

VIETNAM SERVICE

C. David Bethurum

After completing communications school, escape and evasion, and guerrilla warfare training at Camp Pendleton, California, I completed the Advanced Guerrilla Warfare School at Camp Hansen, Okinawa.

From there, I was assigned to the 3rd Marine Division, 3rd Shore Party Battalion, Communications Platoon, Da Nang, Republic of South Vietnam (I Corps). Third Shore Party was a support unit. As a member of the fourteen-man Comm Platoon, our mission was to temporarily replace killed or injured communicators throughout the 3rd Marine Division's area of operation. We would be relieved when a permanent replacement was assigned.

I was temporarily transferred to the 9th Marine Regiment's Reconnaissance Company, where I received OJT in scouting and forward observation. I returned to Shore Party Battalion, then located at Dong Ha Combat Base, near the Demilitarized Zone. From there, I would deploy wherever and with whomever assigned for periods of one to four weeks or more.

As a Forward Observer/Scout (FO) I was responsible for advising strategic engagement options for infantry groups, and locating enemy positions for artillery and air strike interventions. I detected, monitored, and communicated troop and supply movements along the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' in Laos and North Vietnam.

As a general practice, when one of our platoon's members had around thirty days remaining before returning to CONUS, he was assigned to 'Charlie Company' located at the isolated Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB). Throughout 1967, Khe Sanh was a relatively calm and secure location. It was a good place to rest and recoup from a year of the stress of combat and miserable living conditions.

I was reassigned to the III Marine Amphibious Force (3rd MAF) at KSCB during the second week in January 1968, to complete my Vietnam Service. But, as providence would dictate, the Dinks launched the 1968 Tet Offensive the third week in January.

We were surrounded and incessantly attacked by North Vietnamese ground, mortar, rocket and artillery units. Ground forces repeatedly attempted to breach our perimeter with human waves.

Normal resupply was almost nonexistent. Any aircraft attempting to land at KSCB was immediately hit and destroyed. Air crews began deploying C-rations and ammunition using 'LAPE' - Low Altitude Parachute Extraction, where a C-130 or C-124 aircraft would come close to touching the runway, then eject the load via parachute just a few feet above the deck.

Naturally, the pallets and banding material would be destroyed and the runway littered with *goodies*. My 'hole mates' and I would cut cards to see who would run for the scattered boxes of food and ammo.

I was finally able to leave Khe Sanh the second week in April following Operation Pegasus. By that time I had missed my flight date and had to be put back on the rotation roster. The 3rd Shore Party First Sergeant advised me that with half a second tour (six months for the Marines) gone, I'd be better off to stay for a complete second tour in hopes of an early discharge.

He was right. When I got back to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, I was offered an early discharge. I took it.

Obviously my experiences at KSCB remain the most vivid memories of my Vietnam Service.

Except for a two month period, I served under the same Commanding General during my entire service with the Marine Corps. Rathvon McClure Thompkins was the Commanding Officer at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina, where I went to Boot Camp. He was promoted to Major General and by the time I was assigned to the 3rd Marine Division, he was the Commanding Officer.

Brigadier General Lowell English was Major General Thompkins' Assistant Commander. He had an interesting summation of Khe Sanh:

"When you're at Khe Sanh, you're not really anywhere. You could lose it and you really haven't lost a damn thing."

I suppose that's the nature of war.