

Operation Hastings - July 1966 South Vietnam

33 years have passed since Operation Hastings and more specifically, the battle for Hill 362. I assume every man who fought in Vietnam or any other war has one defining moment — one minute, hour or day forever burned in his spirit; one freeze-frame of horror, hell, bravery and fear, of relief and of guilt; one incident of extreme emotion that shook him to the core. The battle for Hill 362 was my time of truth.

In the immediate years following Vietnam, I wanted to forget my experiences and get on with my life. It seemed nobody really cared or could possibly understand anyway. The most common remark I heard from civilians was, “Well, you weren't really in a lot of combat over there,” to which I would shrug my shoulders, nod my head and say, “Yeah, not much.”

In actuality, I saw more hostile fire on Operation Hastings Hill 362 than I'd ever encountered prior to that battle or since. My company, Lima 3/5, lost 8 men in seven days of Operation Hastings — 8 out of the 18 Lima 3/5 Marines that were KIA (Killed in Action) for the entire year of 1966.

Bravery in the face of extremely hostile conditions was the norm for the men of Lima Company during Hastings. This was their baptism under fire and they were superb. Most of them received no medals or special recognition, and they should have. Somewhere in the history books, their special valor should be recorded. Yet in all the accounts I've read on Hastings, Lima Company is barely mentioned.

Just this past year, I had the opportunity to read the now-declassified Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, First Marine Division's command chronology for the period — including Operation Hastings — signed by 3/5 Battalion Commander Lt. Col. E. J. Bronars. In the narrative of this after-action report there is no mention of the details of the individual battles. Without being there it is impossible to know what really happened on Operation Hastings. The last page of the report lists the friendly casualties — KIA - 51, WIA - 162. There is no method to link the friendly casualties to individual units or specific battles. And, of course, the accounts of individual heroism are nowhere to be found in the official records.

In fact, India Company of 3/5 had 18 Marines killed on Hill 362 in one day.

In four days on Hastings, India lost a total of 27 Marines — 15 percent of a company of about 180 men. At least 70 India Marines were wounded badly enough that they had to be med-evaced, and most of the WIA (Wounded-In-Action) was hit on Hill 362. In three days, India Co. received 116 Purple Hearts. Where is all this history written?

So it is with motivation that I set down my account of Operation Hastings and Hill 362 — to keep alive the memory of the brave men who gave their lives on Operation Hastings

and to add my personal experiences to the history of Hastings to be told with “names and individual actions”, and not just in cold statistics.

Lima Company 3/5

As senior-most second lieutenant, I was the XO (Commanding Officer) of the original (Vietnam version) of Lima Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines. The battalion formed and trained at Camp Pendelton, California, in late 1965 and early 1966, then did more training on Okinawa and in the Philippines. Sometime in May, 1966, we went afloat off the coast of Vietnam as a reinforced battalion to be inserted into Vietnam where needed.

While afloat, Lima Co. was aboard the USS Princeton, a World War II aircraft carrier converted to carry and deploy Marines aboard helicopters. Our first operation, “Nathan Hale,” was a walk in the park somewhere in Vietnam’s central highlands. After a week of little action, we boarded the Princeton and sailed back to the Philippines. But our stay at Subic Bay was cut short. In fact in our haste to leave the Philippines, we left a few troops in the bars of Alangapo. Once at sea, we were told that several recon teams had gotten into some heavy stuff near the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), and we were headed that way.

Operation Hastings

In its initial stage, Hastings was called “Deckhouse II.” We wandered around in the sand near the coast for a few days. We all thought this operation wasn’t any different than our first, but a big-time wake up call was coming.

On the second or third day of Deckhouse, we boarded choppers and flew inland several miles to the hills and forests. We were about to land in our first “hot” landing zone — welcome to Operation Hastings.

A hot LZ (Landing Zone) is utter chaos. You land in a clearing of high, elephant grass encircled by trees. The visibility is poor, and you don't have a clue as to which way to go. If you take too much time to figure out where the hostile fire is coming from, it's too late.

The helicopter crew knew what was going on before we did. I don't think any of the choppers actually landed. Instead, troops departed the copters at varying heights. I can't blame the helicopter crew. Their job was to get us in and get out alive, and with all the automatic weapons fire coming in their direction, they didn't waste any time. However, we lost our First Platoon commander to a back injury from the jump.

After landing and regrouping, the company headed west along a creek. The Second Platoon and its commander, Lt. Jim Harrington, came under fire and Jim was hit in the

elbow while pulling one of his wounded men out of the creek. (It took a year and several operations to get his arm back to normal.) Although I didn't see any of this action, I learned some of the details that night and others, 33 years later in a conversation with Harrington.

After we set in that first night of Hastings, our company commander, Captain Reiss Tatum, called me to the CP (Command Post). He was sitting on the side of a sloping hill. Jim Harrington with his bandaged arm — ashen, but in good spirits — was positioned to his left. If I were an artist, I could create a very accurate painting of that moment in time 33 years ago — Captain Tatum holding court with radio operators and other nearby troops, the backdrop of mature trees and matted down underbrush, Jim to Reiss' left and me standing in front of the group. It's almost as if I'm posing the group for a photo.

The reason I can still create that scene in my mind is two-fold. First, Jim being wounded hit close to home because the lieutenants of our company were close. Jim was a friend of mine, and I didn't like the way he looked. I remember thinking, This is the real thing. Secondly, Captain Tatum informed me that my services as XO were no longer needed, and I was being demoted to the more important job of platoon commander. I was taking over Jim's Second Platoon.

The good news — I'd be doing something useful on this operation. I wouldn't be just following the guy in front of me and handling the radio reports and re-supply stuff. The bad news — I wasn't very familiar with the men of the Second Platoon or any other platoon. As XO, I didn't train with and get to know the guys of each platoon. Fortunately, I inherited a great platoon sergeant.

Staff Sgt. Norman Koos was a Marine's Marine. I got to know him some while training in Okinawa. On an off day, Koos taught me and a few others how to repel. We had a great day flying off the cliffs of Okinawa. It is one of my fondest memories of the Vietnam experience. "Koos" was the consummate Marine in every sense. He was smart, hard-nosed, dedicated, loyal, and a real leader and warrior. I wish I had more of a chance to really get to know him. Unfortunately, he was one of the first to get hit when we reached the top of Hill 362.

I now know — from talking to other guys at our Lima Co. reunions, reading articles and after-action reports on Hastings, looking over my original situation report books, and reviewing the casualty reports — it was about a week from the time we landed in the hot zone until we climbed Hill 362.

Much of that week remains a blur, but I think we spent most of our time moving back and forth on an east-west corridor to the south of Hill 362. It seems we went over the same territory several times.

All that week, I remember thinking , We are not very smart. Here we are operating on the

enemy's home turf. From all the encampments we found, we concluded it was probably an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) training ground. The NVA knew every inch of the ground and probably had the coordinates of every trail plotted. To top it off, we'd captured an enemy radio and discovered they had all our battalion radio frequencies recorded. (Well, maybe none of them could speak English).

The whole time I felt like we were in a fish bowl. They sat on top of their hills and waited until they had the advantage. Helicopters are modern marvels and the brave guys that flew them saved many a wounded Marine's life, but every time they flew in to re-supply us, they gave away our position.

Although most of my memories of Vietnam are vague and distant, there were several events I remember quite well. One evening Capt. Tatum had me set up an ambush with a squad from my platoon. We set up on a trail a distance from the company perimeter. Several days before, the same site was the scene of a successful ambush by our company. The dead North Vietnamese were still lying where they were killed.

By this time, the heat of the jungle had taken its toll. The bodies were black and swollen and smelled as bad as anything I have smelled before or since. We had an uneventful night except for the occasional sound of someone throwing up. But as bad as the smell was, fate was on our side that night. While we were safely removed from Lima Company's position, the company came under mortar attack.

We could hear the mortars, but didn't know exactly what was going on. On that fateful night, Corporal John C. Holoka was killed. I didn't know John, but 33 years later learned all the details from the troops that were with him that night. John was a short-timer with less than a month to go. He didn't have to go on Operation Hastings — he volunteered. A true Marine hero.

I want to make sure one other act of bravery is recorded, told to me by Captain Tatum. During the mortar attack that night, the F.O. (Forward Observer) attached to our company, Lt. Ed Connell, ran through the mortar fire, with his radio operator in tow, to the perimeter. Once there, he was able to map the position of the enemy mortars from the flash coming from the tubes. He called in and directed artillery fire until the mortars were silenced — an act of courage that most assuredly saved many lives. Like many other heroes in combat, Lt. Connell didn't receive any medals or citations for his actions.

Another remembrance of that week seems almost comical now, but at the time it was anything but funny. One very dark night in our perimeter, I was in my hole. It was so dark I couldn't see my hand held at arm's length. Someone was crawling towards me, and I couldn't remember the password (if we had one). A great debate was going on in my mind. Should I risk calling out or should I wait it out? I aimed my 45 in the direction of the sounds. An eternity passed before Sergeant Koos rolled into my hole.

Hill 362 I'm still not sure of the exact dates of the battle of Hill 362. Lima Company's KIAs (Killed-in-Actions) are recorded as July 24, 1966. India Company's KIAs are recorded as nine on July 22, 1966, and 18 on July 24, 1966. I know we didn't go up the hill on the same day India Company lost 18 men — it was at least one and maybe two days later. But I guess the dates aren't important. What happened is.

We were camped for the night to the south of Hill 362 when we heard all hell break loose on Hill 362. India Company of our battalion was into some heavy shit on top of the hill. We later found out that they were sent up the hill to establish better radio communications between the battalions participating in Operation Hastings. The next morning, we got word India Company was hit hard and suffered many casualties. Our orders were to go up Hill 362 to support them.

I can remember looking over the valley to Hill 362. The area we had to cover was either high with elephant grass or dense with trees, and the hill was very steep. I thought to myself, This is suicide. We are going to cross that clearing and start up the hill and the NVA will be dug in and waiting for us. It was an ominous feeling. My platoon was the lead platoon going up the hill, one in a range of hills that runs roughly northeast by southwest just below the DMZ. Hill 362 itself is very steep with high elephant grasses in parts and heavy woods in other sections. We were moving up the hill from the south, slightly west of India Company's position.

I can still hear the sound of the chain saws. The top of the hill was so dense with trees, helicopters dropped chain saws to India Company to clear them. Only then could the copters land and evacuate the dead and wounded.

Although it was a very difficult and slow climb, there was no action. No shots being fired, no mortars, only the muted sounds of the chain saws off in the distance. I remember thinking, This is a bad dream in slow motion .

As we clawed our way up, we crossed a trail that ran perpendicular to our path of ascent. I was tempted to take the trail as an easy way to the top. However I thought it might lead us away from India Co., and I didn't want to walk into an NVA ambush.

As we approached the top of the hill, Sergeant Koos was with the first squad. I was right behind that squad. I'm sure our positions changed several times on the way up in efforts to communicate and position people. As we discovered, there was a trail running atop the mountain range. We hit that trail just west of India Company's position.

As soon as we crested Hill 362, my young, boot-raw Marine ass changed forever. Sergeant Koos and three others from my platoon were killed instantly. We had to return some heavy fire immediately to neutralize the situation. Luckily, there was a brave Marine with a machine gun close by.

During an operation, the machine gunners from Weapons Platoon are attached to and operate with the rifle platoons. I positioned the gunner right next to the trail. He kept a steady fire on the NVA that allowed me to get some of my troops up the hill and into a make-shift perimeter defense. That weapons platoon machine gunner saved all our lives that day. He is a real hero, and I don't even know his name.

The battle lasted for what seemed like an eternity but was probably somewhere between one and two hours. One hour of heavy fighting is a lifetime.

All our previous fire fights were of the 30 second-to-five minute variety.

To my great surprise, Lt. "Andy" Anderson and his Third Platoon were positioned on the northwest side of the hill, on the other side of the trail, to my right flank. Later what happened became apparent. Andy's Third Platoon had come up the hill behind my platoon. But he took the trail we'd crossed and got to the top of the hill before us. The Third Platoon had moved through India Co. and set up positions to the northwest of the ridge.

My second Platoon hit the crest of the hill at the same moment the NVA started their attack from the west. The NVA were coming up to finish off India Company.

Fortunately, the Third Platoon was already in position before the NVA struck and took the brunt of the initial attack. This allowed me to get some of my troops in position to complete the perimeter. Eventually, the Second and Third Platoon formed a semi-circle perimeter on the west side of India's position, around the company.

Timing is everything. If our company had gotten to the top of the hill an hour earlier, we would have taken fewer casualties. If we had arrived any later, India Company would have sustained even more casualties. I still don't know why the NVA waited so long to attack India Company again.

Sometimes I think we give the enemy too much credit. They are not as smart as we think they are. In the initial stages of the fight, I spent my time getting my people in position. There were some holes previously dug either by the NVA or India Co. and some of my troops took advantage of this ready-made cover. Most of the men used tree stumps, larger trees or fallen trees as cover. I remember moving from tree to tree throughout the battle.

For me, the single-most traumatic moment of the battle occurred when we were hit by a tear gas grenade. For 30 seconds to several minutes, I was near panic. I was sure it was all over. I couldn't see, my eyes were burning, I was choking. I was unable to function at all. Thankfully, a favorable wind blew the gas away, and the NVA never threw anymore

gas grenades.

Several times I wanted to throw a grenade, but I never did. The area was too heavily wooded, and I was concerned that the grenade would hit a tree and come back at us. We didn't need anymore incoming, and I was never much of a quarterback.

Throughout the battle, automatic weapons-fire snapped off tree limbs a mere foot above my head — an almost constant rat-a-tat, crack. While moving and talking on the radio, I knew if I made one wrong move, someone else would be leading the Second Platoon.

As I noted, Andy's Third Platoon was to my right flank. The trail down the center of the mountain range divided our platoons. Andy and I were in sight of each other and in communications throughout the battle. At one point, Andy realized Sergeant Koos — a good friend of his — had been hit. Koos' body was lying in front of our position throughout the fight.

Andy wanted to go out and get Sergeant Koos. I knew Koos was dead and that we could retrieve his body after the fight, but I had a hard time convincing Andy his efforts would be futile. We needed him alive to run his platoon. In the end, Andy's common sense prevailed, and of course, we later took care of Sergeant Koos.

Marine air power, both fixed-wing and helicopter gun ships, were a great help in the battle for Hill 362. Andy and I threw smoke grenades to mark our position. To my surprise, I then found myself in radio communication with a jet bomber pilot. I have no idea how I got him on the radio, but I brought him over our position and he dropped a 500-pound bomb on the NVA. The whole mountain shook. Luckily, it landed on the downside away from us. It had to have hit right in the middle of the NVA. I'm sure it was effective, but it was a little too close for comfort to suit me. I didn't have the balls to bring him in for anymore runs, and I waved him off.

Calling in helicopter gun ships was also a very effective tactic. I remember talking a long time to the pilot to make sure he knew exactly where we were and what direction he should come from. He was right on the money. He came in and fired over our position right into the NVA. The battle was turning in our favor at that point. The tree limbs breaking over my head were music to my ears now that the bullets were going in the opposite direction, although I have to admit, I was nervous with every pass of the copter. I was never sure he would get it right.

The battle eventually subsided, and I spent the balance of daylight getting my troops into a solid defensive perimeter for the night. Some of my platoon had still been on their way up the hill when the firing started, so when things slowed down, I yelled directions to them to get up the hill and into our position without moving across our front lines. The vegetation was so thick, you couldn't see more than 50 feet. My whole effort was directed at preventing any casualties caused by friendly fire — responsible for more of our

casualties than the military cares to admit.

One of my most horrible memories of that day came after the battle ended. With my troops in position, I walked along the trail to India Co.'s position. It was a sickening sight. In the make-shift landing zone of sawed-off tree stumps lie a pile of dead Marines. Rifles and gear were flung all over the place. Wounded Marines sat scattered throughout the clearing, some lying down. I had never experienced such devastation. But the worst part was the looks on the faces of the survivors of India Company. Their expressions were trance-like. They'd all been to hell and back, and it showed.

My limited, though intense, action on Hill 362 pales in comparison to what the men of India Company endured the day and night before. The Marines of India Company fought bravely under very adverse conditions. They were spectacular in a situation where the odds were greatly stacked against them.

There were many individual acts of valor — some recognized and I'm sure many that will never be known outside of India 3/5. Lance Corporal Richard A. Pittman received the "Medal of Honor" for his actions on Hill 362. Lt. Robert S. Williams was awarded the "Navy Cross" and Lt. Michael D. Carey the Silver Star for their bravery on that hill.

The night after the battle passed quietly. I don't think anybody got much sleep. A few rifles shot off during the night — just a couple of nervous Marines firing at any sound. What puzzles me about that night was the fact that we didn't get mortared. To this day I don't understand it. Obviously, the NVA had the trail and hilltop zeroed in — they'd mortared India Co. the night before. Maybe this supposed large number of NVA was engaged with other Marine battalions that night, or maybe we inflicted such heavy casualties the NVA was disorganized and retreated.

Was it just a matter of fate, luck, timing? Why did I walk off that hill unscathed? Sometime the next day as we were preparing to move out, Capt. Tatum told me to take a small patrol down the trail to check it out. We'd only moved about 100 yards when two NVA came around a bend not more than 10 yards from us. A couple of my guys raised up and killed one of them immediately. But it was obvious that these two North Vietnamese soldiers were disoriented, harmless, and would offer no resistance. I halted my guys' fire, and we brought the surviving NVA back to our lines.

Over the years, I've often wondered what happened to the guy we captured. We saved his life for the moment — maybe my fondest memory of Hill 362. Did he survive the war to have a full life? Probably those spineless ARVN interrogators killed him later.

I remember little else about operation Hastings after those two days on Hill 362. I don't even remember walking off the hill. The remaining several days of Hastings are nowhere to be found in my memory bank.

When you're in a battle like Hill 362, with such dense vegetation and with that much chaos all around, you have no clue as to the big picture. All I know is what happened within 50 feet of me. It would be nice if every surviving member of Lima and India Companies wrote their story of Hill 362. Then we would have the complete, true story.

A few years ago, I became aware of and involved with our Lima Co. 3/5 reunion group. It has been a reawakening of my Vietnam experience.

Although at times it is very painful, the group has had a very healing effect on me. It's been good for me after all these years to talk with guys who had the same experiences.

Two years ago at our reunion in Washington, D.C., accompanied by my wife and other Lima Co. Marines, I was able to go to the Wall (the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial) for the first time. I was buoyed by the support of these 10 other Lima 3/5 guys who also survived Operation Hastings. I don't think I would have ever found the courage to go by myself.

At our recent reunion, I had the honor to talk to a very brave Marine, Horace "Shack" Bryant. Thirty-three years later, I found out one more small but significant piece of hill 362 history. Horace was in my 1st squad going up the hill that day. He was right behind PFC Pruitt Cheaney when Cheaney was killed. Shack welled up with emotion as he told me his story.

"As I held Cheaney in my arms, all I could see was those big, blue eyes looking at me for help," said the black man, who so many years later is still shaken by the horrible fate that befell his good buddy. I could tell from our conversation that Horace will always love Cheaney, who was white. "I'll never forget those big, blue eyes."

No single event in my life has had as much of an effect on me as Operation Hastings and Hill 362. After all these years, my images and recollections are mostly dull and dreamlike, but the feelings remain intense and chilling. I cheated death, and I got away with it. I found out what the true meaning of courage was — at least the military meaning. Traumatic took on a real meaning for me. It is the same fear and near panic you experience in the split second before an auto accident or near miss. The difference was, the battle for Hill 362 lasted at least an hour. It was not a bad experience, but a horrible one; not a sad experience, but a heart heaving one; not a frightful experience, but my worst nightmare.

I discovered two things about myself on that hill. I know I'm not a hero. I didn't grab a machine gun and charge the enemy. I also know I'm not a coward. As frightened as I was — and anybody who says they have no fear in a combat situation is either lying or insane — I did my job. I kept outwardly calm and directed my troops and maybe saved some lives.

I was married on July 22, 1967 — one year after Hastings. My children were all born in

the months I spent with Lima Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, First Marine Division in Vietnam (Tony, May 4; Gina, June 7; Krista, July 13; Billy, July 20; and Joey, August 31). Why I walked off that hill to live a full life and so many others didn't will forever puzzle me. I feel very fortunate and very guilty at the same time.

While I don't want to think Vietnam was a complete waste of those young lives, I constantly ask myself, Why did all these young kids die? What did we accomplish? I want to find even something of small redeeming value to justify this loss of lives. I don't know what it is, and I'm glad I don't have to justify it to their loved ones, but I do know one thing. We can never forget the men and women who died in Vietnam — especially not the valiant Lima 3/5 Marines who died in Hastings and on Hill 362.

We, as survivors, must do everything in our power to keep the memory of their courage and supreme sacrifice in the forefront.

These are the real heroes.

Hill 362 KIAs Date KIA Hometown

PFC Bruce A. Baker 7-24-66 Essex Junction, VT

PFC Pruitt H. Cheaney 7-24-66 Sarasota, FL

SSGT Norman L. Koos 7-24-66 Olivet, MI

PFC James R. Nash 7-24-66 Brick Township, NJ

PFC Paul J. Strausser 7-24-66 Millington, NJ

* Other Hastings KIA

SGT Lewis C. Barnard 7-18-66 Gadsen, AL

CPL John C. Holoka 7-22-66 Gettysburg, PA

PFC Robert E. Stallings 7-22-66 Spokane, WA

NAME	RANK	CITY	STATE	DOD	PANEL	LINE
BANOVEZ, MICHAEL J JR	CPL	MADISON	WI	7/18/66	9E	31
BARNARD, LEWIS C	SGT	GADSDEN	AL	7/18/66	9E	31
RUTHERFORD, DANNY L	CPL	LOUISVILLE	KY	7/20/66	9E	50
HOLOKA, JOHN C	CPL	GETTYSBURG	PA	7/22/66	9E	57
STALLINGS, ROBERT E	PFC	SPOKANE	WA	7/22/66	9E	60
GILBREATH, RICHARD A	HM3	NEW BRITAIN	CT	7/22/66	9E	57
NASH, JAMES R	PFC	BRICK TOWNSHIP	NJ	7/24/66	9E	71
STRAUSSER, PAUL J	PFC	MILLINGTON	TN	7/24/66	9E	71

CHEANEY, PRUITT H	PFC	SARASOTA	FL	7/24/66	9E	65
KOOS, NORMAN L	SSGT	OLIVET	MI	7/24/66	9E	69
BAKER, BRUCE A	PFC	ESSEX JUNCTION	VT	7/24/66	9E	65

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