



38TH OFFICER CANDIDATE COURSE AND BASIC CLASS 3-66 PARTICIPATION IN THE KHE SANH HILL FIGHTS / OPERATION BEACON STAR (PHASE II)

Dave Mellon

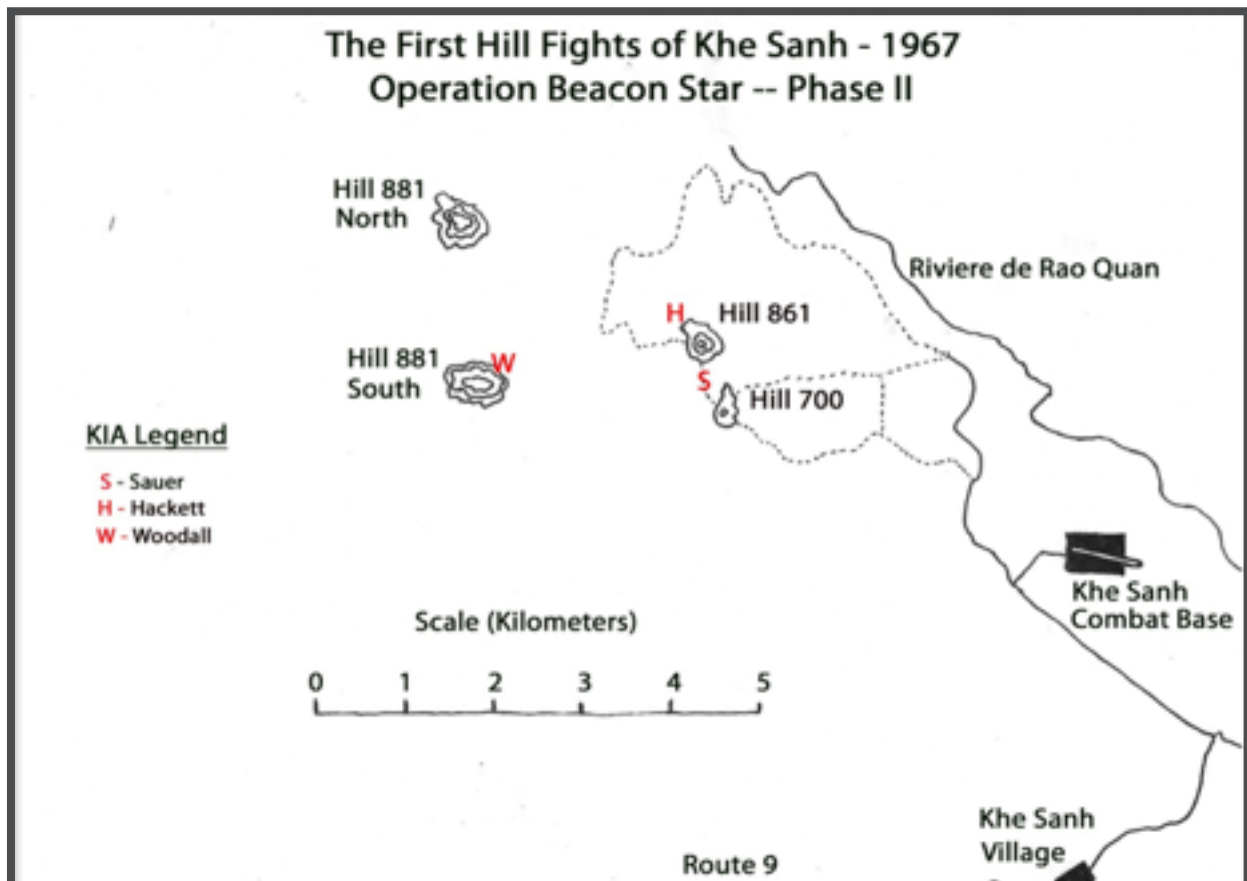
Our 2017 Class Reunion was held in San Antonio, Texas. The Memorial Service on Friday, October 13, 2017 was held at the San Antonio Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the City's Veterans Memorial Plaza, a brief walk from our host hotel, the El Tropicano . The focus of San Antonio's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a three times life size statue of a scene Marine Combat Artist Austin Deuel witnessed on April 30, 1967 during the assault on Hill 881 South. The scene was initially a sketch that Deuel made into a desk top bronze. The piece titled "Hill 881 South" was purchased by John Baines, a San Antonio real estate broker and developer, who founded and raised the funds for the installation of the statue as the centerpiece of San Antonio's Vietnam Memorial. The statue is a singular moment in a series of battles that Marines fought with North Vietnamese Army regulars. The brutal battles took place between April 24, 1967 and May 12, 1967. Hill 881 South, located approximately 7.5 kilometers northwest of the Khe Sanh Combat Base, was one of the three dominant terrain features astride the infiltration route from the northwest. The others were Hill 881 North, 2 kilometers to the north of Hill 881 South, and Hill 861, which was approximately 5.5 kilometers from the Combat Base. Cumulatively, the battles became known as "The Khe Sanh Hill Fights" or "Operation Beacon Star (Phase II)".



Background:

The site of what became known to Marines as the Khe Sanh Combat Base was originally occupied by U. S. Special Forces (Green Berets) as a base for Civilian Irregular Defense Group (indigenous) troops in August

of 1962. It was intended to stop infiltration of NVA troops into South Vietnam from Laos. The Base was located in the northwest corner of South Vietnam approximately 18 kilometers east of the Laotian border and 28 kilometers south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). "Operation Virginia" was conducted in the area by the Marines of 1/1 in April of 1966 with little contact. Under pressure from General Westmoreland, Lt Gen Walt (IIIMAF) agreed to station an infantry battalion at Khe Sanh. Accordingly, during the summer of 1966 Seabees installed matting to convert the dirt airstrip to an all-weather capability. On 29 September 1966, Marines took up permanent residence when 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines moved in and the Special Force Camp displaced to Lang Vei, approximate 9 kilometers to the southwest to resume their surveillance and counter-infiltration activities. During late 1966, while 1/3 and Force Reconnaissance patrols were occasional observing an NVA presence and engaging in brief firefights with elements of the NVA 325C Division, the NVA were generally using this period to build fortified positions on the dominant terrain features and build up their logistical supplies. Force Reconnaissance would remain in place until late March of 1967, when the recon mission was passed to Alpha Company of the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion. The NVA during this period tended to avoid contact as much as possible, while they were engaged in these logistical tasks, except when Marine activities jeopardized their work. As III MAF had little interest in tying up a full battalion of Marines in that isolated corner of South Vietnam, and were only manning it to satisfy General Westmoreland, on February 5, 1967 a single company, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was tasked with assuming responsibility for the security of the Khe Sanh Combat Base from 1/3. Bravo 1/9 was supplemented in the security mission for 20 days in March, when Echo Company 2/9 joined them and both companies worked the hills from March 7 – 27. During February and March, there were a couple of substantial engagements between elements of Bravo 1/9 and the NVA. On February 25th, a patrol from 2/B/1/9 encountered a mortar section and their security attempting to get close enough to the Combat Base to put 82mm mortar fire on the runway and helicopter revetments. Later on March 16th, two platoons, one from Echo 2/9 and



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the other from Bravo 1/9 engaged NVA on Hill 861 with a loss of 19 USMC KIA. As the number of contacts with the NVA by Bravo 1/9 and recon Marines increased, Brig Gen Mike Ryan, Assistant Commander of 3rd Marine Division, visited Khe Sanh regularly and worked to get additional supporting arms on station. Brig Gen Ryan's efforts were responsible for getting a light section (2 Ontos) from 3rd Anti-Tank Battalion to the Combat Base. Commanding the light section from Alpha Company that arrived by C-130 on March 27th was our Classmate, 1st Lt Sauer. Generally, during the February to April period in 1967, the NVA avoided contact and engaged only when Marine patrols stumbled on NVA activity or recon attempted insertions close to the positions the NVA were constructing. All that ended on April 24, 1967.

Order of Battle:

The order of battle for the "Hill Fights" that would ensue was composed primarily of the following units:

Marines:

Bravo Company, First Battalion, Ninth Marines was the resident security element for the Khe Sanh Combat Base and was first to engage the NVA.

Third Battalion, Third Marines were the first on the scene and it was a composite battalion finally composed of:

- Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Third Marines
- Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Ninth Marine
- Mike Company, Third Battalion, Third Marines
- Mike Company, Third Battalion, Ninth Marine

Second Battalion, Third Marines was the last unit to join the fight was comprised of its four organic Companies:

- Echo Company
- Foxtrot Company
- Golf Company
- Hotel Company

Foxtrot Battery (Reinforced), Second Battalion, Twelfth Marines was the resident artillery support at the Combat Base. Its primary mission was fire support for 3/3. It was comprised of the following:

- 6 – 105mm howitzers
- 2 – 155mm howitzers
- 3 – 4.2 inch mortars

Bravo Battery, Second Battalion, Twelfth Marines was the Special Landing Force artillery component and was deployed to Khe Sanh once the ground component, Second Battalion, Third Marines was also committed to the fight. Once in place, it supported 2/3 during the "Hill Fights". It was comprised of the following:

- 6 – 105mm howitzers
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North Vietnamese Army:

18th Regiment, 325C Division – suffered heavy casualties during the period April 24 and May 1 and retired from the field.

95th Regiment, 325C Division – replaced the 18th Regiment and was the opposing force from May 1 through May 12.

Classmates:

We had seven Classmates participate in this series of brutal engagement at close quarters, four would survive:

Joe McDavid – The Artillery Liaison Officer from Charlie Battery, 1/12 attached to 3/3. McDavid became the 3/3 Artillery Operations and Planning Officer in February of 1967. McDavid would serve in that capacity until May 2, 1967. He was relieved to go on R&R immediately after the conquest of Hill 881 South.

Dave Rogers – An Artillery Forward Observer with Charlie Battery, 1/12 attached to Mike Company, 3/3, who played a crucial role in the capture of Hill 881 South. In joining Mike 3/3 in early April of 1967, Rogers took over a billet previously filled by Classmate Joe McDavid. In a similar manner, on May 2nd he would replace McDavid as the 3/3 Acting Artillery Liaison Officer for the remaining 11 days of the Hill Fights, while McDavid went on R&R.

Jack Schworm – The Platoon Commander of First Platoon, Foxtrot Company, 2/3, who played a crucial role in the capture of Hill 881 North on May 5th and the battle of Lang Xoa on May 9th.

Howell Wright – The Intelligence Officer (S-2) for 3/9, who led an expanded scout section tasked with stopping the egress of NVA soldiers from Hill 881 South on May 1st.

Our Class would lose three fine young Marine Officers during the “Hill Fights”:

1stLt Philip H. Sauer – The Platoon Commander, 2nd Platoon, Alpha Company, 3rd Anti-Tank Battalion (an Ontos unit), who died just south of the summit of Hill 861 (see map above).

1stLt David S. Hackett – The Executive Officer, Hotel Company, 2/3, who was killed in a draw approximately 1 kilometer northwest of the summit of Hill 861 (see map above).

1stLt John B. Woodall – The Platoon Commander, First Platoon, Kilo Company 3/9, who died just east of the summit of Hill 881 South (see map above).

This narrative is being undertaken to record for posterity the progression of the “Fights”, the roles our Classmates played and their heroic actions.

1st Lt Philip H. Sauer

On April 24, 1967, Bravo Company 1/9 had two of its platoons maneuvering north and west of Hill 861. The platoons were tasked with checking out a cave complex that recon had identified northwest of Hill 861. To provide indirect fire support to the 1st and 3rd platoons while they carried out their mission, an infantry
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squad from 2nd Platoon led by the platoon commander and reinforced with an artillery Forward Observer team, two 81mm mortars, a 60mm mortar and an M-60 machine gun team set out to establish a fire support position approximately 1 kilometer south of the summit of Hill 861. Lt Sauer, who had arrived at Khe Sanh on March 27th with two of his Ontos, got permission to accompany the patrol. Lt Sauer was intent on observing the terrain and determining whether or not his Ontos could maneuver in the hills outside the wire of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. The 30 Marines set up on a knob known as Hill 700. While the mortars were being set up, the 2nd platoon commander dispatched the artillery Forward Observer team along with two infantrymen for security to the top of Hill 861 to create an Observation Post and see if they could observe the two Bravo Company platoons operating northwest of Hill 861 and be in position to call in artillery and mortar fire missions in the event the platoons encountered NVA forces. Lt Sauer elected to accompany the FO team to see if his Ontos could further navigate the rest of the climb to the top of Hill 861 and from that position be utilized in a direct fire role. As the five man Observation Post team reached a point 300 meters from the summit of Hill 861, they were ambushed. The point Marine was killed in the first volley. While under intense fire and attempting to take cover, Lt Sauer quickly determined the team was vastly outnumbered by entrenched enemy and was in the ambush kill zone. He ordered the balance of the team to withdraw, while he covered them. Armed only with his .45 caliber pistol, he engaged the enemy positions. His decisive and selfless action allowed the other three Marines to break for safety back down the hill. Due to the heavy fire, only one Marine, the forward observer survived. Lt Sauer gave his life while providing the other members of the team the opportunity to withdraw. In the Third Anti-Tank Command Chronology for April 1967, it was reported "First Lieutenant Sauer recommended for the Navy Cross for heroism when in the face of hostile fire he gave his life to delay the enemy, thereby enabling another Marine to evade to safety". The awards section of Headquarters Marine Corps apparently never received the recommendation contemporaneously and Lt Sauer's heroism went unacknowledged for over 50 years. About two years ago, a retired Marine LtCol named Dave Little heard the story from Lt Sauer's brother and resubmitted the award. It is currently at the Secretary of the Navy's office for review, so hopefully there will be some good news in the near future. As soon as the disposition of the award is known, it will be included in a President's Newsletter to the Class.

Hill 861

With NVA forces fixed on Hill 861, the two Bravo Company platoons located to the northwest were redirected to approach Hill 861 from the north and west. Bravo Company 1/9 engaged entrenched NVA forces in a series of intense firefights over the next three days. The intensity of the fighting led the Third Marines to pour in assets to exploit the contact. The commanding officer of Third Battalion, Third Marines, LtCol Wilder and his command group consisting of his operations officer and Classmate McDavid arrived at Khe Sanh Combat Base at noon on April 24th. LtCol Wilder then assumed command of the operation. Meanwhile Col Lanigan of the Third Marines began feeding available units into Khe Sanh. On April 25th, Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Third Marines was the first unit to arrive at the Combat Base from the vicinity of the Rockpile. The Company moved first to Hill 700, the site of the fire support position and now the 3/3 Command Post. Kilo 3/3 was immediately ordered into the assault of Hill 861 from the south, following the trail Phil Sauer and the Artillery Observation Post team had ascended earlier. Classmate McDavid took control of the artillery assets at the Khe Sanh Combat Base and began employing them against visible targets and the avenues of approach on the north side of Hill 861. Kilo 3/3 took heavy casualties during the waning daylight hours on April 25, then, hunkered down to await assistance to break contact and return to Hill 700. Kilo, Third Battalion, Ninth Marines was the next company heli-lifted into the Combat Base from Camp Carroll late on April 25th. Serving with Kilo 3/9 was our Classmate Lt Woodall, a platoon commander. On April 26th, Kilo 3/9 was dispatched to help Kilo 3/3 break contact and withdraw from the southern approaches

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of Hill 861 with 23 KIAs and 42 WIAs. Classmate McDavid coordinated the artillery support on Hill 861 as the casualties were evacuated and the Kilo 3/3 survivors were extricated. Later in the day, Lt Woodall led his platoon, K-1 and the Kilo 3/9 command group in a sweep around the west side of Hill 861 to locate and extricate Bravo Company 1/9, which was similarly bogged down with their casualties. As day broke on April 27, Lt Woodall's platoon helped carry Bravo Company 1/9's dead and wounded into the 3/3 Command Post. The Bravo Company losses were reported as 32 KIAs and 46 WIAs with wounds requiring evacuation. Bravo 1/9 was sent to Camp Carroll to regroup.

Given the strength of the NVA resistance on Hill 861, LtCol Wilder requested additional troops. Next committed to the Hill Fights was Battalion Landing Team, Second Battalion, Third Marines, who were the ground component of the Special Landing Force. 2/3 was in its fourth day of Operation Beacon Star Phase I on a stretch of Highway 1 north of Hue known as "The Street without Joy". The arrival of three companies (all except Foxtrot) from 2/3 on April 26 was an opportunity for LtCol Wilder to move his CP back to the Khe Sanh Combat Base temporarily to coordinate a plan with the Commanding Officer of 2/3, LtCol DeLong. 2/3 personnel would thereafter refer to the fighting in Khe Sanh as "Operation Beacon Star - Phase II". Arriving in Khe Sanh at 1600 was Hotel Company 2/3 with Classmate Lt Hackett as Executive Officer. Additional units were also fed into Khe Sanh to provide a full slate of four infantry companies to the 3/3 composite Battalion. As the 2/3 companies arrived, they moved immediately to the southern base of Hill 861. LtCol Wilder's units consisted of his integral companies, Kilo and Mike 3/3. Assigned to and moving with Mike 3/3 was our Classmate Rogers, who led the company's artillery forward observer team. Filling out the composite Battalion was Kilo 3/9, which arrived late on April 25th and Mike 3/9, which arrived on April 27th.

On April 27, Classmate McDavid passed the responsibility for the coordination of artillery fire on Hill 861 to 2/3. The Battalion (2/3) from its positions at the southern base of Hill 861 coordinated the softening of Objective 1(Hill 861) with supporting arms. Fixed wing aircraft dropped 136k pounds of bombs, generally a mix of 250 pounders and 500 pounders plus 18k pounds of napalm. When air was not on station, the artillery units at Khe Sanh fired an additional 632 rounds of observed neutralization and preparation fire missions. April 27th, Foxtrot Company 2/3 would arrive at Khe Sanh Combat Base, with Classmate Schworm leading its 1st Platoon. Foxtrot 2/3 would serve in many roles, before being reunited with its parent Battalion. First they would be assigned to Base Security and as the multi-battalion operation's reserve, as all other arriving companies had been pushed forward to the hills. Foxtrot 2/3 would remain in that role for four days, until May 1st.

Recognizing the available artillery at Khe Sanh Combat Base would be insufficient to support two maneuvering battalions, the SLF artillery battery, Bravo, 1/12 was flown in on April 27th. The artillery complement then stood at one 6 gun 105mm battery in support of 2/3 (Bravo 1/12), one 6 gun 105mm battery in support of 3/3 (Foxtrot 2/12) and two 155mm guns and three 4.2 inch mortars in general support of operations.

On April 28, additional preparation fires preceded the assault of Hill 861. Aircraft delivered ordnance totaled 382k pounds of bombs including twelve 2000 pounders and 74k pound of napalm. Artillery fire was equally heavy with 968 rounds expended in observed fire missions to soften the summit of Hill 861. The assault was the classic two up and one back. Echo 2/3 and Golf 2/3 were abreast with Hotel 2/3 in reserve. By 1630, 2/3 was consolidating on the summit of Hill 861, as they had moved up unopposed. The NVA had withdrawn under the withering preparatory fires. Upon securing Hill 861, a search located the bodies of four Marines which had been abandoned due to the heavy fighting earlier. Among them was the body of our Classmate Lt Sauer. Once Hill 861 was in Marine hands, a detailed examination of the enemy fortifications was undertaken. It revealed the bunkers were well constructed of bamboo, dirt and grass. The bunkers
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were well camouflaged and in some cases comprised of up to 6 feet of cover, which would be capable of absorbing direct artillery strikes without sustaining internal damage. At the summit were 25 bunkers with an additional 62 fighting holes all with mutually supporting firing lanes. The position was ready for a defense in depth as there were over 400 total fighting holes. The defenses were primarily oriented toward the finger running up the finger from the south, the location of the major trail leading up from the plateau below. It was estimated that two full NVA companies could have occupied the fortifications. The information regarding the type of fortified positions the NVA had prepared on Hill 861 guided the commanders as they planned their assaults on the remaining objectives. Heavy air bombardment and artillery fire missions would precede the attacks on Hill 881 South and Hill 881 North. 2/3 would spend April 29 searching the enemy fortifications and destroying them.

With Hill 861 in Marine hands, the commanders devised an operational plan to take the two remaining dominant terrain features – Hill 881 South and Hill 881 North. The plan called for the composite battalion 3/3 to move out on April 29, skirt around the western flank of Hill 861, where 2/3 was located and proceed approximately 3 kilometers to an intermediate objective, a small knoll approximately 750 meters north of Hill 881 South. The assault on Hill 881 South scheduled for April 30 would be made up the north slope. On April 29, in addition to destroying enemy fortifications, 2/3 would spend the day readying itself to move out on April 30th. 2/3 would move to an intermediate objective south of Hill 881 North and then attack, once Hill 881 South had been secured.

On April 29, 3/3 moved out in column toward their intermediate objective with Mike Company 3/9 on point followed by Mike Company 3/3 and Kilo Company 3/9. As Mike 3/9 led the battalion column, they drifted north of the intended line of march and found themselves in a draw, approximately 1200 meters west-north-west of the summit of Hill 861. They received automatic weapons fire from their front and right flank from an estimated NVA platoon and sustained casualties during the ensuing firefight. While Mike 3/9 was engaged, the balance of the battalion column swept to the south and continued on toward their intermediate objective with Mike 3/3 now in the lead followed by Kilo 3/9. Once Mike 3/9 had broken contact and evacuated their dead (2) and wounded (10), they followed in trace of the other two companies to the intermediate objective, a small hill approximately 750 meters north east of the summit of Hill 881 South. Once the 3/3 Command Group had arrived at its night position, Classmate McDavid began artillery prep fires on the proposed route of attack and the summit of Hill 881 South. He would continue these fire missions and planned fires for the next day and a half. Additionally, Classmate Rogers, with Mike 3/3, the lead company, began detecting enemy movements and was similarly busy conducting observed fire missions. First at 19:30, Rogers engaged 20 NVA troops moving in a westerly direction across the top of Hill 881 South. Shortly thereafter, Rogers was alerted to the presence of two mortar crews moving into position just west of the company's CP. Rogers immediately got a fire mission underway on this enemy mortar site and after firing only 4 rounds of 82mm mortar, the enemy mortar crews broke down their weapons and retreated to safety. Approximately an hour later (20:15), Mike 3/3 troops observed what appeared to be an estimated NVA company moving toward their position. Again, Rogers was called on to neutralize this threat. He effectively called in variable time fused artillery rounds on the area where noise and lights were observed. As Mike 3/3 had led the battalion column to the intermediate objective, it was also positioned to be the lead company in the assault on Hill 881 South on April 30.

1stLt David S. Hackett

At first light on April 30, Hotel 2/3 was tasked with leading the battalion column and confronting the NVA force Mike 3/9 had encountered the previous day in the draw 1200 meters to the west-north-west. The
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draw was in the line of march to 2/3's intermediate objective. Hotel 2/3 would lead the column followed by Golf 2/3 and Echo 2/3. It was there our Classmate; Lt Hackett would die. Lt Hackett was on a ridge just above the draw when Hotel Company's leading platoons were taken under fire by NVA in well camouflaged entrenched positions by small arms, heavy machine guns and sniper rifles, later verified to have been equipped with scopes. Observing the location of the NVA heavy machine gun, which was inflicting severe casualties on Hotel Company, Lt Hackett sprang up from a small depression and moved 30 meters through heavy enemy automatic weapons fire to direct a Marine M-60 machinegunner's fire. Lt Hackett's orders placed heavy fire on the bunker in which the NVA heavy machine gun was located and neutralized the position. Still under heavy fire, Lt Hackett directed the evacuation of several of the company's casualties. Recognizing that the Company Commander's radioman had been killed, Lt Hackett sent his radioman to take over as the Company Commander's radioman. Next, he moved forward to assist in the direction of the 2nd Platoon, as their platoon commander had been wounded and was out of the fight. He took over the 2nd Platoon and began pressing the assault down into the ravine to extricate the pinned down 3rd Platoon. It was during this courageous action that Lt Hackett was killed by an enemy sniper. He was the second of our Classmates to die during "Operation Beacon Star - Phase II". Lt Hackett was one of 10 Marines killed in the engagement. He was awarded the Silver Star posthumously for his valor on April 30.

While Hotel 2/3 was engaged, Golf 2/3 held their position to be ready to move in support, if necessary. Simultaneously, Echo 2/3 moved to the south around the two other companies and continued on to their intermediate objective, just south of Hill 881 North. Hotel Company disengaged and called in air and artillery to neutralize the enemy position in the draw. Having been depleted by the earlier fighting, Hotel 2/3 spent time reorganizing its platoons. Later, in the middle of the afternoon, Golf 2/3 was tasked with returning to the draw and clearing the remaining enemy. Fighting through the prepared positions, Golf was able to dislodge the enemy with light losses (2 USMC KIA and 9 USMC WIA). While still short of their intermediate objective, Hotel and Golf companies set in for the night on the route of march.

1stLt John B. Woodall

At 0800 on April 30th, at the base of Hill 881 South, Mike 3/3 initiated its attack. The assault plan called for two of the Mike 3/3's platoons to move up the slope to the top of Hill 881 South in column with M-1 on point followed by M-2. As they arrived at the top, the plan was for M-1 to veer to the left, while M-2 would veer to the right. The two platoons would then get on line and sweep across the summit. Our Classmate Dave Rogers and the Company CP would remain at the base of Hill 881 South with M-3 in reserve. At 0830, 4 NVA soldiers were observed on the forward slope and Rogers initiated an artillery fire mission to take them under fire. By 1045, M-1 was on the western end of the plateau that led to the summit. M-1 began moving to the east to allow M-2 to come up and get on-line. The NVA exercised incredible fire discipline until the second platoon, M-2, was also on the summit and in their field of fire. Then, the two platoons were hit by heavy fire from well camouflaged, fortified bunkers and sustained heavy casualties. The two platoons were also hit with 30 rounds of 82mm mortar fire. Again, Rogers was called upon to initiate a counter mortar fire mission. By noon, Mike Company 3/3 was spent and LtCol Wilder gave the order for them to withdraw. With Mike 3/3 bogged down with heavy casualties, Kilo 3/9 and one platoon from Mike 3/9 were sent forward to help M 3/3 disengage. It was during this relief effort that we would lose our third Classmate, 1stLt John Woodall. Lt Woodall's 1st Platoon of Kilo 3/9 was tasked with moving to the east of the Mike 3/3 positions in an attempt to flank the entrenched NVA who had sprung the ambush. As Kilo-1 moved on a more easterly route, the terrain was extremely difficult and by mid-afternoon, they were still only three-quarters of the way to the summit. For optimum control, Lt Woodall was moving behind the point fire team. The point reached an open area and Lt Woodall sent two Marines forward to scout. The NVA engaged the scouts from
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a camouflaged and fortified bunker, severely wounding one, while the other crawled back and reported the casualty. Recognizing immediate medical aid was required to save the life of the casualty, Lt Woodall grabbed an M-16 and with total disregard for his safety, placed accurate fire on the bunker and then charged it killing both NVA soldiers. From that advance position, John continued providing covering fire, while his Marines moved forward and recovered the casualty. As he covered their withdrawal, Lt Woodall was killed by an NVA sniper. John was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for his heroic actions and unselfish devotion to the welfare of his Marines.

Hill 881 South

The relief units would continue to the summit and under cover of white phosphorus smoke rounds locate and evacuate many of the dead and wounded. Additionally, Classmate Rogers called in a “dangerous close” high explosive artillery fire mission on the summit to help break the NVA “bear hug” and allow some Marines to escape certain death. Total disengagement was not completed until nightfall. The units, which had fought on the north slope of Hill 881 South, would consolidate for the evening on the knoll from which the attack had been launched earlier that morning. The Marine losses would be counted as 43 KIA, including Lt Woodall, and 109 WIA, of which 90 would require evacuation. During the assault and subsequent extraction, 1685 artillery rounds had been fired in support of engaged units. Additionally, close air support consisted of 118 sorties which delivered 323k pounds of ordnance to help the Marines to break contact and recover their casualties.

With Mike 3/3 totally depleted, the decision was made to call forward the operational reserve, Foxtrot 2/3, from the Khe Sanh Combat Base perimeter and have them temporarily join 3/3 at the base of Hill 881 South. Moving forward with Foxtrot 2/3 was Classmate Schworm, platoon commander for the F-1. By noon on May 1, Foxtrot 2/3 was in the field protecting the 3/3 Command Post. As the reserve had been committed, the Commanding General of 3rd Marine Division provided Echo 2/9 to secure the Khe Sanh Combat Base perimeter and reestablish a reserve. One platoon from Echo 2/9 was sent forward to occupy Hill 861 to ensure that NVA forces did not reoccupy that strategic location. As preparations were being made for the final assault on Hill 881 South, Foxtrot 2/3 was tasked with moving forward to the knoll 750 meters northeast of the summit to be in position to support Kilo 3/9 and Mike 3/9, if necessary.

As Classmate Rogers’ unit, Mike 3/3, was no longer effective and was going to be returned to the area of the Thon Son Lam also known as the “Rockpile” and Kilo 3/9 was without an artillery forward observer officer, LtCol Wilder initially dispatched Rogers to take over that role. However, on May 2nd, Rogers was offered the option of returning with Mike 3/3 to the Battalion’s Tactical Area of Responsibility near the “Rockpile” or of staying with the battalion CP as the Battalion Artillery Liaison Officer. It seems that Classmate McDavid, who had been serving in that billet was scheduled for R&R and had to depart for the rear on May 2nd. Rogers elected to stay and served with LtCol Wilder as his Artillery Liaison Officer until May 12th, when the 3/3 Command Group finally returned to the “Rockpile”.

The daytime hours of May 1st were devoted to using supporting arms to neutralize NVA positions on Hill 881 South by 3/3 and on two battalion intermediate objectives on the route of march to Hill 881 North by Golf 2/3. Artillery fired 1445 rounds and air flew 166 sorties dropping 650k pounds of bombs. Both battalions also called forward their mule mounted 106mm recoilless rifles to be used to neutralize fortified bunkers as the operation proceeded. May 1st also saw Classmate Wright join the fray. Wright was serving as the Intelligence Officer for 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines. When he took over the S-2 function, on April 4, 1967, his battalion commander, LtCol Wilson, advised that he wanted the scout section of the intelligence
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shop expanded so he would have his own intelligence gathering unit and not have to rely strictly on the Intelligence Reports being forwarded from 9th Marines to guide his operations. Accordingly, Wright took 15 enlisted Marines to Dong Ha where they were trained in reconnaissance operations by 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion and Force Recon personnel supplemented by the Regimental Intelligence Staff. As LtCol Wilson had provided two companies (Kilo and Mike 3/9) to 3/3 for the "Hill Fights", he was lobbying the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Marine Regiment, Col Lanigan, to send a command group forward to assume control of the fight. It is suspected that Col Lanigan's response instead was to allow Wright's scout Marines to be sent to Khe Sanh on May 1st. Wright and his scouts were flown by helicopter from Camp Carroll to the knoll at the base of Hill 881 South and reported for duty to LtCol Wilder. Wright's Marines were tasked with breaking up into teams and setting in entrenched positions on the west side of Hill 881 South, which were the likely avenues of egress from Hill 881 South. It was assumed that as the summit was being pummeled with heavy artillery fire missions and air strikes late in the day and into the evening of May 1 the NVA would attempt to evade to the west. At midday on May 2, after more heavy morning preparatory fires, Wright accompanied Kilo and Mike 3/9 as they moved to the summit of Hill 881 South unopposed. Only one NVA body was found on the summit and Wright's teams reported they had not observed any units moving off the hill. While never located, it has been speculated that there were caves and tunnels in the hill that may have allowed the NVA to escape without being observed. Shortly thereafter, Wright developed a high fever and was medevaced from the battlefield with a form of hepatitis.

Hill 881 North

Simultaneously on May 2, units from 2/3 were tightening the noose on Hill 881North. Golf 2/3 with Hotel 2/3 in trace was approaching Hill 881 North from the northwest, while Echo 2/3 had nearly reached the summit from the south. A violent rain squall swept the area at approximately 16:00 dictating that all the units pull back to more defensible terrain for the evening. Echo 2/3 move back into the positions they had occupied the previous evening.

At 0415 on May 3rd, a suspected NVA company attacked Echo 2/3 from three sides and was successful in penetrating the perimeter from the north and occupying some of the bunkers they had constructed earlier. The Echo 2/3 Marines were able to contain the penetration, but they did not have the combat power to eject the NVA. LtCol DeLong devised a plan to drive the NVA out of Echo Company's position and kill them. He asked for Foxtrot 2/3 to be returned to his control and at 07:00 Foxtrot Company was chopped from 3/3 to 2/3. As Foxtrot was not engaged, it was tasked with providing a platoon to supply the additional combat power required to eliminate or eject the NVA soldiers from the bunkers they had occupied. Meanwhile, Hotel Company was ordered to move around to the north of Echo's position and in behind the NVA unit and be in position to eliminate any NVA attempting to flee in that direction. Classmate Jack Schworm's platoon (F-1) was selected to be heli-lifted to the Echo 2/3 position. Helicopters picked them up at their overnight base with the 3/3 Command Post, which was about 1200 meters to the south east of the site of Echo 2/3 fighting. Once on the ground at 0730, Jack's platoon moved into the Echo 2/3 perimeter and joined up with Echo-2. The NVA penetration of the perimeter had taken place on the northwest sector, over the positions manned by the 1st and 2nd squads of Echo-2. The penetration had been supported by a 12.7mm heavy machine gun that was ravaging the Echo-2 positions. After coordinating with the Echo-2 platoon commander, Schworm's troops began the task of identifying the points of NVA resistance and methodically attacking them with grenades and M-16 rifles and successfully eliminating them. The Echo-2 platoon commander would have the opportunity to return the favor a few days later, when Schworm's platoon faced similar adversity, on May 9th.

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Outside the perimeter, the Marines from Hotel 2/3 surprised the NVA by attacking from their rear and they were able to exploit the vulnerability of the NVA bunkers oriented to the south. The combination of Hotel Company's work outside the perimeter and Schworm's platoon's success in eliminating the NVA positions inside the Echo Company perimeter neutralized the NVA threat. Schworm's platoon spent the evening of May 3rd in the Echo 2/3 perimeter and rejoined Foxtrot 2/3 on May 4th. All three 2/3 companies spent the night of May 3rd in a large consolidated perimeter, once the NVA, who had penetrated the perimeter had been eliminated. Marine casualties during the fighting consisted of 27 KIAs and 84 WIAs.

On May 4, the NVA launched a separate amphibious tank supported attack on the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei and overran the position, methodically destroying all of the bases structures.

For the Marines on the "Hills", the major effort during May 4 was to employ supporting arms on the summit of Hill 881 North preparing the terrain for the final assault. Additionally, the balance of Foxtrot 2/3 moved overland from their night position with 3/3 to the Echo 2/3 position and picked up Schworm's platoon to return the Company to full strength. At 15:30, with Foxtrot 2/3 on the left and Echo 2/3 on the right, the assault companies began moving toward the summit from the south in a slow and methodical manner. The two companies set in at dusk short of the summit; but, in position to make the final assault on May 5th. Golf and Hotel 2/3 moved to positions east of the summit to support the assaulting companies as required.

On the morning of May 5, additional artillery fire missions and air bombardment were unleashed on the physical summit of Hill 881 North. Foxtrot 2/3 would lead the final assault and Foxtrot-2 was the platoon selected to take the point of the company movement. The assault commenced at 0850 and Schworm's platoon would support Foxtrot-2 as they led the column up the steep slope. As Foxtrot-2 moved toward the summit, the Marines began receiving a heavy volume of fire from their left flank. The Marines pulled back and again worked the area with artillery and close air support. At 1310, Foxtrot 2 resumed the attack and cleared the enemy bunkers they had earlier encountered. At 14:45, the summit was declared secure. The four 2/3 companies then moved into separate perimeters surrounding the summit and blocking each of the potential routes for an NVA counterattack.

With both Hill 881South and Hill 881 North now secure, the two battalions continued searching the enemy hilltop fortifications for weapons and equipment and then methodically destroying them. Additionally, patrolling activities resumed especially to the west and northwest. While the Marines were occasionally mortared, there was little loss of life.

Lang Xoa

The relative calm was broken on May 9th, when the final substantial combat of the "Hill Fights" occurred with Classmate Schworm's platoon in midst of it. 2/3 sent two of its companies, Foxtrot 2/3 and Echo 2/3 on two-platoon day patrols to the west and northwest of Hill 881 North. The remaining platoon in each company would continue to occupy the company patrol base and keep it safe from NVA infiltration. The Foxtrot patrol consisting of Schworm's 1st Platoon and the 3rd platoon. They were assigned the objective of checking out the abandon village of Lang Xoa, approximately 3200 meters to northwest of the Battalion CP. The Echo patrol's objective was Hill 803, which was approximately 800 meter south of Lang Xoa. Foxtrot-3 was lead platoon in the company column moving down off Hill 778 and into a ravine that led to Lang Xoa. At the junction of another ravine that entered from the north, NVA troops took the two platoons under fire. Realizing that NVA troops were scrambling for the high ground, up the finger from Hill 778 that trended to the northwest, both Foxtrot platoons similarly move up the finger from the south. They knew they had to
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deny the NVA the high ground. In close quarters fighting the combatants slugged it out for control of the high ground. Fortunately, the Echo company patrol was on Hill 803 approximately 500 meters southeast of the action and could observe the progress of the battle across the ravine to their north. It was then that the platoon commander from Echo-2 took the maneuvering NVA under fire with his machine guns at a distance of approximately 1000 meters. Foxtrot Company was bogged down with heavy casualties and two of its officers had been severely wounded. The 2/3 Battalion Commander had a platoon from Hotel Company move to the Echo Company position on Hill 803, above the battle with two 81mm mortars and two 106mm recoilless rifles in the hopes that additional long range fire power could help support the platoons of Foxtrot Company. A squad from Echo Company and their two 60mm mortars remained on the fire support position overlooking the battle below, while the balance of Echo Company, led by the Echo-2 platoon commander and his platoon, moved down off Hill 803 and up back up the finger that extended to the northwest from Hill 778. From the high ground on the finger, Echo Company, led by Echo-2, was able to attack down the finger from above the NVA and root them out. Schworm's Foxtrot Company suffered heavy casualties in the ambush. Marine casualties were 24 KIA and 19 WIA. After evacuating their dead and wounded, helicopters were directed to return and extract the two companies back to Hill 881 North. Foxtrot Company was successfully extracted, but fog moved in and Echo Company could only be lifted to the fire support position on Hill 803 where they established a perimeter for the night with the platoon from Hotel Company that had previously been tasked with the security mission. This was the first engagement of the "Hill Fights" in which the NVA did not fight from fortified positions. As 203 NVA shallow graves were later discovered at the base of the ravine, it is assumed that ambush was hastily undertaken to stop the patrolling Marine's from discovering the graves.

On the morning of May 10, LtCol DeLong and the supporting arms he had brought with him to Hill 803 were evacuated by helicopter back to Hill 881North. Echo Company after expending all unnecessary ammunition on suspected enemy positions due to the unavailability of helicopter lift capacity were forced to walked back to Hill 881 North.

Ordnance

During the "Hill Fights" awesome quantities of supporting arms were expended in support of the infantry ultimate successes. The two 105mm batteries fired a total of 23,472 rounds. The two 155mm guns fired a total of 1365 rounds. Unfortunately, records were not available for the number of rounds expended by the three 4.2 inch mortars. The artillery rounds were fired during a total of 1688 missions of which, 460 were observed, 87 were unobserved and 1141 were harassment and interdiction. Air support was equally impressive. In 1170 sorties, air delivered 3.8 million pounds of ordnance consisting of 3.2 million pound of high explosive bombs ranging from 250 pounders to 2000 pounders. There were also 600k pounds of napalm delivered on the three summits. Additionally, there were 23 B-52 "Arc Light" missions and numerous TPQ-10 radar-controlled missions on suspected NVA infiltration and exfiltration routes and bivouac possible areas.

Casualties

The casualties suffered by the combatants during the "Hill Fights" were substantial. Marine losses were 168 KIAs, 443 WIAs and 2 MIAs. The NVA suffered 833 Killed as confirmed by body count. Additionally, it was estimated that an additional 542 NVA deaths were probable; however, this number is, of course, quite speculative. Finally, there were 5 NVA prisoners of war.

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M-16 Performance

The infantry officers of the 38th OCC and Basic Class 3-66 were regrettable witnesses to the Marine Corps conversion from the reliable M-14 rifle which fired the 7.62mm NATO round to the M-16 which fired the lighter 5.56mm round. Our Class' infantry officer arrived in Vietnam in July of 1966 and their Marines carried the M-14 until the March-April time frame of 1967, nearly 3/4 of their tours. The conversion to the M-16 immediately preceded the "Hill Fights". There was faint praise for the new M-16 in the official 3/3 after action report, it consisted of two sentences, quoting the Commanding officer of Mike Company 3/3, who was permanently assigned to a Marine detachment aboard a Navy ship, but, who had volunteered and was temporarily serving with the infantry, while Mike 3/3's permanently assigned skipper was on R&R. The quote of the temporary CO, who was directing the assault on Hill 881 South from the northern base of Hill 881 South, was made the focal point for the critique of the M-16 contained in the After Action Report. The report was undoubtedly written by a staff officer, who did not actually participate in the assault. There have been numerous reports from those who were on the ground that the M-16 failures cost Marine lives. In describing the efforts by Kilo 3/9 and an additional platoon from Mike 3/9 to extricate the two decimated Mike 3/3 platoons (M-1 and M-2) from the killing zone on the summit of Hill 881 South, two statements are found in the After Action Report:

1. In the Execution Section - "Deploying of the M-16 aided by the large amounts of ammo the individual Marine was thus able to carry, 3/3 put out a large enough volume of fire to gain fire superiority to allow the evacuation all wounded from the battlefield under cover of artillery and 81mm smoke."
2. In the Commander's Analysis Section - "The M-16 proved its great value in the weight of the weapon and the weight of the ammunition. The amount of ammunition that can be carried is nearly double that of the M-14. This proved to be a very important factor on the initial attack on Objective 2 (Hill 881 South). The Company Commander of M/3/3 stated he would have been out of ammunition at the most critical time of the attack, if his company had been armed with the M-14".

This faint praise became the focus of the endorsements as the Report made its way up the chain of command. In the 3rd Marine Division's endorsement (Maj Gen Hochmuth) to the Commanding General, III MAF (Lt Gen Walt) is found the following:

"Endorsement 2. The favorable performance of the M-16 rifle in this battle is worthy of note. Comments in paragraph 13.c. indicate that the light weight of the weapon and the ability of the troops to carry more ammunition than they could for the M-14 were important factors in the success of the attack."

The endorsement from the Commanding General III MAF (Lt Gen Walt) to the Commanding General, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Gen Westmoreland) is even more glowing on the performance of the weapon:

"2. The Khe Sanh battle was the first major test of the M-16 rifle in combat by the Marine Corps. The vast majority of the officers and men who participated in this battle were unstinting in their praise of the weapon. This Headquarters considers the M-16 rifle to more than meet the requirements that have been shown to exist in Vietnam for a light-weight, hard-hitting, reliable basic infantry rifle."

This final glowing endorsement is not substantiated elsewhere in the after action report, other than in the single instance cited above. It is difficult to understand how the chain of command could describe so

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favorably the performance of the weapon, given the complaints of the enlisted Marines and junior officers, who had to place in body bags the numerous Marines found employing all manner of tools to try to extract expended cartridges jammed in their M-16's chamber.

Awards:

1stLt Hackett:

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to First Lieutenant David S. Hackett (MCSN: 0-92088), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving with Company H, Second Battalion, Third Marines, THIRD Marine Division (Reinforced), in the Republic of Vietnam, on 30 April 1967. While conducting a search and destroy mission in Thua Thien Province, North of Khe Sanh, the company came under a sudden and vicious attack from fortified enemy emplacements less than one hundred meters away. Armed with .50 caliber machine guns, automatic rifles and small arms with sniper scopes, the enemy inflicted heavy casualties. First Lieutenant Hackett unhesitatingly charged thirty meters through a hail of automatic fire to direct an M-60 machine gun team against an enemy bunker. Once this mission was completed, he again exposed himself to the intense fire to organize a stricken platoon and help evacuate the seriously wounded. Upon completion of this task, he once again rushed to the base of fire to encourage and direct his men's fire. While pressing the assault and encouraging his Marines, First Lieutenant Hackett was mortally wounded. By his outstanding courage, indomitable fighting spirit and selfless efforts in behalf of others, First Lieutenant Hackett served to inspire all who observed him and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

Action Date: 30-Apr-67

Service: Marine Corps

Rank: First Lieutenant

Company: Company H

Battalion: 2d Battalion

Regiment: 3d Marines

Division: 3d Marine Division (Rein.), FMF

1stLt Woodall

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to First Lieutenant John B. Woodall (MCSN: 0-93518), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as Platoon Commander with Company K, Third Battalion, Ninth Marines, Third Marine Division, in the Republic of Vietnam, on 30 April 1967. As First Lieutenant Woodall led his men in an assault on Hill 881, north of Khe Sanh, the Platoon was taken under devastating fire from machine guns and automatic rifles. The initial burst of enemy fire felled the two point men, who were closest to the hidden bunker. Several attempts to reach the two critically wounded Marines were thwarted by a hail of deadly fire from the enemy position. Immediate medical attention was necessary to save their lives. With a total disregard for his own safety, First Lieutenant Woodall grabbed a rifle and placed accurate fire into the bunker. He then charged the bunker and killed both of its enemy occupants. From this position he laid down covering fire enabling the two Marines to be carried to safety. As he covered their withdrawal, First Lieutenant Woodall was mortally wounded by an enemy sniper. His heroic actions and unselfish devotion to the welfare of his men were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United

States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

Action Date: 30-Apr-67

Service: Marine Corps

Rank: First Lieutenant

Company: Company K

Battalion: 3d Battalion

Regiment: 9th Marines

Division: 3d Marine Division (Rein.), FMF

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4. Then 2nd Lt James R. Cannon, USMC – Memoir – “The Khe Sanh Hill Fights – 20 July 1969”
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Additional Links Related to the “Hill Fights”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA1GTLWUMNM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zsqRf2DxKo>

<http://vietnamveteransmemorialofsanantonio.com>

<http://www.virtualwall.org/dr/RandallJA01a.htm>

<http://rogermarty.com/hill881s.htm>
