

Book I, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs" Excerpts

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What follows are random outtakes from *Book I, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs"* to give you a good idea of the true stories about Marines and Navy Corpsmen in training leading up to participating in the Vietnam War and their personal narratives of combat.

"Rounds penetrating a helicopter are hard to describe. It's a loud metallic, cracking sound when coming through the sides while up through the floor it was more of a muffled sound. The floors are honeycombed aluminum, thicker. I've had grunts (we've just extracted from a hot LZ) hitting the deck of the helicopter as was normal for them when receiving hits (on the ground). Once I took my stubby screwdriver, which every crew chief carries, and poked a hole in the side of the helicopter (to show how thin the walls of the aircraft were and they would not stop an enemy round). I then told the grunts, 'There's nowhere to hide in here.'---Cpl. Josef "Joe" Dobosz, 21, of St. Joseph, Missouri, HMM-364 Purple Fox crew chief. Chapter 1.

Doc (Shuck) said he felt around Beaver's neck in the darkness and was able to locate the other end of the severed windpipe. "I held the windpipe in my hand and blew down into it inflating his chest. I think I had someone else pumping on his chest to massage the heart knowing I couldn't do both. I know I was breathing for him more than was required and thought if I let go of his windpipe, I'd never be able to find it again."---Navy Corpsman HM3 "Doc Mike" Shuck, 20, of Hanover, Indiana, Echo 2, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, in an attempt to save LCpl. Robert Lynn Beaver, 19, of Ashtabula, Ohio, who was mortally wounded by friendly artillery fire when a jagged piece of shrapnel hit him in the throat the night of May 22, 1970. Chapter 1.

"Don't worry about your girl back home. Jody is keeping her warm for you. He's your best friend or maybe one of those longhaired hippie war protestors 'Make Love, Not War' Types. Hell, boy, if the Marine Corps had wanted you to have a wife or girlfriend, you'd have been issued one!" (The issuing of a wife comment was originally from Lt.Gen. Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller to a PFC asking permission to marry---MDK).---Sgt. H. Brimgentoff, boot camp Drill Instructor, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, California, commenting to the author's Platoon 1104 enlisted training class October-December 1967. Chapter 3.

"Your soul may belong to Jesus, but your ass belongs to me."---Sgt. H. Brimgentoff, boot camp DI, MCRD San Diego, California, informing Platoon 1104 his unlimited authority over them October-December, 1967 during the 8-week training course. Chapter 4.

The DI got me for punishment exercises on another occasion with one of his wickedly funny one-liners when he told someone next to me, "You're so-o-o-o dumb, I'm gonna pulverize you into a fine powder and sell you for Instant Dumb Ass." I think he had a secondary career as a standup comic. My involuntary guffaw resulted in another 50 squat thrusts.---Pvt. Dan Kellum, 20, of Longview, Texas, Marine boot camp, MCRD San Diego, California. Chapter 4.

3/26 deployed outside Khe Sanh to Hill 881(S) April 7-9, 1968 in preparation for wresting Hill 881(N) from NVA troops occupying it. "I remember the battalion CO (Lt.Col. J.C. Studt) was a real stickler for us wearing our flak jackets and helmets in that heat no matter where we were at Khe Sanh," said Harold.

"We did a lot of griping about that. So when a (unit from the U.S. Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division) flew in to relieve us on the lines for the few days we would be gone, we noticed they weren't wearing any flak gear. And the first thing they did when they got off the helicopters was to start throwing a football around! We were amazed. When we returned from attacking Hill 881(N), they had lost something like 22 men at our old position."---LCpl. Harold Bridges, 22, of Longview, Texas, fire team leader in Mike Co., 3rd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment. Chapter 5.

"Clausewitz, de Jomini, Sun Tzu, Giap, Lee, Grant and many other impressive military strategists became familiar to us at Officer Candidate School and later at The Basic School at MCB Quantico, Virginia. Never again would we look at a piece of high ground without figuring how to take and hold it. In 8½ months of intensive training we learned how to be like the Greek god Zeus with thunderbolts (air, land and sea ordnance) at our beck and call. We were anointed officers and gentlemen in the United States Marine Corps, a mystical warrior organization with a rich history full of heroic hard men who lived by a stringent code of honor, brotherhood, stubbornness and chest-pounding pride. The Eagle, Globe and Anchor insignia we all earned indicated our eliteness. Woe be our enemies whom we projected would quake at our coming as Almighty God, a Marine platoon and superior firepower were on our side...precisely in that order."---2ndLt. Dan Kellum, 21, of Longview, Texas, Charlie Co.-1969 upon graduating from The Basic School at Quantico, Virginia, February 8, 1969. Chapter 6.

Sgt. Manfra deployed his team to give them a clear view of the enemy emplacements supporting the assaulting NVA troops. He exposed himself to the intense hostile fire by standing up and locating two of those enemy emplacements. Seizing one of the 3.5-inch rocket launchers, he calmly fired a rocket destroying an NVA mortar position killing four NVA soldiers. Although wounded in the leg, Manfra stood up and fired on the second target. Hit a second time the critically wounded Manfra directed his men from a dangerously exposed position to continue firing on the enemy positions pinning Mike Co. down. While seeking better cover, he was struck once more rendering him unconscious. For his actions he would receive the Silver Star.

"Sgt. Manfra was so badly hurt he was laid out with the KIAs and one Marine he knew passed by and Manfra whispered his name. That Marine alerted everyone that Manfra wasn't dead. We have been unable to find him after Vietnam," said Murray.---1stLt. John D. "J.D." Murray, 28 in 1967, Navy Cross recipient for his actions during *Operation Swift*, was the commanding officer of Mike Co., 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment fighting to hold on to The Knoll near Chau Lam (4) in the Que Son Valley, September 4-5, 1967 against an overwhelmingly large NVA force (Mike 3/5 started the day with 160-165 men and by the next morning only had 63-68 not wounded or killed); Sgt. Howard Tapscott Manfra Jr. of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was a squad leader who commanded the Rocket Team (Antitank Assault Squad). Chapter 7.

The Navy Explosive Ordnance Demolition, EOD, team was suited up from head-to-toe in protective bomb gear before venturing into the minefield. The Navy explosive experts didn't inspire confidence as we watched them try to orient their old minefield map with the terrain and seemed stumped until one of the guys reached over and rotated the map 180 degrees. They waved off a helicopter that was flying too near the deck overhead as its rotor wash might have set off other mines. Watson and I watched the harrowing recovery operation and held our breaths for their safety. After the two Cubans' bodies were brought out of the minefield, they were interred in the potter's cemetery near the leeward runway.---1stLt. Dan Kellum of Longview, Texas, executive officer, and 1stLt. Talbot Watson of Lake Charles, Louisiana, commanding officer, Golf Co., 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, U.S. Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, August/September 1969. The two Cuban Nationals had climbed over the base's 6-foot tall fence during the night seeking asylum and a new start in the United States when they walked off into the large American minefield. Chapter 8.

As I talked to Marines for this book who had made Lt.Col. Drumright's acquaintance in Vietnam in 1969-70, I discovered many of them--pilots and Recon Marines--fondly recalled their own unique "Drumright Story." He was, indeed, special and enjoyed nothing better than to mix it up with the enemy...wherever he may be. It was said an annoying border between Laos and Vietnam didn't get in his way if it stood between him and locating or destroying the VC/NVA.---Lt.Col. William Covington "Wild Bill" Drumright, 41, of Columbia, Tennessee, commanding officer of 2nd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, and later 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, in Vietnam 1969-70. Chapter 10.

"I remember going on patrol and Louie Garcia spotted the little metal 'MIN' sign as we were entering an area and we backed out of there pretty quick. At the same time we spotted a punji stick trap that still had a jungle boot like ours with blood on the end of some of the sticks."---Cpl. Ron Robison, 18, of Roswell, New Mexico, Echo 2-3, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment rifleman and later 60mm mortar squad leader, Vietnam, 1969-70, describing the Da Nang Anti-Infiltration Barrier border north of Hill 55. Chapter 14.

In Vietnam Docs out in the bush like Shuck weren't just in the "vicinity of the action" but right in the middle of it with the Marines they accompanied. For the entire Vietnam War, Navy Corpsmen sustained 688 KIAs, according to statistics calculated from Navy casualties listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund website, vvmf.org. The breakdown to KIAs by years is reflective of the heavy fighting between the warring sides. By year, the Navy Corpsmen's KIAs were '62, 1; '63, 2; '64, 0; '65, 14; '66, 78; '67, 189; '68, 247; '69, 122; '70, 30; '71, 3; and '75, 2. Twelve Docs were listed as MIA.---Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund website statistics and referring to Navy Corpsman HM3 "Doc Mike" Shuck. Chapter 16.

(The 1st Recon radioman) was sweating profusely from the moment he walked up the ramp of the insertion helicopter on into the night snoopin' and poopin' in the boondocks. He asked (Cpl. P.J.) Hanley why the hell he was sweating so much and was it natural.

"You're scared to death. That's why you're sweating so much," replied the old salt.

"Then why are you sweating?" Feldman asked defensively.

"Hell, man, I'm scared, too. You never get over being scared," said the team leader reassuring him.---LCpl. Larry Feldman, 20, of Dover, Delaware, Vietnam 1969-70. Chapter 18.

At 0100 Monday, April 6, 1970 six Viet Cong cadre entered the Ngan Cau New Life Hamlet, which is supposed to be defended by RF troops, and demanded an 18-year-old Vietnamese female nurse accompany them. When she refused, they shot her in the head killing her instantly as her father was made to watch. The old man was forcefully made to go with the VC in her place. The VC also made off with the young woman's supply of syringes and some penicillin. The Marines deployed their ambush sites around the hamlet the next night to halt further terrorism in the ville...much too late for the young nurse and her father.---Operations Journal for April 1970, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment and comment by author 1stLt. Dan Kellum, 22, in April 1970. Chapter 20.

Something that LCpl. Nick Phillips, a 21-year-old white Marine, who served with Charlie (Fraleay, a black Marine) in Vietnam, recalled spoke volumes about the Milledgeville, Georgia Marine.

"What stood out about Charlie was something he said when approached by some other blacks in the Rear (while sitting at a table drinking with his bush buddies at the EM Club). He didn't know them and they called him 'brother.' He said, 'I ain't your damn brother.'" Charlie seemed to indicate that *his* "brothers" were the multi-colored Echo 2-3 squad members--African-American, European-American, Scot-Irish-American, Hispanic-American, Italian-American, etc.--who, regardless of race or ethnic background, would be there for him as he would be there for them when the bullets or shrapnel were

flying. Real "brothers" have your back when it counts. What's in a man's heart is more important than skin color. I think he recognized this important point made often by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and that made him special.---PFC Charlie Fraley, 21, of Milledgeville, Georgia, Echo 2-3, 2/1, KIA, April 8, 1970. Chapter 21.

Cpl. Thomas W. Parker's 35-year-old remembrance of that tragic event was that LCpl. Emilio De La Garza Jr., a machine gunner, and (1stLt. James A. Beach, Echo 3 platoon commander) were approaching the cornered VC (who had dove into a pond to evade the Echo 3 Marines pursuing him) near Tra Khe (2) when he withdrew a grenade from under the water and pulled the pin, letting the spoon fly allowing the striker to hit the delay fuse arming it. The two Marines in the pond had 3-5 seconds to make a life or death decision before the grenade exploded. The enemy combatant had already made his choice...to die killing Marines.---LCpl. Emilio De La Garza, 20, of East Chicago, Indiana, Echo Co., 3rd Platoon, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, would be killed saving Lt. Beach's life and receive the Medal of Honor posthumously. Chapter 23.

The VC/NVA fired 10-12, 82mm HE mortar rounds from 2 clicks due west of the (2nd Battalion, 1st Marine's) Battalion Rear around Binh Ky at 0112 Friday (May 7, 1970) towards Camp Lauer. The battalion's reaction platoon inside the cantonment was unlucky to be near the impact of most of the incoming mortar rounds. The platoon was in the general vicinity of the COC bunker...a VC/NVA prime target. The barrage wounded 12 Marines and one ARVN. Nine were medevacked by air while four received minor injuries and were treated at 2/1's Battalion Aid Station and released.

One of those 82mm rounds nailed the battalion chapel causing considerable damage while two others fell nearby. I later heard that one mortar round crashed through the chapel roof to embed itself in front of the pulpit without exploding. Can I have one "Hallelujah?"---Operations Journal for May 1970, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, and 1stLt. Dan Kellum's "hallelujah" comment. Chapter 35.

"Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!"

"I hear something hitting the side of the (Sea Knight transport helicopter) and I immediately ask, 'What's that? What's that?'" (1stLt. Earl Masaji "Pineapple" Miyamoto, 22, of Kaneohe, Hawaii) had never taken incoming fire before so had no idea what was happening.

"We're taking fire!" came back Maj. (Neil R.) Van Leeuwen (of Manti, Utah), matter-of-factly.

"I tried to get as small as I could in my seat," he laughed thinking back on that day. The seat he was in had half-inch armor plating and would hypothetically stop most small arms fire from below. Optional wear was something called "bullet-bouncers," a honeycombed ceramic material weighing roughly 60 lbs., that could be worn to protect the pilot from his neck to waist, front and back.

Most pilots managed to use just the front only by strapping it on with Velcro and sometimes put the back portion at their feet to protect their legs and "family jewels" from incoming fire from below.---1stLt. Earl Masaji "Pineapple" Miyamoto, HMM-364 Purple Fox copilot, Charlie Ridge medevac mission, South Vietnam, September 1970. Chapter 39.

"We probably had about 1,600-1,700 men killed or wounded in about that 6- or 7-month period. We landed in the Mekong Delta in January 1967 and just kept on going after that. We operated almost all over Vietnam during that period. We spent the previous months around Hill 55 southwest of Da Nang. We lost close to 160 men killed due to mines near Hill 55 in either May or June of 1966.

"I believe every Marine who served in a rifle company at that time is a Hero, whether decorated or not. I truly believe all those young Marines, both officer and enlisted, with me in Company "D" fit that description. I do not mean awards are not important. However, they often do not tell the whole story and many who deserve them are missed. Without question, however, the real Heroes of that war are those who were killed-in-action.---Lt.Gen. William C. "Bill" Keys was a 26-year-old platoon leader with 3rd

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Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 1966; captain commanding Delta Co., 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment (nicknamed The Walking Dead for their high casualty rate fighting just below the DMZ on occasion) in Vietnam, 1966-67. Perspectives on the Vietnam War--Part II.