

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

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What follows are random outtakes from *Book II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs"* to give you a good idea of the emotional narratives told by Marines and Navy Corpsmen involved in combat in the Vietnam War.

"In my job there were always people eagerly waiting for me. They waited hidden, heavily armed and ready to kill. Like every other day of the month, I got up about 0400 in the morning, dressed, tried to hold down my breakfast and act calm in front of the other pilots."---Col. Walter R. "Walt" Ledbetter Jr., 40 in 1970 from Dallas, Texas. He was a lieutenant colonel serving as the pilot flight leader and CO of HMM-263 Peachbush, whose Sea Knight transport helicopters carried the Marines into battle as part of Kingfisher missions. Chapter 1.

"I looked down at the Marine working on my legs and asked, 'How are my legs?' to which he replied, 'Don't worry about them...they're gone.'" West told the Marine on top of him to go check on the lieutenant and he was gone before he could finish his sentence...

"As a survivor of that mission, it is my responsibility to share the unbelievable courage and bravery I witnessed that day. I was surrounded by heroes."---LCpl. Ed West, an 18-year-old radioman for the Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) with only 45 days in-country accompanied 1stLt. Bruce Cruickshank, a 24-year-old A-4 Skyhawk pilot calling in air support for Alpha Co., 1/1. Both men would lose their legs to a mine explosion in a minefield. Two Marines and a Doc were killed and altogether 12 Marines wounded out of two squads north of Hill 55 while engaging NVA troops on January 31, 1970. Chapter 1.

Jeanne gave birth to a daughter, Christine, on April 13 while Tony was on Hill 146. Since he was on patrol from April 2 until his death April 16, it was bantered about by some of his TBS platoon mates that he may not have been told of her birth. It saddened us all to think that he might have died without ever knowing of his daughter being born...

...PFCs Tom Ruud, (20 in 1969 from Gurnee, Illinois) and Bob Hungate (18 in 1969 from Sidney, Ohio) confirmed that Tony had received word of his daughter's birth prior to his last patrol. In celebration of the event Team Nail Brush had a "Mad Minute" by firing off their M-16s in a stream of red tracer rounds, lit up the night with multi-colored pop flares and threw grenades off Hill 146 from their perimeter bunker positions. Tony's Marines knew how to make the arrival of his firstborn reverberate in the Que Son Mountains to friend and foe alike.---2ndLt. Tony "Buddy" Kupka, 22, of Kensington, Maryland, a 1st Recon platoon leader, and PFC Karl Culp, 18, of Fort Worth, Texas were killed by two tripped boobytraps involving two separate teams as part of Team Nail Brush coming down off Hill 146 the night of April 16, 1969 to check out enemy activity in the villes below. Kupka would die just hours after hearing his wife, Jeanne, gave birth to their firstborn daughter, Christine. Kupka's story is one of nine told about Marine officers KIA in Vietnam out of the author's Charlie Co.-1969 Basic School class at Quantico. Chapter 2.

"I was walking behind about 30 CIDGs (Civilian Indigenous Defense Group personnel--Montagnards, Nungs, Vietnamese, etc.) so I was pretty relaxed," said Plunkett. His "relaxation" was short-lived. As they clambered up out of the creek onto a path, the enemy detonated two 82mm mortar rounds with a napalm canister attached. The area was covered with numerous toepoppers (a boobytrap consisting of a bullet or

shotgun shell set off by a foot pushing it down onto a nail or perhaps a small amount of C-4 plastique explosive with a blasting cap embedded in it that explodes when a nail is stepped on driving it into the blasting cap) and homemade mines, which the CIDGs tripped trying to escape.

In the ensuing shrapnel-flavored conflagration, one CIDG was KIA, one U.S. Army Special Forces WIA, one Marine (Plunkett) lightly WIA and 16 CIDGs WIA.

The Special Forces report notes the uninjured CIDGs were not helping their comrades who were injured and it took a while to secure an LZ. Medevacs ran from 1430-1600 that afternoon.---Cpl. Michael S. "Steve" Plunkett, 20, of Fort Worth, Texas was part of 1st Recon's 6-man Team Turf Club March 6-10, 1970 attempting to recover the bodies of 2ndLt. David Skibbe and Capt. LaVoy Don "Mac" McVey. Chapter 5.

Cpl. Feldman from 1st Recon recalled the Sea Knight helicopter that had tried to extract Team Chili Pepper returned later that night to Camp Reasoner's LZ 401 with the (flexible aluminum) ladder hit by the falling tree. As it approached the LZ, the aircraft turned its landing lights on to set the long ladder down on the LZ so it could be disengaged from underneath the Sea Knight. The Recon Marines at the LZ and on the hillside above the LZ, as was their habit, came out to see the team come in and to make sure they were okay. All they saw was the spooky sight of no Team Chili Pepper Marines snap linked onto the ladder but rather two M-16 rifles dangling from it spotlighted by the helicopter's landing lights in the darkness...an ominous sign that the team was in deep trouble out in the Que Son Mountains.---Cpl. Larry Feldman, 20, of Dover, Delaware, relating as to what he saw back at Camp Reasoner following a freak accident that befell 1st Recon's Team Chili Pepper in the Que Son Mountains September 1, 1970 when an unstable tree fell over from the tornadic wind produced by a hovering Sea Knight scraping all but one Marine off the ladder killing two and injuring three others of the 7-man patrol. Chapter 8.

"There's an unwritten (Recon) rule that if one man goes down a rappelling rope to the ground from a hovering Sea Knight...everyone goes." SSgt. John Hare, 33, of Cayce, South Carolina, relating why his best friend Gy.Sgt. Terry Moore, 31, of Wayne, Michigan, rappelled from a Sea Knight into the darkness September 1, 1970 weaponless after his extract officer accidentally dislodged his grease gun off his shoulder pointing out green tracer fire on the ground aimed at the Sea Knight. He joined three other men of Team War Cloud Mission Impossible on the deck who accidentally rappelled into the middle of an estimated NVA regiment falling 4 clicks short of their targeted area looking to recover the beleaguered Team Chili Pepper. Chapter 8.

While Drumright was still CO of 2/26 he complained to a visiting Maj.Gen. Edwin B. Wheeler about a U.S. Army Brigade being helilifted to a mountain on the border with Laos. "It seemed we never learn our lesson. We can't shoot across the border but the NVA put their long range artillery and mortars there just across the border and shoot at us from Laos all day. I told him that Marines weren't made to fight from a hole. They were made to fight in the open. I thought putting a Brigade on the border like that or putting Marines in a big bowl like Khe Sanh was the dumbest idea I'd ever heard..."---Lt.Col. William Covington "Wild Bill" Drumright, 41, of Columbia, Tennessee, CO of 2nd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment before taking over 1st Reconnaissance Battalion in January 1970. Chapter 9.

Without a doubt, I have always felt I owed Dr. Bernard B. Fall a debt of gratitude for the two books he wrote that I read before embarking for Vietnam...*Street Without Joy* and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*. I'm sure other officers from all the U.S. military services had the same special feeling of having been prepared for what we were about to encounter in Vietnam through the vicarious exposure his writing gave us of the French Indochina War. All we had to do was substitute "American"

and "VC/NVA" for "French" and "Viet Minh" and our war was strikingly similar to their war.---1stLt. Dan Kellum, 22, of Longview, Texas, H&S Co., served with 2nd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment and later Echo Co. 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment in 1970 in Vietnam, explaining why he devoted a full chapter to Dr. Bernard Fall, who was considered the premier authority on the French Indochina and Vietnam Wars. Dr. Fall was killed February 21, 1967 while on yet another book research trip embedded with 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment on the Street Without Joy which he wrote so much about. Chapter 10.

"We were finding mines--bouncing betties and toepoppers--all over the place. I even saw punji sticks," said PFC William J. "Weid" Weidenbacher, 25, of Scotch Plains, New Jersey, who was the Alpha Co. (1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment) field clerk responsible for writing up the casualties. "We were approaching a wide stream when either Fall stepped on or someone command-detonated a bouncing betty (M16 type reported in the official reports) with extra explosives in it. The only reason I say it might have been command-detonated was that gooks were in holes inside our perimeter as part of an ambush."

"I watched as (Dr. Fall) and the gunny started down a major dike towards 'The Street.' I turned around and in about 2 minutes heard a loud explosion. I saw what I believed was Dr. Fall's body flying up in the air at the intersection of 'The Street' and the dike."---1stLt. Dave Marshall, 25, of Chelmsford, Massachusetts, the Forward Air Control, FAC officer, explaining how a huge mine killed Dr. Fall and two other Marines, Gy.Sgt. Byron Grant Highland, 33, of Detroit, Michigan, and an unnamed Alpha Co., 1/9 Marine died of wounds, and three other Marines were wounded, SSgt. Edward D. "Ed" Grantham, Cpl. Cal Guthrie and one unnamed Alpha Co. Marine. Chapter 10.

On or about August 12, 1965, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, CG, MAC-V, accompanied by military dignitaries and war correspondents, flew by helicopter to the U.S. Army's Special Forces camp at Duc Co on the Vietnam-Cambodian border in part to congratulate Marine Maj. Bill Leftwich Jr., Vietnamese Marine Brigade advisor, for routing an NVA regiment which had laid siege to the camp. Westy stated that Leftwich was "the best advisor in Vietnam." His statement was also anchored on Maj. Leftwich's heroism on March 9, 1965 which earned him a Navy Cross at Hoai An with the VNMC as they lifted the siege of that district town as well.---Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Commanding General, MAC-V, lauding Maj. William Groom "Bill" Leftwich Jr., 39, of Germantown, Tennessee, for his role as an advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Brigade for lifting the enemy's siege of Hoai An and the Special Forces' camp at Duc Co. Chapter 11.

Moving up the 70-degree incline to the 600 meter (1,968-foot) level near the crash site after a 2 hour climb, Pu parted some bushes and saw one of the Rush Act team members that he knew well just ahead staring at him. Pu put his finger to his lips to let the Marine know he should remain quiet. Circling the spot where he last saw the Marine, he came up on his flank and noted his gaze straight ahead was unchanged.

The Marine had died with his eyes open and unseeing. He was cut in half by either the nylon (SPIE) strap or as he was being pulled through the trees (by the Sea Knight helicopter flying too close to the mountain). What Pu was seeing was only the young man's upper torso.---SSgt. Rodney H. "Rod" or "Pu" Pupuhi, 33 in 1970, of Honolulu, Hawaii, walking point for 1st Recon's Team Mission Impossible up the side of Hill 800 in the Que Son Mountains, recalled the first member of 7-man Team Rush Act he came across from the air crash of a Peachbush HMM-263 aircraft that killed 15 men November 18, 1970. Chapter 15.

...“The evening of the day Leftwich was lost but before the aircraft was found, the eligible lieutenant colonels were already lobbying to get the Recon job. The day he was lost I also met about everyone of a full bird's rank and above at Division who appeared to have both love and admiration for the man. His reputation was about as good as it gets with many of the colonels saying that Leftwich had been on track to becoming Commandant.”---1stLt. Bill Valentino, 25 in 1970 of Albany, New York, Air Liaison Officer/Forward Air Controller (ALO/FAC) with 1st Recon, noted the gathering of officers at 1st Marine Division's Headquarters November 18, 1970 and their vying to replace Lt.Col. Bill Leftwich Jr. at 1st Reconnaissance Battalion as well as their laudatory remarks about him. Chapter 15.

1stLt. Robinson noted that it seemed like the war stopped when the news got out that War Cloud 6, Leftwich, had been killed in that air crash. “I remember the troops were crying. I was in Da Nang with Maj. Grinalds, Maj. Monahan and Col. Kelley trying to eulogize Leftwich. They were trying to find one thing wrong with him. They couldn't. Finally, Grinalds said, ‘He was the perfect leader.’”---1stLt. Gil Robinson, 2/1's S-2 (Intelligence) officer in 1970, describing his conversations with Maj. John S. Grinalds, 2/1's S-3 (Operations) officer; Maj. Phil Monahan, 1st Marine Regiment's S-3, and Col. Paul X. Kelley, 1st Marine Regiment's CO, discussing Lt.Col. Bill Leftwich Jr.'s untimely death November 18, 1970. Chapter 15.

“Leftwich was the very best and Ross Perot pursued a fitting tribute to him by sponsoring the *Leftwich Trophy* for leadership and encouraging the Navy to name a destroyer after him,” recalled Maj.Gen. Grinalds.

Perot commissioned Dr. Felix Weihs de Weldon, the sculptor of the magnificent towering Marine Corps War Memorial, also called the Iwo Jima Memorial, adjacent to Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, to create the *Leftwich Trophy*. The 2x2-foot trophy was an extremely heavy bronze miniature of the colonel that commemorates the service and leadership of Marine captains in Lt.Col. Leftwich's tradition.---Ross Perot, a billionaire Texan who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1953 with Lt.Col. Bill Leftwich, created the annual *Leftwich Trophy* award to the most outstanding Marine Corps captain beginning in 1979. Maj.Gen. John S. Grinalds, USMC (Ret.), praised Perot for his recognizing Leftwich each year through the H. Ross Perot Foundation's sponsored trophy presentation. Chapter 16.

With the passing of Bill Leftwich Jr., the honors and accolades came from all quarters of the country. The *USS Leftwich*, a 563-foot Spruance class multi-mission destroyer was christened in his honor at the Pascagoula, Mississippi Naval Yard on May 27, 1978. Jane did the honors by breaking a champagne bottle on the ship's bow as Mattie and Bill's sons, Bill and Scott, looked on.⁶ Perot indicated that John Warner had a hand in getting the ship named for Bill Leftwich.---Jane Leftwich Michaels was on hand to christen the *USS Leftwich* along with the colonel's sons and mother, Mattie. Chapter 16.

Col. Les Williams told me he stopped wearing his uniform off base in the '60s and '70s as it attracted spit and anti-war confrontations. It was a strange, hostile world we all returned to in 1971.

The Peachbush pilot said he carried around in his memory the medevac of a black Marine north of the Que Son Mountains in the spring of 1970 that had always made him wonder how this special casualty made out after he was dropped off at 1st Med. "I picked him up and he had lost a leg to a mine. He was brought on board on a stretcher and he yelled for me to hurry because 'he wanted to live.' If I could find that Marine, I would love to talk to him and perhaps both of us could put things behind us. Isn't it amazing how many of these stories there are? And how the 'mission' seemed to drive us to help these Marines then get onto the next one?"---1stLt. Les Williams, 25 in 1970, HMM-263 Peachbush pilot, from Lakewood, Colorado, who would retire as a colonel and commanded Recon Marines before leaving the Marine Corps and worked in law enforcement as a second career. Epilogue.

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"The men and women who came home from Iraq were said to be 'conquering heroes.' But if you ask them if they're 'heroes,' they'll tell you that the 'heroes' died in the sand over there. In our time the 'heroes' died in the jungle. In World War II their 'heroes' died everywhere. In Korea the 'heroes' froze in the bitter cold. A lot of us don't like the term 'hero.' I don't. There are too many 'heroes' nowadays.

"A fighting man is just a normal man who chose to fight for his country or his God or his service outfit. He chose to do it. He didn't run and he willingly went. After he got there, he and the men he bonded with fought for each other."---Cpl. Bob Morris, 20, of St. Petersburg, Florida, a squad radioman (RTO) with India Co., 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment; transferred to 1st Recon where he was a point man then Team Cayenne team leader, made 25 patrols, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. Perspectives on the Vietnam War--Part II.

"Many of my friends that I grew up with joined the Marines. Most served in Vietnam long before I did. They, along with the Marines that I served alongside with in Vietnam, did this voluntarily for a couple of reasons: to be a part of the world's greatest fighting force and more importantly, because we all felt that we owed a debt to our country."---Sgt. John D. "J.D." Barber, 21 in 1970, of Weymouth, Massachusetts served in Vietnam in 1970-71, and was a Sea Knight crew chief, Peachbush HMM-263, Marine Air Group-16, 1st Marine Air Wing. He is also a board member of USMC Combat Helicopter Pilots Association and past president, 2001-2007. Perspectives on the Vietnam War--Part II.