

L/3/5 on OPERATION HASTINGS

JULY 1966 RVN

PROLOGUE TO BATTLE

After reliving of the events of Hastings so many times in my mind over the ensuing thirty-three years, it's difficult to know where to begin. I seem to remember much, including details, perhaps because the events of the most dramatic times of our lives become etched so deeply in our consciousness. I have also had the opportunity, through ongoing contacts over the last several years, to replay many of the events with several other Lima Company personnel, who helped with facts that I either did not know, or would not have remembered.

Lima Company was one of four rifle, or infantry, companies that, along with Headquarters Company, made up the Third Battalion of the Fifth Marine Regiment. The Fifth Marines, as the regiment is called, was one of three infantry regiments that, together with an artillery regiment, The Tenth Marines, and other support units, has historically made up the First Marine Division. Third battalion's other rifle companies were India, Kilo, and Mike, or I, K, and M.

Our battalion, began forming up at Camp Pendleton, California, during the closing months of 1965, with the ultimate mission of being assigned to Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific, meaning combat duty in Vietnam. After periods of training in California, Okinawa, and the Philippines during the early months of 1966, we became the designated Special Landing Force in June. We were sort of a floating "ready reserve", available to be inserted ashore for combat operations wherever needed along the coastal areas of South Vietnam from the amphibious ships on which we were embarked.

The five months of training as a unit from January to May, 1966, gave Lima Company an opportunity to mold itself into a cohesive, combat ready unit. As the commanding officer, I tried to make our preparations as tough and exacting as possible to get us ready for what awaited us. We had placed a heavy emphasis on squad and platoon tactics, ambush and counter-ambush tactics, scouting and patrolling, live fire exercises, and physical conditioning. Unlike combat units already operating in country, including Lima Company after 1966, who got their replacements fed in piecemeal on an "as needed" basis, we had the advantage of training and bonding together in advance. This accounted for what some believe was a higher than usual state of readiness and morale. The same was true for the other units of 3/5 as well, to varying degrees.

Our part of Hastings started in LZ Crow early in the afternoon of July 18th. For the two previous days we had been operating in the coastal plain just below the DMZ, along the axis of Highway 1, Bernard Fall's "Street Without Joy". As we

disembarked from our helicopters into the LZ, little did we know that we were embarking on a period of time that would, for many of us, be the most memorable part of our lives.

Operation Deckhouse II was a two-day operation that immediately preceded Hastings. It was conducted by our Battalion Landing Team, 3/5, shorthand for Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, reinforced by various supporting units. We were an infantry, or "rifle" battalion of the First Marine Division, taking our turn as the Special Landing Force, or SLF, operating from aboard ships in the South China Sea. Our small flotilla consisted of the USS Princeton, a WWII aircraft carrier converted for use as an amphibious helicopter assault ship, plus a troop transport ship.

Compared to what we were about to encounter, Deckhouse II was a walk in the park. There was virtually no enemy contact during those two days. Most of the land between Highway I and the South China Sea where we operated was typical of South Vietnam coastal areas, flat, sandy, and somewhat densely populated. The major terrain features were the delta area of the Cua Viet River where it flows in the sea, and the beautiful white sand dune beaches that extend inland over a mile from the southern edge of the DMZ south about five miles to the Cua Viet.

On the morning of July 18th, the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Ed Bronars, summoned the company commanders to a meeting at the battalion command post. I arrived by helicopter. The atmosphere at the CP was electric. Bronars informed us that heavy enemy contact was being made by other Marine units operating several miles to our west, in the mountainous jungle area south of the DMZ. Our battalion was being committed as part of that operation, called "Hastings". We were being attached to Task Force Delta, a command comprised of elements of six other Marine battalions, plus several ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) units, all under the command of Marine Brigadier General Lowell B. English.

As a college history and political science major, I was aware of the significance of the Battle of Hastings in 1066 as a pivotal point English history, and at the time, saw some irony in comparing what seemed to be a borderline skirmish to that momentous event. Lima Company would be going in to Landing Zone Crow, right behind Mike Company. Usually we went in first, but this time Mike got the honors.

LZCROW

As a twenty-six year old, brand new Marine captain, I was both prepared and unprepared for what the next ten days would bring as the CH-34 helicopters we flew in sat us down in Landing Zone Crow.

Although I felt well trained in my four years as a Marine Officer, and in the Marines and sailors of Lima Company, the sum total of my prior combat experience consisted of slightly over two weeks of field operations in the prior month. About one hundred miles to the south we, as part of the SLF, had participated in operations Deckhouse I and Nathan Hale in the II Corps area near

Tuy Hoa.

Although there was some action, compared to subsequent operations, Deckhouse I seemed more like a training exercise than combat. We heard very few shots fired in anger. It did give us a chance to operate as a team, get used to the stifling heat of the Vietnamese summer, and generally work on our communications and control procedures. We did suffer two killed in action, and a few wounded, primarily from mines and booby traps.

But nothing really prepares you for the real thing like the real thing. In CH-34 helicopters, Lima Company lifted off from the coastal flatlands about 2 PM, about eight combat loaded troops per load. We headed almost due west. Below us the terrain grew progressively steeper and greener. I sat on the seat nearest the door, next to the crew chief/door gunner.

After a flight of about ten minutes, we started to orbit downward toward the landing zone in a spiraling pattern. The engine noise drowned out any attempts at speech. The crew chief glanced over at me, silently tapped his flight helmet twice with his right hand, indicating radio traffic on his headset. He pointed down toward the ground, then grasped the firing handles of his M-60 machine gun with both hands. It didn't take much for me to figure out what he meant. Hot LZ.

I was a little surprised at this because our sister helicopter assault unit, Mike Company, had already gone into the same LZ. Why hadn't they secured it by now? As we got closer to the ground, it became obvious that the terrain was drastically different than anything we had been in so far. The low, steep hills surrounding LZ Crow were covered with dense, dark green vegetation. The LZ itself, about half the size of a football field, was fairly flat and grassy, probably used for cultivation of some sort not many years past.

As our heli-team jumped from our chopper and headed for the edge of the clearing for cover and to allow the choppers to depart, I was faintly aware of popping noises overhead. It dawned on me moments later that the popping noise was enemy small arms fire, probably directed at the choppers more so than at us. Later, other people told me we were under heavy automatic weapons fire in the LZ. Fortunately, no one was hit.

As succeeding flights of CH-34s off loaded more of "L" Company into LZ Crow, the Marines under the direction of platoon commanders, Jim Harrington and Don Vogelgesang, dispersed into assigned zones. Jim commanded Second Platoon, and Don, normally the Weapons Platoon commander, had First Platoon, filling in for Dave Meinertz who had sustained an ankle and back injury earlier in the day.

We soon learned that Third Platoon, commanded by Lee "Andy" Anderson, had been somehow landed behind us, to the east, on the other side of a rather large stream. Not wanting to move out without the company intact, I had the First and Second Platoons continue to spread out and set in, while Andy searched for a good place to ford the stream and join up with us.

I estimated it would take fifteen or twenty minutes for Andy to get across the stream to where we were. In order to get first hand information on our situation, I took my command group, consisting of my two radio operators, LCpl Larry Jones and PFC Bill "Obie" O'Brian, and the company gunnery sergeant, GySgt Thomas Brenton, and set out to find out what Mike Company was up to. It was obvious from the sounds of gunfire that "M" Company was busy.

We followed a jungle trail only a short distance before coming up behind the "M" Company command group. The group was crouched inside the edge of a tree line that opened out into a clearing, an abandoned agricultural field of some sort. I could see several Marines lying motionless about thirty yards out in the clearing. Other "M" Company Marines were maneuvering across and around the clearing toward the tree line about one hundred and fifty yards away from where a company of NVA had taken them under fire as they started across. The enemy let the lead elements get close to the middle before firing on them, killing five and wounding several others.

"M" Company had a forward air controller, or FAC, attached to the command group. He was a red headed lieutenant, an A-4 pilot, who was not about to miss out on the action. He was laying next to a large tree firing a .22 caliber rifle at the far side of the clearing in the general direction of the NVA. It struck me as comical, since I doubted he could hurt anybody with a .22 at that distance, but I admired his pluck.

Commanding Mike Company was Captain Dell Pettingill, from Greely, Colorado, a former enlisted marine, or mustang, and a great field officer. Dell briefed me on his situation. Before they could recover the dead and wounded lying in the open, they had to secure the far tree line. They had been in constant enemy contact since landing in LZ Crow an hour or two earlier. I asked how we could help, since our initial instructions were to secure the LZ. Dell suggested trying to take some pressure off his people by consolidating his left flank to the south, so he could deal with the NVA to his front.

I moved back to my unit, about a hundred yards to the rear, conscious of the fact that we probably soon were about to be in serious combat. The enemy we were facing were not a small group of rag tag Vietcong guerillas, but regular soldiers from the same army that defeated the French only a few years earlier. As evidenced by the scene with "M" Company, they were prepared to fight. We were about to find out how well our training paid off, and moreover, what we, as Marines, were made of.

While Andy's Third Platoon was beginning to make it's way across the stream to our rear, I told Don Vogelgesang to take a two reinforced squad patrol from First Platoon out a small valley, or draw, that headed due west. He was to travel about half a kilometer, to a place I indicated on the map, and stop. He was then to radio me and we would decide the next move. As a precaution, I had Sgt. Patrick Dudley, the 60mm mortar section leader, have his men set up their two tubes to be prepared to fire up the valley six hundred yards, essentially over the heads and in front of, Don's people in case they made contact.

Twenty minutes passed. All was quiet. Andy's platoon began to arrive in our position. Then, just as the patrol from First Platoon reached the pre-designated stopping point, all hell broke loose around them. The point man, LCpl Robert St. Clair, had just stepped up on a small rise when a group of NVA opened fire. About a platoon size unit was in concealed positions, but not oriented in the best direction to effectively ambush the Marines, who came from an unexpected angle. The full brunt of their fire could not be brought to bear.

St. Clair had seen movement about fifteen yards to his right front. As an NVA soldier in a fighting hole moved to fire his AK 47, St. Clair yelled "ambush" and instinctively dove to his left. As bullets tore through his pack and uniform, he rolled into position, startled but unharmed, and instinctively returned fire. The second Marine in the column, PFC Carroll Chism, dove right, and on the way down was hit by a bullet just under his arm, which exited his back. He fell, but with the help of nearby Marines was able to crawl and be dragged to cover. Heavy automatic weapons fire raked the patrol, mostly from the front.

The Marines reacted well. Had they not, their situation could have been much more serious. Ambush drills had been practiced repeatedly in training while in Okinawa. The lead squad, led by Sergeant Don Feid, began to establish a base of fire, while the following squad moved on line on their right and began to fire and maneuver forward.

The distance between the Marines and the NVA was close enough for grenades to be thrown by both sides. The NVA grenades were of the so-called Chicom variety, meaning Chinese Communist, which were much less lethal than our own. Two or three Marines received minor fragmentation wounds, including Chism and PFC Alfonso Brooks, but despite the heavy firing, no other serious wounds were inflicted on Marines from the First Platoon in this encounter.

As the following squad moved on line on the right flank to assault, they received automatic weapons fire from their right front. A fire team leader, (or the squad leader) Cpl. -----had the heel of one of his boots shot off and received another round on his hip, which ricocheted off his .45 caliber pistol holstered there, leaving a bruise, but no other injury.

Things were happening fast. At my direction, Sgt. Dudley's 60mm mortars began to lob rounds over the heads of the Marines and to the rear of the enemy the First Platoon was fighting. Because mortar round trajectories can be somewhat inexact, especially at this close range of about 600 yards, we need a margin of safety. My intention was to at least partially block the retreat of the ambush force, and to discourage and disrupt any reinforcements or defenses in depth that might be behind them. Don Vogelgesang and I were in radio communications, and we were able to adjust the mortar fire after the first volley.

It became quickly clear that the NVA were well schooled and were willing to fight. They understood enfilade fire and how to use it, as an automatic weapon opened up from a streambed of the Marines' right flank. The maneuver squad hit the deck and began to inch forward. Fortunately, despite the heavy firing at close range from two directions, there were no serious injuries, other than Chism's, to this

point. The terrain was uneven and brushy, with two-foot high grass in the more open areas. Visibility was limited, more so once you hit the deck.

Seeking an opportunity to gain a numerical advantage, I directed Jim Harrington, Second Platoon commander, to move his platoon ahead in support of First Platoon, and with the command group in tow, also moved out. Second Platoon, moving fast, went up the right side of the draw, and my command group up the left, following in the traces of First Platoon.

Second Platoon had moved quickly up the right side of the draw and into the stream bed that the First Platoon was getting flanking fire from. As the lead squad rounded a bend at a fast pace, they saw a group of NVA firing toward First Platoon, and opened fire, hitting several. In the return fire, Sergeant Lewis Barnard, was critically wounded in the head by automatic weapons fire. Lieutenant Harrington, who was nearby, immediately went to his aid, and while pulling him to safety, was shot through the fleshy part of his upper right arm.

About the same time, I came up behind elements of First Platoon. One of the first people I saw was Staff Sergeant Augustine Lara, the platoon sergeant. Sergeant Lara was in the prone position with his .45 caliber pistol stretched out in his hands in front of him. He was looking down the sights, firing off an occasional round.

At this point the NVA had begun their withdrawal, and the firing was beginning to subside. I crouched behind Lara's prone figure, and tapped him on the boot. I said "Sergeant Lara, what are you doing?" He replied, "Killing VC, sir". I thought, "We got to get him something better than a .45". About twenty feet in front of Lara was a dead NVA soldier in a fighting hole, probably killed by St. Clair in the initial moments. Not far away was another dead NVA, apparently killed while exiting his hole in the withdrawal.

Gunny Brenton picked up the AK 47 from the dead enemy soldier in front of Sergeant Lara, and ended up making it his personal weapon for the rest of the operation. Brenton, an Irishman from Boston, was "Old Corps", winning a Silver Star on Bougainville in the Pacific in WWII. He did not want to get caught in a shoot out in the jungle without an automatic weapon, and the AK was well known for its reliability and firepower.

At this point the fight had ended. We had one KIA, Sergeant Barnard, and three of four wounded, only one seriously, Chism. As it turned out, he recovered quickly, and was back with us in less than a month. We brought in a med evac helicopter at the scene of the firefight, and got Barnard's body and all the wounded on board except for Jim Harrington, just as it began to get dark. The chopper was full, and rather than risk another med evac in the dark, Jim stayed with the company command group.

We moved back to the main company position and after checking in by radio with battalion, and checking with the platoons to see that they were set in for the night, I sent for my company executive officer, First Lieutenant Ed Conti. With Jim Harrington out of action, Second Platoon needed a leader, and Ed was it. Neither

of us knew what a fateful assignment that would turn out to be. Six days later we would find out.

Night fell. We slept. A little. My command group spread out as best we could in a shallow crater like hole. Jim Harrington, who was with us awaiting med evac in the morning, didn't have a comfortable night with the bullet wound to his arm. We didn't know it at the time, but some nerve damage occurred going down his arm to his hand, and his war was over, almost before it had begun. He was cited for bravery and was awarded the Bronze Star for his effort in rescuing the critically wounded Sergeant Barnard. He would soon be on his way home to southern California, where he would undergo restorative surgery and rehabilitation.

No one got a lot of sleep. The NVA had a very good idea of where we were. We had no idea where they were. An NVA night attack would have resulted in utter chaos. Our defenses were impromptu, set up mostly in the dark. Steep, heavily forested hills lay to our north and south. To our east, fairly open, flat terrain to the stream and beyond, with elephant grass and occasional trees or brush. West, up the valley, was where First and Second Platoons had slugged it out earlier in the day with perhaps twenty or thirty NVA.

The NVA resistance was determined up to a point. My best guess was that it was probably a holding action meant to slow us down to allow a larger unit to withdraw or to regroup. Regroup. Could that mean they would return in force, sweeping down the valley in the dark, trying to use the advantages of surprise and knowledge of the terrain to wreak havoc? Were they inclined to fight at night? I didn't know. They were known to attack isolated Special Forces compounds at night, but those were fixed positions that allowed for detailed planning and rehearsal. Would they at least probe our lines to see if we were paying attention or vulnerable?

The night was quiet. Mostly. There were strange jungle sounds. Birds calling? Or the enemy giving each other signals in the dark. Spooky.

DAY TWO: JULY 19TH

Dawn slowly arrived. No attack had come. Choppers arrived with ammunition and supplies. Lieutenant Harrington, arm in a sling, climbed aboard for the twenty minute flight back to the USS Princeton. Marines warily rubbed their eyes and began to open cans of C rations for a hasty breakfast. Everyone was alert, knowing that we were in enemy territory, and that the enemy knew his way around.

