

# Col. Bob Fawcett, USMC (Ret.)

## 2/1 Vietnam Era Reunion Speech, 11 Nov 12

### San Diego, California

**[NOTE: The italicized portions of the speech were left out in the interest of time but are included here.]**

Thank you. My thanks to Paul Mangan for that fine introduction and all who had a hand in setting up this fine event. Please, a round of applause and oorahs for their efforts.

After hearing those fine things that Paul said about me, I am appreciative, but I am reminded of a quote that I read in the graduation program we received at the parade on Friday morning. It is by Gen Lejeune, the 13<sup>th</sup> Commandant of the Marine Corps.

*“Among all the honors, among the postings, promotions, medals that have been awarded to me, the one that I take the most pride in is to be able to say, ‘I am a Marine.’”*

First I want to wish you a Happy Birthday and a happy veterans day and tell you what an honor for me to be here among you at all, and that I am awed be the opportunity to speak to you. I realize I am the backup quarterback, but General Grinalds, who was scheduled to speak, is unable to attend. He sends his regards, and I will try to fill his shoes. So I am the backup QB. Maybe I'll throw some touchdowns; maybe I'll throw some interceptions. You can decide.

I look at us now, we are all a bit older and grayer, with somewhat less hair and somewhat more belly. You know as I wandered around and met some folks today, I overheard some of your wives talking. By the way, of the wives I might say, you guys know how to pick some good ones. Beautiful...and patient...smiling politely as they listen to yet another retelling of the glory of our youth.

But you know, in talking to your wives, I heard something disturbing. Some of you just don't have it anymore...and that is sad. Well I am here to tell you, I still got it. In fact, just before I left Virginia, I showed my wife I still got it. And, yes, she was impressed. But, you guys, I am not sure you still got it. Back when you were younger, you had it. But, most of you...not any more. Well, I still got it, and I'm going to show you I still got it. And here it is...my 1970, USMC issue bush cover. And I still got it!!!

We are older and grayer, but in my mind's eye, I see us as we were back then.

I did 30 years as an active duty Marine. I had a great career by any measure, and I had been well trained on the theory of how to be a Lieutenant at a place called The Basic School at Quantico, but I learned the foundation of being a Marine right among you, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marines, in the crucible of combat in Vietnam.

I am going to take you on a little trip down memory lane, and I warn you, all those memories may not be good. And I apologize in advance. My language may not all be fit for polite company, but back then maybe we were not really fit for polite company, and that's the way we talked. Not all these memories apply to all of us, but in the next few minutes, I suspect I will hit a few thoughts that may strike pretty close to home for most of you.

Let's start at the beginning. Why did you join up? Some of the early vets, from 65 and 66 or so came in before there was a war in Vietnam. You deployed and came in country as a unit in November of 1965. Others of you came later, as individual replacements. But why did you join up? Fun, travel, adventure. Because a slick talking recruiter said he would guarantee you a fine technical MOS where you could learn a trade. How do you know when a recruiter is lying? His lips are moving.

Some did it for money to go to college. Or maybe because the draft board was breathing down your neck, or because the judge gave you an alternative because of some youthful indiscretion. "Son, it is jail or the Marine Corps." And the recruiter was waiting right outside with a quota to fill. For one of many reasons, we ended up on the yellow footprints at PI or San Diego or for a few, OCS at Quantico, with a guy with a funny looking cover that looked a bit like the hat that Smokey the Bear wears, screaming in your face asking you in somewhat less than polite language why you had arrived to screw up his beloved Marine Corps. But somehow, after 8 or 12 weeks depending on when in the war you joined, you came out the other end of boot camp and they called you a U.S. Marine. And however you got there, you were as proud of that title as the young men we saw on the grinder as that graduation parade on Friday.

But it was just getting started. The pattern varied as the war wore on, but you did some combination of ITR, BITS, and Staging Battalion where you were taught some lesson that when you actually got to Vietnam, were pretty much useless. And after a short leave at home, you were on a plane headed west, and after a short stop in Okinawa for more shots and an issue of jungle utilities, you were headed south.

Few of us will ever forget stepping off that air conditioned air liner into the heat, humidity, and stench of the Da Nang airfield. There is no smell in the world quite like the smell of burning diesel fuel and feces. And there you were thinking as you walked down the steps to the tarmac, what in the hell have I gotten myself into.

You hurried up and waited through a series of temporary stops associated with check in and eventually, with no idea of where in hell you actually were, you were dropped off by helo or 6 by deuce and a half truck outside a Quonset hut at a place that was known at 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marines. And you were assigned to a platoon or a section with a bunch of people who you did not know... but who over time would become brothers you would never forget. This is Vietnam and I don't even have a weapon.

Life in the bush. And again it varied over different period in the war, but each contained its own special kind of hell. For some earlier in the war, it was big search and destroy operations with names like Hastings or Union or Pegasus, at places with names like Con Tien, Ka Lu, Khe Sahn, Hue/Phu Bai, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam. Later it was mostly in the area south of Da Nang with names like Marble Mountain, Nui Kim Son, the Leper Ville, Go Noi Island, No Name Island, Cau Ha Combat Base, Hill 55, Cam Sa and Liberty Bridge,

Odd names for strange places, and our own language that was different too. Dinks and gooks and gooners. Cam Cook, di di mau, dung lai, boo coo, numbah 10. Hey GI, I give you numbuh one boom boom. And phrases we used, "Steam and Cream." "Wow man, how you gonna show." "Why you wanna break heavy on me." "Humpin the bush." "Love, peace, and fire superiority."

And places we visited in our youth that we might dream about even today: Bangkok, Taipei, Singapore, Sidney, or Hawaii.

Mostly our tours were a succession of long marches in thick jungle with heavy packs. And sweat running down your face and an olive green towel slung around your neck to wipe the ever present sweat away. Or it was a never ending series of day patrols and night ambushes in the sand dunes, tree lines, and rice paddies south of Da Nang. Always wondering, always worried that the next bend on the trail might be the ambush or the booby trap.

And booby traps. Goddamn booby traps. They were there, always on watch, never asleep, just waiting for you. Some guys were just good at finding them. And unbelievably, some guys volunteered to walk point, because they knew they were good and wanted to look out for their buddies. And sometime, it was just your turn on point. But the best point man in the world could have a bad day. And it only took one bad day.

Walking along with a probe stick, our pants legs rolled up to hopefully feel he trip wire on our shins before a frag grenade got pulled out of a C-rat can or the pull friction fuse pulled out of a can of C4, gravel, and nuts and bolts, and exploded in a flash of sound and light, and fear and pain.

And there was the doc. With his unit one and bandolier of battle dressings, cutting your bloody uniform with his K- bar or that pair of scissors they always had. Checking you out and giving you a shot of morphine and saying, “Hey, man, it’s the million dollar wound, your ticket home, and no sweat, man, and your balls are still there.”

There will be friends and loved ones, but there will never be anyone like the guy who held your hand and told you that you were gonna be OK as they carried you on a litter onto the medevac bird. There will never be another time and place in our lives that it will be like it was back then, among our brothers.

And if you were lucky, it was a “skatin’ heart.” A medevac to the Sanctuary or Repose, or 95<sup>th</sup> Evac, or 1<sup>st</sup> Med. But some of you came back. Only now, a little more scared, because you knew you were not immortal, or as lucky. But you came back and went out on patrol again, and again. Or maybe you weren’t so lucky and you came all the way home and started a new life with pain that never completely left you and a long term relationship with the VA.

And some who did not make it. The 558 members of 2/1 whose names are on OUR wall. While I never saw a Marine cry, we were Marines after all, but there were nights alone on watch in a fighting hole, all alone except for your foxhole buddy sleeping next to you, that it just got to you. And you cried, because you had lost a friend, someone very important to you, who was now gone... forever.

There were many heroes, but I have to digress here for a moment and tell you about one special hero of mine. We had some great leaders, commanders of our battalion. Colonel Duncan and Colonel Norris, and others, and one man who was very special to me. That was Lt Col. Bill Leftwich, Battalion CO 2/1 and later in 1<sup>st</sup> Recon Bn. He led by example, taking risks that Battalion commanders were not supposed to take. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 1970, he was flying on an extract mission to pull out a Recon team in trouble, and the CH-46 he was flying in crashed and killed him, nine recon Marines and five pilots and air crewmen. He did not have to be on that bird, but that was his duty as a leader as he understood it to be there to help pull out his troops in trouble. I saw a quote by Col Leftwich on a plaque on the wall when we visited MCRD the other day. It read,

*“Leadership is the only award a man must win every day. The prize is the respect of others, earned by the disciplines that generate self-respect.”*

He won that award every day. He has my respect. He is one of my heroes.

But sometimes it was a good day. Maybe one of those rare times at Stack Arms by the South China Sea. Drinking beer on the beach. Or just a day when the action was light, the sun was

shining, and maybe a vat can of gristly steaks, or a couple cans of freeze dried pork chops and a 5 gallon box of still cool milk and some mail from home that came in on the resupply bird. Or maybe a really good day when a sympathetic supply NCO tossed a couple cases of warm Falstaff or PBR in with the cases of C rats.

C rats. On a good day you might score some peaches and pound cake. On a bad day you drew the ham and mother...ham and lima beans. Scraping away the coagulated grease at the top of the can. Heat tabs that could make your eyes burn like CS gas. Anybody still have their John Wayne or P-38 can opener that hung on a chain around your neck along with your taped together dog tags? Last name, initials, service number 0110467, USMC, religion and blood type. I've still got mine, and I know many of you still have yours.

When I retired from active duty in 1999, I traded in my taped up dog tags I had worn for 30 years for a St. Michael Medal. The patron saint of warriors, so I would not ever forget who I was and who my brothers, past and present, were.

But among the boredom and fear, and frustration, and crappy C-rats there was something good as well. When we were there, we were together, among men who became our brothers. And we knew we were doing something important, that as bad as it was, that our nation had called on us to do. And we did it, over and over again.

I wrote something for Dan Kellum's book. It is a story about a once upon a time kid in a war in a faraway place, a long time ago. He will remain nameless in my story, because it is a story that is in some way about each of you. And I have told this story to perhaps thousands of young lieutenants I had the privilege to train, trying to describe to them the men they might be lucky enough to lead someday. I call it, "Just kids, just heroes."

In the larger view, 1970 seemed a quiet time of the War in Vietnam, between the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the eventual departure of U. S. combat units in 1972. Vietnamization was well underway.

*[NVA main force units were pretty much back across the borders and the war, at least in the 1st Marine Division area of operations around Da Nang, had evolved into a pattern of saturation patrolling – daylight security patrols and night ambushes by squads and fire teams operating from platoon patrol bases scattered across the rocket belt. The purpose was to prevent the firing of rockets into the Da Nang area containing headquarters, air fields, and logistic dumps.*

*We saw few of the enemy; the main threat was booby traps—or as known in the vernacular of the day, fucking booby traps. They never got tired, never went to sleep, or never went off watch; they just waited until an inexperienced, inattentive, or just unlucky Marine on patrol came by*

*and tripped one. In five months our platoon took 11 booby trap casualties and one gunshot WIA and one KIA.*

*We didn't know it then, but we were in an information war and the real target was the American public. A rocket fired at Da Nang could hit anywhere, even the trash dump, as one did. The news in the paper as we would read in Stars and Stripes some days later was, "Da Nang Rocketed Again." Every time a Marine tripped a booby trap, it was another tally for the weekly casualty reports in the papers back home. The enemy wanted us to leave in defeat, and just wanted to keep up enough pressure to convince the American people that our effort was futile. (In the early 2000s, does this sound like Iraq and AFGHANISTAN?) ]*

As for us, me and my platoon and all the other platoons out there, we were fairly successful at our mission of saturation patrolling to keep the enemy from firing rockets and mortars at Da Nang; but it was not without cost. We patrolled from our patrol base every day and every night. And no matter how careful we were, about once every couple of weeks, you would hear an explosion off in the direction of one of our patrols, and then wait with fearful anticipation for the radio call: "Echo 1, this is Echo 1 Bravo. We have one emergency medevac."

Another booby trap casualty. We ached for a chance to engage the enemy in a gunfight. But except for a few fleeting sightings of the enemy, it was us and the booby traps. And in the face of that, we kept going back out.

We were Marines; that was our mission. We didn't like it but we carried it out. These were no gung ho heroes. Just kids. Some looking for adventure, trying to prove something, or just choosing the Marines over being drafted into the Army, being drafted being the near inevitable fate for an undereducated young man in the late 1960s.

Their names were Don, House, Mickey, Willie, Butch, Dave, Dakota Slim, Bear, Zee, Big K, Lee, Crazy, Bird, Amtrac, Hogman, Doc, LT., and others. And one, as he found out decades later, was known--never to his face--as "Bouncing Bobby."

They were led, for the most part, by other kids. Most of the NCOs in our platoon arrived in country as PFCs or lance corporals. Some of them worked their way up from point man to team leader to squad leader and soon made corporal. They led the under strength squads of six to ten men who left the wire every night to set ambushes on some trail junction or other likely route, and wait for the enemy...and pray.

One of my squad leaders a quiet unassuming kid, maybe nineteen or twenty. He led his squad well. He ran his patrols with kind of a resigned sense of fatalism. In August, he was "getting short," a few days left to go on his tour. He knew the drill: receive the patrol order in the

afternoon; issue his order to the squad; check of weapons and equipment by the platoon commander; and just after dark, line them up to move out of the gap in the wire for another night patrol.

As platoon commander, if I was not leading one of the squad size patrols as I sometimes did, I would always be at the gap to see them off. At the appointed time I heard then saw the squad shuffling up quietly from their sector of the patrol base. The squad leader was first in the file as they approached the gap in the wire. Six or eight kids with M 16 and an M 79, and a Prick 25. All scared , but trusting that this other kid, who was the squad leader would lead them out and take care of them and bring them back alive and in one piece, one more time.

When they came up, I quietly asked him, “Who is walking point for you tonight.” The point man was often a new guy (that is just the way it was) or perhaps an older hand with a couple months in country who volunteered for the job of detecting booby traps for some other reason, like being respected for his skill or bravery by his small group of comrades. The squad leader answered, “I am.”

He was “short”, little time left in country. He had walked his share of patrols as point man and more at deuce point as a team leader and squad leader. Walking point was not his job. I asked, “You sure you should be doing that?” He said with quiet resignation, “Hell, Lieutenant, if I put one of these boots on point, he’ll probably get us all blown up.” After a few moments, he turned and quietly said to his squad, “OK, boys, let’s go.” And off they went into the dark, just like he had for 200 other nights before.

Marines, just kids, led by other kids, doing their duty as it had fallen to them to do. Few think of them as heroes. But I do. And dammit, America should. World War Two vets have been called the greatest generation, but they weren’t the only ones who deserve that title.

*James Webb, currently my Senator from Virginia, and a noted author, wrote a book, Fields of Fire, wrote about something that few people aside from us veterans will ever understand. His book is a novel, but it contains the essence of a truth. One of the main characters in the book, a squad leader named Snake is nearing the end of his tour and he is sitting alone on a bunker considering if he should extend his tour by six months. He thinks to himself, “Man, are you crazy, you are almost out of here. No more of this shit.” But then he says to himself, “But no, it will never be like this again, on the edge of life and death, here with my brothers; me looking out for them, them looking out for me. It will never be like this again.”*

But then for all of us, one day it was over, either on a medevac flight or the Freedom bird back to the world. But when we came home, we were often alone. Even the people who loved us could

not understand, even if we could bring ourselves to describe to them what we had experienced or endured.

Back with our families it was sometimes strange. We knew they loved us, but they just could not really understand, and we could not explain it to them. And we did odd things. Like jumping or hitting the deck when a car backfired. Or at the dinner table saying, “pass the goddamn salt. Oops.” Or “Thanks, Mom, that was great chow” and picking up your spoon, licking it off and sticking it in your pocket.

And America, the people, they just did not seem to care. We had been at war. America was at the mall. Mostly they just ignored us. Some of them were outright hostile. As if we had started the goddamn war. If we showed up in the news at all, it was because some poor vet had snapped and done something bad. And the vast majority of us just disappeared, and tried our best to get on with our lives. And you know what; most of us here did just that, and went back to school, or learned a trade, and got married, and had kids. They built houses, ran trucking companies, taught marital arts, became engineers, Teacher, trained horses, flew airplanes, became cops or firemen, wrote books, stayed in the Corps, or did a hundred other things. We just got on with our lives. But you know, that is most of us here.

But then, I think about some of our brothers who are not here, who maybe did not do so well. Marines who are too poor or too broken or still carrying too many demons to be able to be here with us now. They are our brothers and I think of them as well.

And those who did not come home at all. The Wall. We all have friends whose names are inscribed there. Some of us left blood, and pieces of our bodies, and some of our soul in that faraway place. And 558 of us from 2/1, our brothers who have their name on a wall, did not come home. We grieve for them and their families. And I know they are up there, off duty from guarding the streets of heaven, looking down on us and celebrating our Birthday, cutting the cake, drinking too much, telling lies, and raising a glass for us.

Before I finish, let’s take a moment to consider those who followed us in the defense of our country. The Marines who fought in Fallujah and Ramadi, and still fighting even today in Kandahar and Helmund and other crappy third world hell holes, who keep going out on patrol... when much of America does not really seem to care.

Friday, I was at the PX and in front of me in the checkout line was a big strong tough looking young Marine and his pretty young wife. He was buying collar emblems and medals for the dress blues, no doubt preparing to attend the Marine Corps Birthday Ball. But there was something different about him. He was in a wheelchair and there were no legs below his hips. Let us not forget him and all the others like him who have paid such a high price for the privilege

of serving their country. Consider the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund. Write it down; look it up; read about the work that they do for our Marines. And then do something tangible to help let them know we, their brothers, really do care.

Give some money. Spend some time. Visit a hospital. Help build a special home. Do something. We deserved it and did not get it. They deserve it too.

There are some decorated heroes from 2/1. And here I am in a room full of undecorated heroes. Brave men. Men who walked down jungle trails, waiting for an ambush. Men who left the patrol base every night and prayed to not lose a foot or their life to a booby trap or a burst of AK 47 fire. We were scared. But we were brave. Bravery is not the lack of fear, but the ability to do your job in the face of fear. And you were brave, because we did go back out, again and again. We did it because we somehow felt it was our duty, perhaps to our country, or to our Corps, but in the end to our brothers. And now, here tonight, we are back among our brothers, again.

We are not kids anymore. But you are my heroes. You are my fellow Marines. You are my brothers. It is my honor to share this time with you. For 40 something years I have wanted to say these things to someone who understood. Thank you for listening.

Happy Birthday. Semper Fidelis. Welcome home, Marines.