

Book I Introduction

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Writing about the United States Marine Corps has been a labor of love for me over the past 20-plus years as I've researched the material for *Books I and II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs."* It didn't occur to me until recently that everyone who participated in this project has given future historians an important vignette of not only the Marine Corps but American history as it pertains to the Vietnam War and the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s. The stories that are recounted are not big unit action tales of masses of men clashing but rather individual enlisted men's and junior officers' personal glimpses of what they saw and felt in combat situations.

I never ceased being amazed at the heroism of some of the Marines and Navy Corpsmen I encountered along the way and their "I-was-just-doing-the-job-they-trained-me-to-do, aw shucks" attitude. Their heroism aspect just came across magnified tenfold when they didn't boast of their accomplishments or fully realize how special they truly are. Many of them have never really talked about their experiences much less put down on paper what they did in Vietnam for one reason or another...until now.

Not all the "heroes" of the Vietnam War received medals and let me tell you when a squad loses a couple of Marines in the bush in quick succession to boobytraps, it takes "heroism" of a different stripe to just take that next step to walk out of dangerous ground. Or, when a nighttime ambush patrol en route to its ambush site is itself ambushed by the enemy stitching the darkness with AK-47 rifles' glowing green tracer rounds, it takes discipline and guts to rise up and return fire gaining fire superiority. That's heroism but it's also the Marines' job to engage and overcome with fire an enemy force. Imagine, it's a bush Marine's job to put his life on the line each and every day of a 13-month tour of duty!

I wanted the 2-book series of *American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs"* to be special books about the real training--enlisted and officer--leading up to Vietnam and the war itself. I think I accomplished that by tapping into the emotional voices of the enlisted Marines and Docs up through the frontline lieutenants and senior officers. Having been a former enlisted man who became an officer through the Enlisted Commissioning Program and served as a grunt officer in Vietnam in 1970 with H&S Co., 2nd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment briefly then Echo Co., 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment for the remainder of my 12-month tour, I spoke the special language Marines and Navy Corpsmen were attuned to and was able to get many of them to open up to me to tell their stories.

Still, I was not prepared for a different breed of Marine represented by the helicopter pilots/crewmen and those "Super Marines" called Recon. They each have their own special language and esprit de corps separate from us grunts. I had to take a crash course in helicopter lingo and immerse myself in the unique machismo it took to be a Recon Marine inserted far out in enemy-dominated terrain seven men at a time left on their own to "snoop and poop" without detection for days at a time. My comfort zone in Nam was being surrounded in the bush by no less than 35 Marines and a "Doc" or two in Echo Co.'s 1st Platoon with mortars, artillery or air support at my fingertips over the PRC-25 radio. Echo's 2nd and 3rd Platoons nearby increased that feeling of security for my Echo 1 boys and me.

I doff my old camouflaged Marine steel helmet to the helicopter pilots, especially those I was in contact with through the USMC Combat Helicopter Association over the years. They had the patience to explain to this earth-bound Marine their profession and gave me a rudimentary idea of what goes on in a cockpit. The same patience was shown by many Recon Marines who attempted to describe what it was like being inserted or extracted from hot landing zones. Also, how they were able to hump over 100 lbs. of food, ammo, explosives and weapons to go those many days in the bush...and avoid detection. And once discovered by the enemy, they managed to engage, escape and evade a much larger enemy force out to annihilate them.

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

Initially the book was centered around my experiences during 3½ years in the U.S. Marine Corps and the stories of 21 Marines and Docs as well as one special civilian having fought in his own war in World War II. All are named in the opening Dedication. As my research uncovered other heroic deeds that begged to be told, it became like a snowball rolling downhill and expanded exponentially to either singling out or mentioning in *Book I*: 490 Marines (446 grunts/Recon/attachments, 44 Marine Air Wing), 26 Navy Corpsmen called "Docs" in the bush, four U.S. Navy doctors operating out of a Battalion Aid Station, 17 U.S. Army, seven U.S. Navy and two U.S. Air Force personnel for a grand total of 546 men.

Books I and *II* combined include the names (rank, ages and hometowns when possible) of 1,019 Marines, 42 Navy Corpsmen, six U.S. Navy doctors, 39 U.S. Army, 22 U.S. Navy, nine U.S. Air Force and one State Department personnel. Taking into account 29 men are in both books, my "snowball epic" comes to 1,109 military personnel named in both books. Did I mention I liked to include names in my combat stories when I could find them and give credit where credit is due? The Marines and Navy Corpsmen interviewed also cited the young men's names fighting alongside them. I tried to name as many Marines as I could in group photos at various stages of my training as well as those I served with in Vietnam. History might have overlooked them as minor bit players during the Vietnam War era, but to me no one who went through the Spartan atmosphere of Marine Corps training, fought or served in Vietnam was "minor" and deserves mentioning in this small recounting of the Vietnam War.

My goal in this book was to give the reader a vicarious feeling of having worn our bleached white by the sun and rotting off our feet jungle boots, dressed in shades of green camouflage jacket and trousers (for you civilians that's a long-sleeved shirt or green t-shirt and cargo pants) from head to toe. A green towel was wrapped around our necks to wipe the sweat constantly pouring off our faces in the extreme tropical heat and a metal canteen (plastic canteens heated up and gave water a funky taste) full of fresh water hung off our web belt. We grunts were weighed down by a torn, well-worn questionable life-saving flak jacket stained with what suspiciously appeared to be its former wearer's blood. Protective head gear was a heat-retentive steel helmet covered in shades of green camouflage cloth/floppy camouflage bush cover for the Recon guys. Carrying the all-important first aid pouch, M-26 baseball grenades, extra M-16 magazines and the lightweight M-16 rifle that had a propensity to jam at the worst possible moments, such as firefights, when introduced to the combat zone in March and April 1967 (replacing the M-14 rifle) and in isolated cases thereafter, and you're in our world 1965-71. Welcome to the Vietnam War where 1 in 5.9 Marines who served in-country were either killed or wounded. Marines, in turn, exacted a much, much worse killed-in-action/wounded-in-action licking on their enemy.

As a special feature of this book, I have included some of the maps we used in Vietnam with all the grid lines depicting specific points where Marine activities occurred. The actual map coordinates of most the activities are shown by a footnote numeral followed by a letter of the alphabet and referred to in the Footnote section under the respective chapter. Not all the activities are depicted on the maps but a fair amount are cited in that section, i.e., Cam Ne (6).^{1A} Map Reading 101 is simple. Basically the two numbers at the front end of a six-number map coordinate, i.e., (1. Dai Loc map, Sheet 6640 IV: A. AT976683), AT97 are the numbers marked on the map left to right or east and west. The fourth and fifth numbers, 68, are the numbers running up and down the map, north and south. Where AT97 and 68 intersect on the map will be the 1,000 meter grid square you're working with. Each of the numbers in the third and sixth slots equal 100 meters or 1/10th of a 1,000 meter grid line. AT976 would be 600 meters from the left corner of the intersecting map coordinates moving east or to the right on the 97 grid line. The 3 or sixth number in my example represents how many meters north or up you go, 300 meters on the 68 grid line, after moving to the right 600 meters, hence, AT976683. Those coordinates put you on the (6) of the Cam Ne (6) on the Dai Loc map.

A few Marines are not identified by their real names in these books for various reasons---their given names are either unknown to me since nicknames were generally used or have been omitted to preserve their privacy. Names will be shown with an asterisk following first usage to let the reader know this is a fictitious name, i.e., Hawkes*.

An additional visual dimension to this book includes color combat maps, color photos, research background information, U.S. military, RVN and enemy units, a listing of individuals, excerpts from the book and biographical information on some of the interviewees on my www.MichaelDanKellum.com website. I hope to bring these brave young warriors to the attention of a worldwide audience through the Internet.

During the Vietnam War, a parallel conflict was going on in our country involving the Civil Rights Movement. I included various stories and facts and figures to try and explain the pressures on our African-American Marines serving in time of war and, especially in Vietnam when inequalities existed for them at home. This underlying storyline appears in various places throughout *Book I* and fulfills a promise to PFC Charlie Fraley, a black Marine I knew, who was killed in Vietnam. He was my brother as are all Marines of all races during my service in the Marine Corps and thereafter.

At the beginning and end of *Books I* and *II*, I took some excerpts from my interviews and pulled comments made on the war from a few publications. I also asked other individuals--Marine enlisted men and officers (grunts, Recon and pilots), Navy Corpsmen, war correspondents, etc.--to give me their heartfelt feelings in a section I titled "Perspectives on the Vietnam War."

What I got back are personal views that are basically the heart and soul of what I set out to write...the Vietnam War from various perspectives. In "Perspectives" U.S. Sen. James H. Webb Jr., a former Marine platoon commander and commanding officer of Delta Co., 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, sets the tone with what a "hero" is. Cpl. Don Youmans, a squad leader in 1st Platoon, Echo Co., 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, recalled Marine Corps training to be tough and thorough but you can't teach the heroism it took for a Marine to sacrifice his life for his fellow Marines. Navy Corpsman HM3 Sam Lyles laments having a mortally wounded Marine die in his arms and wonders if there wasn't something more he could've done to save him. 1stLt. Doug Orahoad, HMM-364 Purple Fox Sea Knight helicopter pilot, makes the sincere comment that he loved the grunts and the warm feeling it gave him to bring them back to base safe and sound. These statements and others tell the real story of the Vietnam War.

Marines and Navy Corpsmen whom I've been working with on both these books through the years have shared my passion/obsession to tell their stories and that of the ones they left behind. Their emotions are still raw in some cases after all these years in talking or emailing back and forth with me about their youth spent in a vicious war long, long ago. It's understandable that the Vietnam War is well beyond the comprehension of the average American's experience.

Over time these books have evolved from being "my" books to "our" books..."our" stories. Also, the emotion and honesty of interviewees to let me glimpse a frightening period of their lives has been their special gift to me. I've tried to put their combat recounting down exactly how they told them and more often than not just had to get out of the way and let them tell their traumatic remembrances without my interfering input. To do otherwise would be to betray their trust in me.

So, this is "our" stories about WAR. When Marines arrived in Southeast Asia, we called our clash with Communist North Vietnamese and Viet Cong guerrillas the Vietnam War. Eleven years prior to our arrival in force the French called their attempt to keep all of Vietnam as one of their colonies the French Indochina War. The Communist Vietnamese in the north simplified the two separate wars by just calling the entire conflict from the 1940s until 1975 the Indochina War. To them it was all one continuous struggle to oust the "round eyes" from Vietnam, militarily crush the Republic of Vietnam government and unite both North and South Vietnam into one Communist country. They accomplished this in 1975 by defeating the RVN armed forces not long after the Southeast Treaty Organization, SEATO, troops pulled out.

As I go to press in 2011, U.S. troops are continuing to be involved since 2003 in a WAR of a different stripe in far-off Iraq and Afghanistan. Gradual troop withdrawals are tentatively set to begin later in 2011. Marines and their Docs are still being depended upon to fight this country's battles in distant climes. Like all wars, present one included, the war I relate to is not pretty and sometimes it makes you want to cry when good men die before their time...as many of the men involved with this large accumulation of narratives shed tears over buddies killed in Vietnam. These books honor those young men---Marines and

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

Navy Corpsmen as well as those from the other U.S. military services---and is meant to keep their memories alive...FOREVER.

Semper Fi,
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