



# The Leftwich Legacy

By First Lieutenant Michael Dan Kellum, USMCR

A SENSE OF MILITARY TRADITION WAS INSTILLED IN LIEUTENANT COLONEL WILLIAM “BILL” LEFTWICH JR. ’53, USMC, BY HIS FATHER, WILLIAM GROOM LEFTWICH SR., WHO JOINED THE U.S. ARMY’S OFFICER CORPS IN 1917.

**T**he elder First Lieutenant Leftwich served along the Texas-Mexico border during his military stint through 1920. This was during the time of the Mexican Revolution, 1910 through 1920. U.S. Army units patrolled the border to prevent raids from Mexican revolutionaries such as Pancho Villa.

The senior Leftwich brought the Springfield rifle he carried in the Army home with him and the old scratched up weapon probably fired up the imagination

of his son, Bill, in his early years. Bill’s father expected perfection from his only son while his mom, Mattie, greatly influenced him with a gentler approach. In 1966, Bill would show his own two boys, Bill III and Scott, an AK-47 rifle the Vietnamese Marine Brigade, VNMC, presented him from the Vietnam War that would inspire them to follow in his footsteps, the Marines and Navy, respectively.

Even as a young child growing up in Germantown, TN, a suburb of Memphis,

*His face bloodstained after a Viet Cong bullet raked him from upper lip to ear, then-Maj William G. Leftwich '53, USMC, uses a field telephone to contact other Marines on 9 March 1965 in Binh Dinh Province, South Vietnam. Two hours after this picture was taken, he was evacuated. Action came in Binh Dinh Province in South Vietnam. AP Photo*

he knew what he wanted from life—to be a United States Marine. He and his mother would tell his wife, Jane, years later about drawings and scribbling as a youngster that would have as its theme someday becoming a Marine Corps combat soldier. It was his destiny.

In 1949, he took the first step to realizing his dream when he received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy. Unlike most young men his age who sought the freedom of a carefree college life, he sought the discipline and strict life of a career military man. Four years later, he marched at the head of the midshipmen down Pennsylvania Avenue in President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Inaugural Parade in January 1953 as the Winter Set Brigade Commander.

After graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy, inclusion in *Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges* and reception of the Award of Fleet Reserve Association Prize, Leftwich finally achieved his goal and was given his military service choice—the U.S. Marine Corps.

Fast forward 12 years and the meticulous officer that Leftwich was, now a Marine major, attended language school for four months to learn to speak Vietnamese so he could serve as a Vietnamese Marine Brigade, VNMC, advisor in the Republic of Vietnam. Only 23,000 American servicemen were in Vietnam at the beginning of 1965. In December before he arrived, the 4th VNMC Battalion was ambushed and virtually destroyed as an effective fighting unit by two regiments of the 9th Viet Cong Division near Binh Gia, 40 miles east of Saigon. A relief force was mauled by the enemy as well.

Major Leftwich saw his first full scale action 9 March 1965 as four VNMC battalions engaged three battalions of the 2nd VC Regiment. He and another Marine officer accompanied three VNMC battalions flanking an enemy battalion covering the approach to Hoai An on Highway 19 and another VC battalion holding a hill overlooking the road. Prior to setting out for Hoai An, Leftwich worked out a plan with the 22d Division Air Liaison Officer for supporting aircraft to deliver their ordnance in extra close proximity to the front lines. Also part of the plan was an ingenious innovation to continue simulated air attacks to keep their enemy's head down while the Vietnamese Marines assaulted their positions.

The Navy Cross citation reads, in part: "By his own personal example of shooting point-blank and shouting, he led the attack which overran the immediate Viet Cong positions and carried the assault to within 40 meters of the crest of a hill overlooking Hoai An. Despite injuries by enemy machine gun bullets in the



Colonel Bob Fawcett '69, USMC, in front of Leftwich statue, Quantico, VA.  
Photo by LT Kellum

## The Legacy Lives On...

### Leftwich Trophy for Outstanding Leadership

Since 1979, the Leftwich Trophy for Outstanding Leadership has been presented to Marine captains in the Ground Combat Arms serving on active duty as either a company or battery commander with the ground forces of the Fleet Marine Force. The trophy is provided through a generous endowment by the H. Ross Perot Foundation.

### Armel Leftwich Visitor Center

The first stop on a visit to the U.S. Naval Academy—the Armel-Leftwich Visitor Center—is named for classmates Captain Lyle Oliver Armel II '53, USN (Ret.), and Lieutenant Colonel William "Bill" Leftwich Jr. '53, USMC. The building was dedicated in 1995 as part of the Academy's 150th anniversary.

### Athletic Excellence

Leftwich Tennis Center in Memphis, TN, and tennis courts at the Naval Academy were named in his honor. An athlete himself, Leftwich served as a company officer at the Naval Academy volunteering, to serve as an assistant varsity tennis coach and battalion football coach.

### LEFTWICH (DD 984)

Until she was sunk as a target for training on 1 August 2003, LEFTWICH was the 22nd Spruance-class destroyer and was named for Lieutenant Colonel William G. Leftwich Jr. '53, USMC.

### Statue and Marker

Erected in 1985 by H. Ross Perot '53 at Quantico Marine Corps Base, the statue and marker remember Colonel Leftwich for "his leadership, tactical skill, bold fighting spirit and unflagging devotion to duty..." as noted on the inscription.

back, cheek and nose, he went to the aid of his mortally wounded comrade, First Lieutenant Dempsey H. Williams. Although bleeding profusely, he refused assistance and delayed his own evacuation until he could call for additional air strikes and brief the Task Force Commander of the situation.”

Eight .51 caliber rounds also tore through a map in his left hand riddling it with holes. Covering the battle for Hoai An this day was Associated Press war correspondent Peter Arnett and his Vietnamese photographer Huynh Thanh My. My’s photograph of Leftwich’s bleeding face as he called in airstrikes over the radio would make him an instant hero as the AP Wirephoto appeared in newspapers around the world.

“You know he had his nose broken two or three times playing football. The nose looked so much better than it did before after the doctors worked on it to straighten out the damage the machine gun bullet had done. Bill was proud of the scar on his cheek and liked to call it his ‘Heidelberg dueling scar,’” recalled his wife Jane.

It was less than a month later on 7 April 1965 that he was back in the field with a VNMC battalion at Phung Du fighting for his life against three VC battalions of the 2nd VC Regiment. Enemy mortar rounds rained down on the VNMC at 2300 as 10 separate attacks failed to crack the tough Vietnamese Marines’ position.

Leftwich would later tell his wife in correspondence home that they were surrounded by the Viet Cong and the fighting was at close quarters as many of the Vietnamese marines accepted the fact they might die this night. She said her husband told her that there was no way he was going to die and he would do all he could do to stay alive. He persevered calling in supporting arms to destroy his enemy. Bill Leftwich never gave up and despite being outnumbered five to one, he helped turn the battle in the VNMC favor by calling in airstrikes.

The Battle for Duc Co on 10 August 1965 drew unbridled praise from Military Assistance Command–Vietnam Commanding General William C. Westmoreland, USMC, when he called



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Leftwich “the best advisor in Vietnam.” The Special Forces camp at Duc Co was taken under siege by a large enemy unit so a relief force of Vietnamese Airborne was ordered into the fray with newly promoted Major H. Norman Schwarzkopf, USA, as their advisor.

Schwarzkopf noted intelligence sources told them they would only be facing a North Vietnamese Army battalion with their Airborne’s superior numbers. Intelligence was wrong. After arriving by helicopters, Schwarzkopf discovered he was outnumbered by a significantly larger NVA force. The enemy had the numerical superiority to do them damage, plus the Cambodian border was nearby where they could refit, resupply and return to the battle. They endured 10 days under siege at close range.

The VNMC marines and Vietnamese rangers were called in to relieve the “relievers” now being slowly picked off by the NVA. The lead tank of the convoy en route to Duc Co was disabled by enemy troops halting their advance along a mountain pass and the battle began. Later, one regiment of the 32nd People’s Army of Vietnam was identified as the opposition. The VNMC had the upper hand initially but they lost their air cover during a crucial part of the battle when a U.S. Air Force F-100 Super Sabre jet flown by Captain Richard Lee Goudy, USAF, was shot down making a bombing run. He ejected from his jet and parachuted to the ground only to be run down by the NVA soldiers and summarily executed, according to Leftwich.

The NVA retook the high ground from the VNMC and the battle raged on throughout the long night as Leftwich called in airstrike after airstrike. The NVA broke contact at daybreak and returned to their sanctuaries in Cambodia. Westmoreland heaped praise on Major Leftwich a day or two later when he flew into Duc Co with military dignitaries and war correspondents. Schwarzkopf’s 10-day ordeal holding Duc Co against superior odds was not addressed by Westmoreland.

Leftwich came away with a chest full of medals for heroism in his first tour and an admiration from his peers and media correspondents who recognized an up and coming Marine officer, callsign “Leatherneck 6,” when they saw one. He returned stateside a proven warrior.

“He was glad to be in Vietnam and doing what he was doing,” said Jane. Before he left for his second tour in April 1970, he sat her down and talked about his funeral arrangements should he die. “I thought this was interesting. Billy said that before arranging the funeral I should check to see what sporting events were on for that day. He didn’t want to be buried during an important sporting event and have people miss anything. He knew how that felt,” she said, remembering her husband as the avid, considerate sportsman and fan.

Lieutenant Colonel Bill Leftwich became the CO of 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 2/1, 16 May 1970. He was recognized for his innovative heliborne tactics with a Silver Star on 4 August 1970 for the Cam Sa Raid that killed 12 Viet Cong and captured 12 Viet Cong leaders and their escorts without



First Lieutenant William Leftwich Jr. '53, USMC

“[Lieutenant Colonel William G. Leftwich Jr.] could have been CEO of any company in the country, a U.S. Senator, a Congressman or even President of the United States but he chose to go to Vietnam and fight and die for us... I talked to any number of Marine colonels and generals over him who said, ‘Ross, that guy would’ve been Commandant of the Marine Corps’...He was just one of the finest men I’ve ever known and America should never forget people like that... Great man, big loss.”

—H. Ross Perot '53  
2005 U.S. Naval Academy Distinguished Graduate Award Recipient

injury to a single Marine or Vietnamese in the attacking force. A Command and Control Huey, two Cobra gunships and four Sea Knight transport helicopters carrying 63 Marines and Vietnamese interpreters converged on the target site from three directions catching the Viet Cong leaders holding a meeting south of Da Nang.

On 12 September 1970 the colonel was reassigned as commanding officer of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. As was the case with 2/1, Leftwich brought a breath of fresh air to the tactical scheme of the “painted faces” at Recon.

The promising future that Lieutenant Colonel Leftwich seemed to have before him ended at 1st Recon on 18 November 1970. Although he didn’t have to be on a low helicopter making an extract that day, he was there wanting to share the danger with his men rather than be in the high back-up Sea Knight. Team Rush Act had suffered an injury from a fall and was unable to move. For three days helicopters were kept at bay by the monsoon rains and cloudy conditions in the Que Son Mountains southwest of Da Nang.

On the fourth day, the weather cleared somewhat over the beleaguered seven-man team. Leftwich joined his two-man recon extract team telling his executive officer to go do the “dog and pony show” report at Division and he would take the extract in his place. The helicopter would successfully lift the team by Special Patrol Insertion/Extraction strap from Hill 848. The SPIE strap is a 125-foot long nylon strap with “D” rings attached every eight feet the Recon Marines snap linked onto from harnesses they wore. In turning around to make his way back down a valley, the pilot encountered a cloudbank and crashed into an unseen mountain, Hill 800, killing all aboard and the team on the string.

It was a sad day for the Marine Corps to lose so many good men including Bill Leftwich. He may have perished in that helicopter crash while sharing the danger with his Marines and a Navy corpsman by leading from the front, but his memory may not soon be forgotten thanks to the Marine Corps, the U.S. Naval Academy and Ross Perot. They have made certain this outstanding Marine’s Marine who had unlimited potential will always be remembered for generations to come. †

*Excerpted from author Michael Dan Kellum’s Books I and II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & “Docs” by Navarro-Hill Publishing Group. Book highlights and information are on the website: [www.michaeldankellum.com](http://www.michaeldankellum.com).*

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