hadn't got a replacement in yet.

“Boy, am I glad to see you!”, he exclaimed. “Where've you been?”

“Aw, I gotta go back to the ship, Stu ~ figured you might be needing this”, I said, tossing him the automatic. “Thanks!”...

“Well, thank you back! See ya back at the ship!”, he said. (That’s all that was said between us ~ he tossed me my rifle and pack, and I walked back up the trail to the LZ.)

{For years this would be the mental image most prevalent at the picture show in my head. Me tossing him his rifle ~ him tossing mine back. The feeling of having survived one of the most horrendous moments of my life, and of the sorrow I felt about leaving him. Together, we had just gone through Hell. ~~...~~ And together we had survived. ~~...~~ Without each other, there’s no doubt in my mind we could have lived through the battle for Hill 362...

I wouldn’t see Bob Stewart again until I ended up at the hospital in Chu Lai, after stepping on a land mine September 19, 1966. (He had been wounded tripping a booby trap during the operation that immediately followed ‘Hastings’ (operation Colorado), which I missed because of my head wound). At this time he was on ‘no duty’, and was considered ‘walking wounded’. He’d hitch rides down to Chu Lai to cheer me up. He’d tell me he only did it because the food was better at the hospital than at our rear area which was now based at Ahn Than, nearly twenty miles away. But I knew better ... we had formed a bond as warriors, on the Hill that day ~ never to be broken.

Through him, I learned of the carnage we had caused that day in July ... on the ‘hill’. He’d had to go out the next the day, the 25<sup>th</sup>, as part of a special detail sent out to count the ~~bodies July 1966 ... not just to count the bodies~~ of the NVA dead, and retrieve ~~... any that were still out there from~~ ~~but to retrieve the rest of the dead of India Company as well.~~}}

Moments after arriving back at the LZ, and again sitting on the same log Troy stumbled up and sat down next to me. He was visibly shaking all over.

“What happened to you?!” , I asked him. But all he could do, was point at the huge dent on top of his helmet, shake his head and say ~ his voice quivering, “It was bad. Just really bad . . . They think I have a concussion.” (For some time I was puzzled by what he'd said ~ until learning of SSgt. Koos.)

As we waited for the chopper, I focused for the first time on stuff that earlier had registered in my mind as gear, probably India Company's, laying at the edge of the clearing. In horror, I now realized ~ I was only partially right . . . It was her dead! Laying side by side . . . forever . . . Some had ponchos thrown on them.

But when the med-evac chopper hovered down close to pick us up, and as I briefly glanced back as I leapt aboard, the prop-wash blew the ponchos off their bodies . . . and into the deepest recesses of my mind . . .

**NOTE:** Along with the men of India Company that perished while fighting a relatively unknown battle in a small country known as Vietnam, five men from Lima Company of the Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, of the First Marine Division ~ United States Marine Corps, died within a heartbeat of each other on July 24, 1966 ~ during the Battle for ~~H~~hill 362.

Their names are: PFC BRUCE A. BAKER; PFC. PRUITT H. CHEANEY; SSGT. NORMAN L. KOOS; PFC. JAMES R. NASH and

**PFC. PAUL J. STRAUSSER.** These men died with valor. They died,  
**SGT. PAYNE...like MARINES...**

## AFTER WORD

A pair of hands grabbed my arms and pulled me up into the open hatchway of the Huey gunship. A Huey! It was like getting into a Cadillac compared to our old CH-34's.

I automatically positioned myself next to the opening on the starboard

side. As with the 34, there were no doors or seats. Like all gun ships used in the Vietnam war they were stripped of anything considered unnecessary. Less weight meant more cargo (ordnance) and maneuverability. In this case, room for bodies – alive or dead.

With my back pushed up against the rear bulkhead I pointed my weapon out the doorway. Troy was next to me. He had jumped on board first, and he just sat there with his head cradled between his knees – shaking like a leaf.

My eyes shifted on the scene below as the chopper gained altitude – swiftly ascending from the tropical canopy. The bodies of India Company began to blur into the foliage, and other figures below me became a part of the forest. I could vaguely see the trail winding along the top of the ridge. Damn! We were flying directly over my position of only – moments before!

I glanced over at the door gunner who had pulled me aboard. He was staring at me . . . not knowing quite what to say. (After all he'd gone in expecting a 'Hot LZ' and to pick up the dead. Here two 'live ones' jump aboard with their helmets all blown apart!) I nodded at him and winked (a habit that always seems to surface in me – during times of stress).

"You're going to be all right man – we're blowing this place most ricky ticky!", he yelled assuredly through the prop noise of the chopper.

"They're down there! THEY'RE ALL DOWN THERE!", I yelled back jabbing my rifle in the direction of the draw, that now with altitude, nearly split the hill in two.

"Who?! Who's down there?!", he shouted.

“THE MOTHER F—KING GOOKS, DAMN IT! THEY’RE ALL DOWN THERE!”, I yelled again pointing at the area that was becoming more and more clear the higher we got. My total focus ~ concentration ~ life! Was narrowed down to that one area where I KNEW THEY WERE AT. Reeling from the punishment we had just given them ~ maybe. But they were there. I WAS SURE OF IT! From my vantage point in the air, and although I couldn’t see them ~ they had to be down there.

{In writing about this story I have had to bring to the surface a lot of stuff that may have been better off left buried. But, as I have said ~ this has been knocking around in my brain for more than thirty years now. As I have addressed each facet of my involvement with it, and it has been absolutely amazing to me how much just ‘spills’ out of the subconscious ~ while reliving it. I have had to deal honestly with my feelings (What was I thinking? ~ How was I reacting?)... at the time.

I can tell you this: Had it been a CH-34 that had picked Troy and I off the ‘hill’ that day ... I would have been thinking , ‘Let’s just get the hell out of here.’ ‘We’ll be LUCKY to get the hell out of here!’

But it wasn’t that way. It was a HUEY that I was on. And, having witnessed, before hand, what they were capable of doing ~ I just got all excited about exacting vengeance on ‘thine’ enemy. Just one minute of fire-power directed into that area ~ rockets and guns ~ would have created ‘havoc’ on the enemy! But then years later, I have had to analyze ~ WHERE exactly were we ~ down there? Where WERE our exact positions? Where WAS ~ what was left of India Company?

And, now I realize that the captain of this gunship had to be thinking of all of this...}

“YOU’VE GOT THE POWER - ROCKETS - GUNS! WE’VE GOT TO GET THEM! THEY’RE ALL DOWN THERE - IN THAT DRAW!”, the rage once again welling up within me.

I’m sure the door gunner knew what we had been through. He had to have been aware of the risks involved with going in to get us. He relayed what I had just told him into the voice mike attached to his helmet.

I looked anxiously into the cockpit at the Captain as he received it. There was a moment of hesitation as he thought about it. I could see him looking at the clusters of gages on his instrument panels. Was he checking to see how much fire power he had?

The Huey, by 1966, had gained the reputation of being ‘one bad bird’. They were awesome. I had never flown in one before, but there had been several times over the course of our battles when they had been called in as air support fire. They were bad news for the enemy below them - a lot of fire power and seemingly invincible.

After a moment the Captain, swiveling the mike away from his mouth and turning to look directly at me shouted, “Sorry Marine - we’re almost out of fuel. We’ll be lucky to make Dong Ha!”

{Comforting thought! We were in ‘Indian territory’ - there was ‘nothing’ between us and Dong Ha at this time. Dong Ha - was like an

outpost/fort in the old west. On the fringe of the wilderness ~ with nothing in between.}

The door gunner leaned over and patted me on the shoulder.

“Hey man ~ we’ll get the little bastards, yet. You’ll see”

Sure, I thought to myself, as yet another opportunity to even the score ~ slipped away in the prop wash as the chopper continued to ascend, rapidly sliding sideways ~ away from the hill.

{Unknown to me at the time, India Company and ourselves had made a pretty big dent in ‘our’ enemy. The Third Battalion, Fifth Marines would eventually be awarded the Presidential Unit Citation (unit Silver Star), and the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross for actions during this period.}

Although adrenaline was still pulsating through my body, I was just so tired. I can’t remember much of the flight out of the high country and on to Dong Ha. The hill became a blur after awhile. I may have passed out again ~ from the loss of blood ~ I don’t remember. I do remember thinking at some point ~ ‘What a ride! Wish we had choppers like this ~ Smooth , and bad-to-the-bone.’

The war was changing in subtle little ways in the couple of months I had been ‘in country’. Sometimes for the good ~ like the Huey ~ other times not.

We had ‘fam’ (familiarization) fired the M-16 rifle while on Okinawa, and were told we would be issued this weapon. The ‘Old Corps’ ~ particularly

Gunny Dias - didn't like it.

“How you gunna butt stroke a gook with this little toy gun?!” , I remember him growling.

{As it turned out - he was right. Had Stewart and I had M-16's on the hill - we'd have been shit out of luck. Couldn't have used the machine-gun belts to survive. Wrong kind of ammo.}

We made it to Dong Ha. On fumes I was told.

{You had to admire these pilots, and the 'jet jockeys' like them, who would often at risk to their own lives have to wait on us and the most opportune moment to come in and get us and/or bail us out of trouble. Many times having to weigh the options of their own lives against ours.

I once ran across a retired Navy Captain in the airport on my way home from reunion '93 (Daytona), who had just taken his family back to Pensacola and the beginning of his 'roots'. Turned out we had been in Vietnam at about the same time - he flew A-6's.

At one point, in a very interesting conversation - he said,

“You guys were crazy! Several times you had me dropping my ordinance just five hundred yards or so from your lines!”

I just laughed (remembering the twenty millimeter canons and five hundred pound bombs at the hot LZ - Hastings) and said, “Sir, at times it was more like 'fifty yards'. But, it was either 'them' - or 'us'...” }

While the Huey fueled up I was taken to the medical facility, where a doctor sliced open the wound from hole to hole (debrided it), poured on a bunch of antiseptic, bandaged it and sent me out the door. His last words to me were, “Sure was close Marine - fraction of an inch more - and you’d have been history . . . There’s candy by the door on your way out - grab some Hershey bars.”

I remember thinking as I walked out the door with one breast pocket stuffed with Hershey bars -

‘Who, does he think I am? A kid?’ {I was eighteen years old.}

It was nearly dark by the time the Huey touched down on the flight deck of the USS Princeton. Seemed like ages had passed since I had lifted off from her steel decks with the ‘Give-a-Shit’ squadron. But it had only been about twelve days.

The ‘flight deck’ was all lit up as we landed. Bright lights! Remember thinking - in my delirium,

‘What the F—k?! Turn off those damned lights! You want us to get shot?!’

. . . So conditioned to the field - and complete darkness - (except for the mortars - and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July on hill 362) . . . it was hard to fathom that we were probably about twenty miles out to sea - and relative safety.

I was home . . .

As I started to bail out of the chopper two corpsmen came running up

carrying a stretcher.

“Get on Marine!”, one shouted through the whine of the slowly decelerating blades.

“I’m not a cripple”, I started to say grumpily ~ “I can walk.”

“Not on my ship!”, said the other one with authority, and they physically placed me on the stretcher and started across the flight deck.

A Navy Chaplain appeared suddenly, hovering above my head ~ the silver crosses on his collar ties glistening in the bright lights of the ship.

“You’ll be all right, son, they just need to get you to the O R (operating room). Can I get you anything? What is your religion?”, he rattled off in a rehearsed spiel.

{Now, this is the honest truth ~ and those of you who know me ~ can imagine the wicked little gleam in my eyes as feigning delirium, and after some twelve days of continuous combat ~ ending with witnessing my dead brothers on the LZ, and of the rush in having survived it all ... I replied in a low, slow voice ~ }

“Sir! I could use a cigarette ~ a stiff drink ~ and a woman ... As to my religion? I am Marine Corps! Sir!”

“Well, I’m not God son!”, he said ~ somewhat taken aback. (I guess I had

insulted him ~ I hadn't meant to...)

“And I am not dying ~ sir”, I replied with a sincere tone in my voice. “There will be others coming aboard this ship that will need your services ~ more than I...”

And with that, he just jostled my shoulder with his hand and walked off.

{I have always felt bad about my mouthing off to the Chaplain. I have had years to think about it. The Navy always treated me right. They took good care of me ~ us. In the field with our ‘excellent’ corpsmen and on board ship. They went all out for us ~ in all areas. I guess I was just having a bad hair day when this incident transpired, but I have certainly felt a lot of guilt about it over the years. It was not my ‘style’ at that time. But, I would continue to arbitrate this ‘other style’ from then on. Maybe, believing that the bullet through my head ~ had given me the right to occasionally act ‘crazy’.

~ Maybe I had crossed some sort of invisible bridge, and didn't know the way back...}

The ‘conditioned response’ comes into play here . . . I have had to think about it over the years. So, in unraveling this story that has been knocking around in my head for three decades ~ I will attempt to address it now.

Here I am . . . Young ~ (eighteen years old), trying to adapt into an environment totally adverse from everything my first years of life had prepared me for. Even with all of the training in the Marine Corps ~ the

‘evolution’ was left up to happenstance. An exchange of values and morals, so-to-speak.

The emotion ‘anger’ allowed me to live ... And, that is what I had adapted to. There was no room ~ nor time for anything else. Sometimes a flitting of other emotions would surface. Sorrow for instance ... when someone close to me ~ was no longer there. But, ‘anger’ could displace this emotion ~ very rapidly. It could be used as a tool, that even subconsciously ~ would and could ~ propel a person to perform acts of action that normally would not be a part of ‘their’ persona. Enough said.

As they started to carry me below decks two other corpsmen showed up. They really had it down to a science ... They started to cut my utilities (my clothes) off from me as we were traveling down this narrow passageway.

There was a kind of gayety in going about it, as I remember it (I might have had a shot or two of morphine ~ I don’t remember) but it went something like this:

“Jesus, Marine ~ When’s the last time you had a bath?”

“Well, Christ! Wait a minute ~ it’s coming to me ... I think ~ ‘bout. Yeah, ten or so days ago ...”

“Really! That’s gotta be a record. Write that one down, Bob. I think this is one for the record books”

“F—k you guys!”

“Hey, Marine you just don’t understand our humor here. Bob ~ you better write that down too! One lean ~ mean Marine that doesn’t know his head has almost been blown off and stinks ~ to boot! Oh! Wait a minute what’s this? HERSHEY BARS! He eats Hershey bars. Thought you guys only ate bullets and babies? Did you get that Bob?!”

“F—k, you guys!”

“Boy! He is one mean-of-a-bitch Marine! I don’t think they’ll take him in the OR.”

“Yeah! Probably send him down to hell!

“Isn’t that somewhere below decks where they store all of the ammo?”

“Bob! Someone has to prep this guy or they won’t take him ~ your turn man!”

“Yeah ~ wait a minute. I’m trying to get all of this down. Let’s see now ... He stinks ... He eats Hershey bars ... and he is mean ...”

“F—g you guys! HELL is on a hill a hundred miles from here, and am tagin you wi me!” ... (the morphine was setting in), lights out ... Bye!

I awoke ... feeling non-the-worse. Not knowing at first where I was ...

Could this really be Hell? ... Naw! Too comfortable. Too white. Too clean. Too bright! Too cold! ... What is this? Air conditioning? They got air conditioning on this ship?!

My eyes blinked open. Where am I? What the hell?

It came to me ... Must be the ships medical ward. But of course ~ top bunk ~ rank has it’s privileges. Really felt uncomfortable ~ everything’s all lit up clean, white ~ noisy ...

‘I’ll be damned’ I remember thinking in awe. Air conditioning ... Had never occurred to me before. Just assumed that everyone had to suffer like the rest of us. Sleeping out on the ‘cat walks’ (Walkways that were attached to the exterior sides of the ship ~ leading from one area to another. They were of meshed steel in a diamond pattern, allowing air to circulate up from the depths of the sea ~ some eighty feet below.) ~ because it was just to damned

hot in the berthing compartments (troop compartments). Laying on our rubber ladies (air mattresses) taking in the stars that shined so magnificently over the South and South Eastern seas. Happily enjoying the coolness of the catwalks (85 to 90 degrees - 90% humidity) versus the 100 degrees plus of the compartments.

Abruptly, my thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in the room next to me (which turned out to be the head). A bunch of corpsmen rushing in and eventually carrying a guy out on a gurney.

Awake for only a couple of minutes and having a hard time of it. So conditioned to the field - sleeping on the ground, and sweating through the night. On ambush or what-ever, and usually on fifty percent alert - if that. Often so quiet you could hear your heart beating in the darkness.

Started to nod off again. Almost there. Felt a presence next to me . . . Eyes instantly open - body tenses ready to do battle.

“It’s O. K. man, just taking your vital signs. Go back to sleep. Won’t hurt a bit - I promise.”, the corpsman says in slow motion, sliding a thermometer between my lips and pumping up the pressure band around my arm.

“What happened to that guy you were carrying out of there?”, I mumble weakly pointing in the direction of the head.

“Malaria. He had a relapse. Sad - survives a bullet only to get knocked down by a bug.” (Found out later he had died.)

“Malaria?!” I said with surprise ~ the thermometer glued between my lips. “But, we’re not supposed to get it. We take pills ~”

“Yeah, well they’re not doing any good. A lot of you guys are coming down with it.”, he says matter-of-factly. “Must be a different strain or something.”

“Damn!”, Your temperature has gone up.” He says having pulled the thermometer from my lips and peering at it. “I’m going to have to take some blood.”

“Go ahead ~ there isn’t much left”, I said wryly.

The next thing I remember is thrashing around in a horse trough full of ice water up on the hanger deck ~ a grizzled old Navy chief physically pushing me under the water and screaming, “I’m sorry son! I’ve got to get your temperature down ~ or you’ll die!”

Then forcing gallons of cold juices down my throat. How many times, in the field, had I dreamed of just such a situation? We never had enough to drink ~ and when we did it was fowl tasting and hot. Forget the pitcher of beer. Ice cold water would do ~ all you could drink.

And now I just couldn’t do it. Was fighting against it. They literally had to hold my arms down and force it down my throat. But it worked.

They transferred me by chopper, to the USS Repose (a hospital ship) the following day.

For at least a week I was delirious ~ out of it (malaria and the few relapses I have had since, has made me about as sick as I have ever been), but when I became aware of my surroundings I was in for a most pleasant surprise.

There leaning down before my most amazed expression ~ peering into my wide open green eyes ~ was a woman! An American woman with real round eyes ~ and a gorgeous smile parting the prettiest red lips I had ever seen.

{We referred to women of the Caucasian persuasion as 'round eyes' ~ and I hadn't seen one since leaving the states some six months before. In fact the last woman ('round eyes') I had seen was Jeri Bragole ~ Sergeant Bob Bragole's wife who had come down to the docks in Long Beach to say goodbye to her husband as we boarded the USS Renville, a troop ship that was to carry us 'across the pond'.

I met Bob and Jeri at reunion '93 in Daytona after a laps of 27 years. I was staring at her for the longest time. Finally I said, "You know, Jeri, I've met you somewhere before."

"I don't know where that would have been?", she said, adding, "The last time I saw any of you guys was at the docks in Long Beach when I went down to see Bob off."

"That's it!", I said snapping my fingers. "You were holding a baby in your arms ~ with another hanging on to your hand."

"Yes!", she exclaimed in amazement, "Our daughters Robin and

Tammy. How can you remember that after all of these years?!”

“Because you were the last ‘round eyes’ I was to see for many many months.” I said grinning, “Some of us were having a hard time letting go of things at the docks that day.”}

“Welcome aboard mister Harris”, she said ~ her pretty blue eyes smiling intelligently ~ “I was beginning to worry about you. Thought we might have to send you on to Japan.” (Japan, if possible, was where the worst casualties were sent ~ and stabilized ~ before being sent on to the states.)

“What do you say guys?! Shall we welcome mister Harris to ward 37B?!”

A round of applause as I sheepishly became aware of others in the room ~ besides the ‘angel’. God Bless America, I remember thinking with my young mind. Forget everything else ~ THIS is what I’m fighting for.

“My name is Lieutenant Miles.”, she said beaming yet another wonderful smile at me. ~ “and I’m in charge of this ward. Is there anything I can get you Private First Class Harris? You’ve been terribly sick.”

A little bell rang (~ a conditioned response).

“Uh, no ma’am”, I stammered, focusing for the first time on the silver bars that held her collar stays. “Well . . . uh. Just wondering ~ if maybe ~ the

Chaplain from the Princeton is on board?”

“Why, no he isn’t Mister Harris, but I talk to him often on the ship’s radio. Is there something you wanted to tell him?”

“Uh . . . Well, yes ma’am. Would you tell him for me ~ that I really didn’t need the stiff drink and cigarette, but the rest is appreciated ~ and thanks . . .?”

“Why, yes mister Harris?”, she said inquisitively ~ a small wrinkle furrowed into her brow, “I think I can do that for you?” (Not even having the slightest idea as to what I was babbling about . . .)

“Thank you ma’am.”

{We called her Lieutenant ‘Smiles’, and all of us had a lot of respect for this Navy woman/officer who took care of us by forcing us to interact with one another. She was in complete charge ~ and manipulated us not with her rank ~ but with her charm and with her ‘natural’ leadership. She managed to always keep us busy as we recovered from our medical problems.

“Hey, Lance Corporal so-and-so looks like you’re starting to move a little bit better today. Do me a favor and grab that mop over there. Yeah I know it’s not your style ~ rather have an M-60 or something, but I could use some help here ~ Please!” (Yes Ma’am!)

There was this way about her. I don't know how to explain it - other than she was like a fairy godmother to us. She was like the good fairy in the 'Wizard of Oz'. Pretty (blond hair and freckles), and bubbly. She was like our sister, our mother and the girl next door, all rolled into one - a sum of everything good that had taken place in our lives before the war.}

It was about this time that I became aware of a guy strapped into a wheelchair on our ward. He was so badly wounded they couldn't even lay him in a bed. The main wound (there were others) ran from his groin to his throat. Big rubber coated stitches held his body together like a zipper. There were tubes hanging from several bottles running into his nose and arms.

... And then I found out he had been with India Company. He was one of the men that Lance Corporal Pittman had managed to hide in the brush before returning to try and get help. Had somehow crawled into our lines - a day after Troy and me had been choppered out.

For two nights I lay there trying to go to sleep. Tossing about - looking over to see this man's silhouette in the eerie red light of the 'black out' condition that existed - even though we weren't even close to shore.

On the second night I found myself slipping quietly out of bed and kneeling down before him.

"How you doing man?", I whispered

A minute went by. Silence. Then,

"Better than nothing?", he said - his voice so weak it was barely audible. (Better than noth ... ? It hit me in such a way that I still, to this day, borrow -

that line.)

“I’m with Lima Company. We tried to get to you ~ but they kept us pinned down...”

“Yeah I know.”, he said shaking his head, “Man, they wasted us ~ there was no mercy...”

“Buddy of mine ~ Lomax. We were in Boot Camp together... Do you know if he made it?”

“Lomax? I... Lomax? ... I don’t know? I think he was second platoon ~ First... got clobbered man. Those little bastards showed us... no mercy...”

“It’s O.K. man. With a wound like you’ve got ~ they’ll be sending you back to the States. Soon, I’ll bet!”

He grasped my hand. “No mercy!”, he whispered followed by a hiss and gurgle of the tubes stuck in his nose.

Although it was fairly dark I could see him staring intently into my eyes. And then I understood what he was trying to say. He knew I would be going back out ‘there’ again...

“Aye!”, I said nodding my head slowly ~ “You can be sure of it!”

A hand softly touched my shoulder. And I jerked back in surprise. I had no idea how long she had been standing there.

“I expect you boys to be in bed when the lights are turned out. And not fooling around!”

“Yes Ma’am! Sorry ma’am I . . . I just needed to find out something.” , I stammered while crawling into my rack.

“Now go to sleep. You need your rest and so does he!”, she paused. “He’ll be all right. He’ll make it. O.K.?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She just stood there in the dark for a moment staring at me. (Waiting for me to sneak off again ~ I’m thinking.)

But then she knelt down close to me and whispered seriously . . .

“John, I know what you boys went through on that operation ~ ‘Hastings’ ~ or whatever they call it. It’s all they’ve been talking about. For a week now. . .”, She released a deep sigh.

“I heard what happened up on that hill . . . Terrible thing . . . you all did good!”, For the first time I could hear her voice quiver. “... But ... I see your broken bodies on my ward. It makes me sad...”

She patted me on the shoulder and walked off. I just laid there for awhile ~ thinking about things. I found myself thinking about my mother, who like Lieutenant Miles was a nurse ~ and had been an Army nurse during World War Two. She’d gone into Europe after ‘D - Day’ and had slogged her way through the mud of France and Belgium. Must have seen a lot of pain along

the way. Must have been sad from time-to-time ...

One day she came up to me. And, with her bubbly charm said,

“Mister Harris, a Marine Lieutenant General is to pay us a visit today. A General Walt, I believe. Wants to pin a medal on your chest, and on some of the other gallant boys. (She always referred to us as her ‘boys’. Although she wasn’t much past her middle twenties ~ it was one of her ways of controlling us. She seldom, if ever, had to rely on the power of her rank ~ a Lieutenant in the United States Navy.) Do you think you can fit into the ranks of the walking wounded?”

(Walking wounded? Hell, I’d been walking for a couple of days by now. There was nothing wrong with my legs for Christ sake.)

“Yes ma’am!”, I said without hesitation ~ and in my most ‘gallant’ manner.

General Walt was a legend in the Corps. Many of us assumed he would become Commandant of the Marine Corps some day. I couldn’t miss this advent for anything. What an honor.

“You know, Johnnie, (Huh? This was like the second time she had called me by my first name ~ usually to make a point.) ~ it wasn’t but a couple of days ago that you were so sick you were almost comatose ~ Remember? And we still haven’t pulled the stitches out of that head wound yet.”

“Yes ma’am ~ but, honestly, I’m O.K. now! Really!”

“You and your buddy Chisum. God, what is it with you Mar . . . uh, boys? Sneaking off to God knows where. Oh, you do everything I ask of you, and then you just disappear as soon as my back is turned. Well, I’m on to you two. You’d better be staying out of trouble.”, she says in her most Doris Day like rendition.

“No ma’am! We would never do anything to jeopardize the honor of this ward ~ ma’am.”

{Chisum ~ I don’t know his first name ~ of the First Platoon, and I had run across each other while stirring from our medical disabilities on this ward. And, because we were in the same company and had seen each other before ~ just kind of interacted.

Chisum had been stitched up his right side from automatic gun fire sometime during Hastings. Probably the base camps. He’d been real lucky. One bullet had entered his face below the jaw ~ and had exited just below the temple. Another had gone through his side and out ~ just below the shoulder blade. And still another had missed his heart by a fraction of an inch. Like a couple of kids at Christmas time ~ we’d sneak off and recon the ship from bow to stern.}

“Have you been above decks lately ~ mister Harris?”, she said smiling at me ~ sensing my discomfort.

“Well, no ma’am” , I replied. (And, I hadn’t. I had only gone as far as the

main galley at that point. Amazed at what I had seen and experienced. Fruit and food piled to the ceilings, I would linger there trying everything. Often shuffling away ~ feeling guilty about my greed. Always drifting through the air conditioned passageways ~ never once venturing above decks. Content with the comfort that surrounded me.)

“Well, I have.”, she said matter-of-factly. “It’s hot up there! Do you think you can handle it?”

“Of course, ma’am”, I said, my intelligence being somewhat in question here. After all ~ I was still a ‘field’ Marine.

Needless to say it was one of the most embarrassing moments in my life.

As General Walt approached me ~ I was sagging in the heat of the China Sea ~ ready to pass out. There were about twenty of us in the formation with our heavy navy blue robes on ~ standing at attention. Naturally I was in the last row.

“Son!”, He said to me at attention, his deep blue eyes staring into mine. “You don’t look too good. Go over there in the shade and sit down with your head below your knees.”

“Sir! Yes Sir!”

“I’ll be with you as soon as I’m finished with the rest of these men. Are there any others feeling the heat today?”

(Nope! I was the only one. Jesus!)

“That’s it ~”, He said walking up to me a few minutes later. “~ Now take a slow, deep breath of air. I understand you were on Hastings when you got shot.”

{I looked at him for the first time ~ my strength was gradually coming back to me. He was about my height, but broad at the shoulders. Had deep blue eyes that could see into your soul at a glance. Here was a man that knew how to lead and was comfortable with himself and those around him. He knew how to insert himself within anybody’s space. A man who had been up against the toughest Japanese resistance on Guadalcanal, and other battles in WWII. Mostly leading elements of the Fifth Marines ~ and through guts, luck, and integrity had persevered.}

“Sir, Yes Sir!” (I couldn’t seem to say anything more. I was really in such awe of this man and his reputation in the Corps.)

“That was a rough one. You men fought superbly. Definitely made the 324<sup>th</sup> B Division of the North Vietnamese Army ~ think twice about who we are!”, he said matter-of-factly, and slowly in a Mid-western drawl. “Definitely cleaned their little clocks!”

(So that’s who they were?) and (Yeah, but a lot of them got away!)

“Sir, Yes Sir! Some of their little clocks will no longer be ticking ~ SIR!”

“Are you going to be all right Marine?”, he said with honest compassion. Truly, one General I would remember for the rest of my life. (He would actually remember this incident when he pinned on my second Purple Heart - several months later.

“Now, I want you to have this . . .”, he said - handing me a small dark green box. “I would pin it on your chest, but I think you ought to sit here for a minute, and recuperate.”

“This medal is awarded to you by the President of the United States . . . Be proud of it Marine!”

“Sir, Yes Sir! And thank you sir!”

“You head back to your ward now Marine - and thank you. Keep up the good work!”

“Aye, Aye Sir!” (I wanted to - but couldn’t salute him - I was out of uniform.)

Of course Lieutenant Smiles had heard what had happened by the time I shuffled back in . . . But, she never said a word. Just kind of gave me an ‘I knew it!’ look.

{Not long after that, Chisum was placed back on active duty ~ and sent back to the field.

Unbelievable! In WWII ~ he'd have probably died from his wounds. Maybe even Korea...}

A week later I was transferred out of Lieutenant Mile's ward. (I was healing ~ needed space for others coming in.)

"I'm going to miss you mister Harris", she said all gushy. "You've been one of my best patients!"

(‘Oh, sure!’ I thought, ‘Bet she says that to all the guys.’)

She'd pop her head into my new ward from time-to-time, as I spent yet another week on board that ship. Getting fat and lazy. (I was, however, spending more and more time above decks conditioning myself to the heat.)

"How you doing, mister Harris?"

"Fine ma'am! Thank you!" (Taking a ribbing from some of the other guys who hadn't been in her ward.)

My orders back to active duty finally came through one day (Sending me

back to my Company at a place called Chu Lai. Where in the hell was Chu Lai?! Where the hell was my ship - the Princeton?!). In fact they came through on my birthday - August 11<sup>th</sup>.

Time to blow this white whale.

And, I really did make a point of passing by her ward. Even poked my head in and said goodbye to a couple of the guys I'd gotten to know. (The ghost was no longer there - sent back to the states I figured.)

Didn't see her there.

Good! Better this way ... Sort of like when Chisum and I would sneak off to the galley. So busy she'd never know we were missing.

The Navy launch that had come for me was bobbing up and down at the fan tail of the Repose. A long ladder stretched down to the whays. (Guess I didn't rate a chopper any longer. Which was just fine by me.)

I was reaching down to pick up my sea bag - and was startled by a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Still a little touchy, hey mister Harris?" , she said with a thin smile gracing her normally full lips. "I'll get that for you."

"Uh - No ma'am! It's too heavy!"

"I'll be the judge of that, private. Heard you were leaving us. Didn't want to say goodbye?"

“I...uh...stopped by the ward ~ didn't see you ma'am.”

“Yeah. That's what they told me...”

“Wanted to thank you ma'am for everything you did for me...”

“It's O. K. Mister Harris. I trust you will keep your head down? ~ The next time?”

“Oh, yes ma'am! I'll be a-ducking-and-a-weaving the next go-around. I promise!”, I said as I started to climb down the ladder.

“Good!”, She said while struggling to hand the sea bag down to me. “Because ~ I don't want to see you back on my ship! On my ward! ~ Do you understand me Private Harris?!”

“Yes Ma'am! Loud and clear Ma'am! Thank you ma'am!” The grin and wink flashing by her. Always did have the feeling that she honestly cared about us.

By now I was on board the launch ~ standing at the aft. At parade rest. As the launch pulled away ~ gunning it's motors for 'Indian country' ~ I watched 'her' slip away against the glare of the China Sea.

White Navy cover (nurses cap). White Navy face. Against a white Navy ship ~ the Repose ... and ... waving 'goodbye'.

I came to attention and saluted her. The sharpest salute I had ever snapped off ~ and held it until she was out of sight. I had ironed my 'Tropicals' until every crease was as sharp as a knife's edge (wouldn't be long before I was back in my fighting uniform ~ starching it stiff with my sweat). There were several new ribbons on my uniform that day. And, I owed them to Lieutenant Miles...

As the launch quickly distanced us from the brilliant red cross of that ship ..  
. I found myself thinking.

‘Yes, Lieutenant Smiles ... You’ve done your job ... and done it well! Now, it’s time for me to get back at doing mine ... Spent too much time lollygag in’ around on this old tub. Time to get back to the Company ~ my friends ~ my job.

There was a bit of a lump in my throat ~ I’ll admit. Kind of like when you have to part company with an old friend after only a short stay ... But, then my jaw stiffened when the word ‘friend’ flashed through my head. And, I remembered ...

I had a score to settle ...

THE END (Almost)

‘The Final Days’ ... to be continued ...

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[JFH1]