David Rogers

The Battle for Hill 881 South

Introduction

Before graduating from college, I never knew exactly what I would end up doing for a career and was, perhaps like many other college students, very idealistic. I had considered joining the Peace Corps, as a grass roots effort inspired by President Kennedy was underway. The thought of helping a farmer in Ethiopia, teaching young children to read and write in Afghanistan, etc., really appealed to me. I would not only be serving my country, but also my fellow man. However, as I was about to graduate in 1965, the United States had become involved in a disastrous war, although unforeseen at that time as such, and I felt I could best serve my country in uniform. As a product of the 1940s and 50s, I had been taught by the "Greatest Generation" about the reality of communism and its threat to world peace. I would stand and fight this anti-freedom, anti-God scourge alongside others who had been trained in the discipline of warfare.

Phu Bai

I arrived at Danang, Republic of Vietnam on September 14, 1966, during the approaching monsoon season and at a time when the war was just beginning to escalate. I didn't feel myself to be in any imminent danger. OCS Classmate Rob Day and I were assigned to the 1st 155 Gun Battery, 3/12, which did not have forward observers, located at Phu Bai. It provided artillery support to the "grunts." Being foot-soldiers, they are the ones who primarily pay the ultimate price of war, that being death. Little did I imagine then that I would eventually be an eye-witness to courage and carnage while serving with the infantry as an artillery forward observer at a remote place named Khe Sanh located in northwestern South Vietnam.

There was not a whole lot of activity when I arrived except for an occasional fire mission directed to targets that were located some distance away. The battery fired å few fire missions for recon units that had made contact with the enemy, but mostly fired random H&I (Harassment and Interdiction) missions. There was a mortar attack against the Phu Bai airport at night. The VC set up a mortar position outside the perimeter and fired the mortars over the battery in an attempt to destroy aircraft at the airport. The battery received no incoming while trying to initiate counter mortar fire. Due to mandatory coordination between combat units to limit local civilian casualties and a procedure called SAV-A-PLANE, twenty minutes elapsed before permission was granted to fire at the enemy. But by that time the VC had moved on. The next morning, I talked to a gun crew chief. I learned that the VC had been in the crosshairs of a 20 mm cannon ready to take them out of commission. I sensed the frustration of the crew chief about being unable to return fire. This was my first exposure to real combat that I can recall.

Gio Linh

During the next six months, NVA activity increased significantly near the DMZ resulting in more troops being sent north. I was transferred to Battery C/1/12, a 6-gun 105 MM artillery battery located at Gio Linh. I stayed at there for about five days and spent two nights on top of a 20 foot high observation tower equipped with ship binoculars and a 50 caliber machine gun. The compound, which was mostly underground, was hit the second night by a mortar attack. Approximately 40 mortars hit the compound several landing close to the tower. I saw the muzzle flashes about 500-600 meters north of the compound so I manned the machine gun and fired approximately 50-60 rounds at them. Unlike the Phu Bai area, the DMZ was a free fire zone; I never waited for permission to unload on the enemy. The next morning, I went on patrol with a rifle platoon of Marines to survey for damage and casualties. There were no casualties nor any blood, but a mortar pit from where the mortars were fired was found.

During the day I watched thru the binoculars Vietnamese walking south into a country at war with the country they had just left. There was nobody ever seen walking north.

Rockpile and Razorback

In early April I joined an infantry battalion (3/3/3) as an artillery forward observer and later to be assigned as an artillery liaison officer. I can still visualize the sign that hung in the command bunker of the Third Battalion, Third Marine Regiment, Third Marine Division at a base camp called the “Rockpile.” I forget the exact words, but it went something like this: “A Marine Infantryman - when it’s hot, he’s the hottest, when it’s cold, he’s the coldest, when it’s wet, he’s the wettest, when it’s muddy, he’s the muddiest.” Well, what it really said might well be forgotten from memory, though the impression I got after reading it never has. It was during this time period that my life was endangered the most, and the Marine Corps slogan “first to fight” became more than a mere phrase to me.

Around April 10, 1967, I was attached to Mike Company (M/3/3), a rifle company composed mostly of young Marines just out of high school. OCS classmate 1st Lt. Joe McDavid, who was the artillery liaison officer for 3/3, escorted me in a jeep to the location of M/3/3 where I met the company officers and staff NCO’s. The company was located near the DMZ on the north side of the Rockpile and just east of the southern edge of the Razorback, a place where temperatures rose to 105 degrees during the hot summer days and

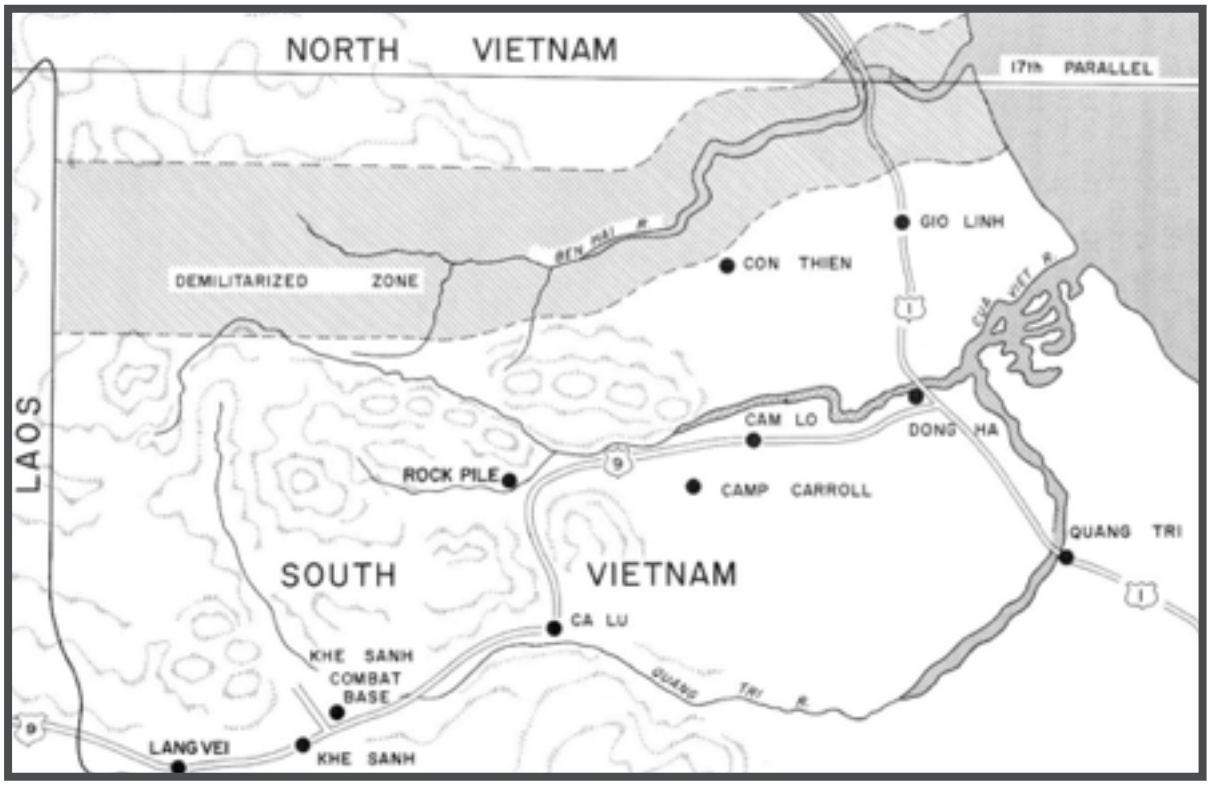
mosquitoes seemed to love Marines, as an average of two cases of malaria per week in our battalion were being reported. Both the Rockpile and Razorback were huge masses of rock between which flowed a tributary of the Cam Lo River that was great for bathing in. They were also used by pilots for navigation purposes and by Marines as observation posts since they commanded a view of five valleys used as infiltration routes into South Vietnam from the north. The area around the Rockpile and Razorback was the scene of a lot of combat during the war.

My first "operation" was a day long hike around Razorback Ridge with one rifle platoon. I remember when we ran across a "lean-to," a three sided shelter composed of a bamboo frame and leaves. It was used by the North Vietnamese for protection against the rain and contained a couple of woven baskets. At the same time a few of the "old timers" recalled the time when a friendly jet was providing close air support to Mike Company while it was fighting North Vietnamese troops near the Razorback. The jet streaked in towards the Marines with a bomb hanging loose on its underside. The bomb finally came loose and deflected off the rocks of the Razorback into the midst of Mike Company. Approximately 20 Marines were killed and 20 others had been wounded. It was a rather gruesome story and must have been a nightmare for the people involved. I couldn't believe at that time, at some future date, I too, would have my own collection of war stories to share with other Marines.

The Hill Fights

The battle for three strategic hills (Hill 881 South, Hill 881 North, and Hill 861), which were measured in elevation in meters and located near the Laotian border in northwest South Vietnam, began on April 24, 1967 and lasted until May 11, 1967. It would subsequently be identified by more than one name, including (1) "The Khe Sanh Hill Fights" (2) "The Hill Fights" and (3) "The First Battle of Khe Sanh," implying that there was more than one battle for Khe Sanh, and Operation Beacon Star – Phase II.

I remember the initial alert and mustering of troops at the Rockpile on April 26, 1967. We (M/3/3) boarded a Rough Rider truck convoy, which could be very rough indeed as drivers drove at a high rate of speed along bumpy roads to avoid being hit by sniper fire, and headed east along Route 9 towards Dong Ha, a fairly large city near the South China Sea. At the Dong Ha airport, we crossed paths with a battle weary company of Marines (K/3/3) having just returned from Khe Sanh. The troops from each company were kept segregated as one of the officers from the returning company advised the command group of Mike Company not to



let the Marines talk to each other - the first omen as to the seriousness of the situation. We enplaned on C-130 military cargo aircraft for transportation to Khe Sanh. We were squeezed in like sardines on the planes and sat on the floor fully combat equipped during the short flight to the Khe Sanh Combat Base.

After the planes landed at the airport, we walked to a staging area just outside of the combat base and remained there for two days. I vaguely recall hearing about two plans which had been discussed concerning the tactical deployment of our company. The first option was to have our company (Company M), which was a part of the Third Battalion, Third Marine Regiment, (3/3) skirt to the west of Hill 861 and then move west-southwestward towards an intermediate objective just short of Hill 881 South. Another battalion (2/3) would capture Hill 861 and then move towards Hill 881 North and cover our right flank. Thus, the order of battle was to capture Hill 861 first, Hill 881 South second, and Hill 881 North third. The second option was a baiting tactic that involved planting our company via helicopter at a location just north of Hill 881 South. Once the NVA were committed, artillery and airpower would be called in to repel the attackers. The first option was chosen; agony was simply delayed and possible suicide avoided.

Before we started toward Hill 881 South, one Marine was selected to remain in the rear for body identification purposes at the graves registration area. This would normally be a person with the least amount of time remaining in country — a 13 month tour of duty in Vietnam having nearly completed and the individual was eligible to be sent back to the United States. Two Marines were eligible and so a choice had to be made between the two. A squad leader was selected but he declined the offer to remain in the rear and insisted he wanted to remain with his squad even though he was a “short-timer.” He later ended up back at the grave registration area as a corpse.

First Contact with the NVA

On April 28, -M/3/3 followed M/3/9 as they led the battalion by Hill 861, which was about 4,000 meters

(2 1/2 miles) from the staging area, at a fairly brisk pace and bedded overnight in the vicinity of Hill 861. The next day we advanced to the west-southwest about another 2,000 meters and bedded down on a hill less than 1,000 meters from Hill 881 South. It was nearly dusk, when we spotted 3-4 North Vietnamese soldiers setting up a mortar position on top of Hill 881 South. I never did understand why they silhouetted themselves on the ridge-line. All they had to do to prevent us from detecting them was to sneak down the backside of the hill. However, they didn't, and I called in artillery immediately to silence the position. At the same time, we had to dig in to protect our-selves from possible incoming mortar fire. I dug about a 6 foot deep hole in about 6 minutes — a foot a minute! Surprisingly, the ground was fairly soft and easy to dig up with our entrenching tools. We were in an area where elephant grass and trees had once stood but napalm had scorched the grass and blackened the naked earth. Later on, I radioed for more artillery as the North Vietnamese began probing our perimeter after dark. I called for variable times (VT) fuses, which explode above the ground rather than on impact, thinking the enemy might be out in the open. They were.

Also, before dark we observed a delirious North Vietnamese soldier half buried on a hillside to our west, a victim of a collapsed bunker. His upper torso would sway at random as we watched him through binoculars. He moaned throughout the night of April 29 – it was haunting to say the least to hear him cry out in pain. On the morning of April 30, Marines from our company captured him and found him to be very close to death. He was placed near my foxhole, examined by a Navy Corpsman, and then left to die. He appeared to be well fed and clothed. He was also very stocky and muscular. We had been advised earlier that the NVA had their elite forces in the area, the infamous 325C Division, and that the possibility of taking any captives alive was remote. If we encountered any resistance, it was expected to be a fight to the bitter end. During the entire battle, I only heard of one enemy soldier being captured alive. They, too, like fighting Marines, were dedicated professionals — especially on their home territory.

Assault of Hill 881 South

The weather on the morning of April 30, 1967, was beautiful after low, dark clouds had rolled by and slowly disappeared. There was barely a cloud in the sky, and one could see for miles. There was no smog or air pollution that far away from civilization. Only North Vietnamese soldiers, Bru Montagnards (mountain tribe people), U. S. Marines, and wild animals roamed those picturesque mountains — even tigers! The only things visible were Marines as the NVA had expertly camouflaged themselves on Hill 881 South under the protection of intermittent fog that had previously blanketed the hill tops for the past few weeks and prevented any detection of enemy infiltration by our aerial observers. We figured there were a few enemy soldiers on the hill as we observed it from a distance, but not an entire battalion! Unknown to us at the time, the NVA had diverted assault troops originally slated to attack the Khe Sanh Combat Base into the hill fights. Possibly they sensed that the ground attack against Khe Sanh was being stalled and decided to make good use of their fortifications — even dare Marines to come and dig them out. There would be no hit and run or phantom tactics by the NVA this time as they silently waited to engage the Marines in close up, face-to-face combat. The hill was prepped with artillery and bombs during the early morning hours as we waited to begin what would turn out to be a very long day.

I should have figured that everything was going to go to hell after calling in a fire mission just prior to starting up the hill. I called for white phosphorous (WP) marking rounds before calling for high explosive (HE) rounds of artillery. I was lucky I did as the first round whistled by real close and nearly hit a couple of Marines in front of us. I told the command group that I felt the battery at the Khe Sanh Combat Base had made an error in azimuth computations. The battery was alerted and told to recheck their data. They admitted a human error had been made and said the error would be corrected by battery personnel.

For the remainder of the day, subsequent rounds would land where called for.

The plan of attack was to proceed from the base of Hill 881 South to its summit with a lead platoon that would turn left after reaching the ridge-line. It would be followed by a second platoon that would turn right after reaching the top. The hill ran along an almost east to west axis and was fairly steep. If there was any resistance, the company was to pull back and call for supporting arms (artillery, bombs, cannon shot, napalm). My job was simply that of an artillery forward observer — to provide artillery support for the "grunts" and to be the "eyes" for the artillery batteries located at Khe Sanh.

The lead platoon of the company started up the hill near its midsection and encountered no resistance. I was with the command group that consisted of the company commander (Captain Raymond Bennett), executive officer (First Lieutenant Joe Cialone), their radio operators, and my radio operator. The commanding officer maintained radio contact with the platoon leaders as their platoons began the ascent. The firing of weapons was sporadic at first as the Marines of Mike Company advanced forward. A few explosions could be heard (grenades) and first reports via radio indicated only light resistance was being encountered and that the situation could be handled. I don't know how far up the hill the Marines had advanced before everything just seemed to explode on the north side of the hill. The advance platoons got pinned down and couldn't be seen by the command group. The noise level increased sharply and reports started coming in via radio that resistance was extremely heavy. It was soon apparent that Mike Company had walked into a death trap. A perfect ambush had been executed and for those on the hill there was no way back down safely as they had become surrounded and victims of murderous cross-fire. The hunters had suddenly become the hunted. Reports of Marine casualties came in including the death of a platoon leader — a friend of mine (Second Lieutenant "Bussy" Mitchell). Eventually, only one radio was transmitting from the top of the hill to the command group. After some time, it appeared nearly impossible to sustain the assault with the number of casualties being suffered.

At the same time the command group had clustered together in a bomb crater located at the edge of a ring of death that had begun to fill with dead and wounded Marines and NVA soldiers. The crater provided some protection except for the mortar rounds which had begun to drop around us. One landed in front of us and about a minute or so later one landed behind us. To an artilleryman that's called bracketing — the next round lands in the middle of where the first two landed, which was where we were located. Fortunately, it never came, but I kept expecting it to show up for a long time. I knew if it landed in the bomb crater we would all be dead. North Vietnamese spotters no doubt had located the command group by observing the radio antennas on the backs of the radio operators. It was now just a matter of zeroing in on us and issuing the deadly order, "fire for effect."

We kept looking at the steep, massive hillside in front of us for the enemy mortar position but to no avail. Marines spotted a tree on top of the hill in which was located either a sniper or forward observer. Rifle and artillery fire were directed at the position. We weren't positive that we had destroyed the mortar position, despite the interruption in rounds falling on us, so the Commanding Officer ordered me and my radio operator out of the bomb crater in a fruitless attempt to detect the unknown mortar position. We moved diagonally towards the hill, remained exposed for a few minutes, and then re-turned to the bomb crater after being ordered back by the CO. Eventually, the mortar stopped firing at us, though I don't know how it was destroyed. My attempt to silence the enemy mortar position was recognized when I was nominated for a Bronze Star for the effort — but the award is still in the mail! In reality, though, my efforts were minimal compared to a lot of fighting Marines who truly deserved medals.

I also remember seeing from the command position one black Marine close to us charging up the slope of the hill when suddenly a mortar round went off behind him. He buckled at the knees, remained stationary with both knees planted on the ground for about 10 seconds, and then suddenly got up and kept moving forward. I thought for sure he had been seriously injured, but apparently the shrapnel had blown away from him and only the concussion from the explosion had momentarily stunned him.

Disengagement

By early afternoon our company was ordered to disengage as the Marines on the hill were starting to run low on ammunition in addition to taking heavy casualties. The decision was made to pull back off the hill with the wounded only and to leave the dead behind. This is contrary to the Marine Corps philosophy and tradition of always bringing back the dead even at risk of life. We had been trained that way and were expected to always look out for each other — dead or alive. But the reality of the situation dictated that only the wounded be brought back off the hill. Otherwise, we faced having extremely heavy casualties as the company had already been reduced to fifty percent effectiveness.

In an effort to help the Marines get back down off the hill, the call for more artillery came in. I called in artillery on the backside (south side) of the hill but had difficulty in hearing the rounds explode due to all the noise from rifle and small arms fire. Because I couldn't hear the rounds exploding after being advised by the battery they had been fired, I called for white phosphorous (WP) marking rounds, which create a white billow of smoke upon impact. I remember seeing the white billow puffing up from the backside of the hill. It was an awkward fire mission to say the least. I adjusted the rounds by bringing the rounds closer to the Marines and called in the command "fire for effect," which alerts the battery to fire all tubes (normally 6) simultaneously. The battery fired, and then, I brought it in closer to the Marines. Finally, the call came in to bring it in even closer. A battlefield situation had arisen which I had not been trained for and never expected to happen. I advised the command group that my call back to the battery would possibly result in the death of our own people - I would be calling in artillery on top of Marines. The order came back to get the Marines off the hill at whatever cost before I adjusted the next barrage even closer. When I called in the next mission, I was fearful of hitting our own Marines, and when I observed the artillery rounds explode on the ridge of the hill, I immediately felt remorse, sure that Marines were likely killed or wounded by the barrage. (Note: Years later I talked to Donald Hossack who was on the hill at the time. He confirmed that the artillery rounds landed dangerously close to the Marines, but none were hit by the shrapnel. As he described the results of the fire mission to me, "It was perfect." No Marines had been hit. This event was mentioned in General John Admire's fictional account about the battle in "Darker Than Dark").

The Marines started slowly trickling back off the hill. Some were visible to the command group as they approached us carrying the wounded. I recall seeing one Marine whose pectorals appeared to have been almost shot off. Apparently, he had been shot at and hit from a ninety degree angle. Another half an inch and surely he, too, would have been among the dead. I remember seeing one Staff Sergeant (Terrence Leo Meier), an outstanding NCO and leader, carrying one of his wounded men piggyback along with two rifles. He was cursing as he stomped back off the hill. His bitterness about what had happened was very apparent. He was later nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor. He never did receive it — although I believe he was awarded the Silver Star - and was killed in action a few months later in an ambush on Route 9 at Ca Lu.

At the same time, we were being relieved by another company of Marines. Their mission was to help bring the wounded back down off the hill rather than try to capture the hill. They were from Company K, Third

Battalion, Ninth Marines (K/3/9). The company commander was briefed about the situation by our company commander. We then moved back to the smaller hill we had left from early in the morning and settled down at almost the exact spot where we had stayed the night before. By now, the wounded NVA soldier that had been captured earlier in the day lay dead in the heat of the day. No immediate effort had been made to bury or move his body. Captain Bennett gave 1st Lt. Joe Cialone the unenviable task of making a head count in an attempt to ascertain who was missing from the 161 man company and who had been wounded and needed medical treatment and evacuation. A final count of casualties by nightfall would show that 26 had been killed and 54 wounded. This did not include the casualties from the company that relieved us. It would suffer 17 dead and 43 wounded. Helicopters were called in to evacuate the seriously wounded before nightfall. Word went out that there would be no med-evacs after dark.

I was getting short of water and saw an opportunity to fill my canteens from a marshy area where water was standing one to two inches deep. The water was stagnant and dirty looking after being stirred up like a bowl of soup by Marines wading through it with their muddy boots. I filled my canteens anyway, dropped a couple of halizone purification tablets in them, and waited the usual thirty minutes for them to take effect. It was better than having no liquid intake at all. In addition to becoming a battle casualty, one could also become a victim of heat exhaustion very easily.

It was dark when we clustered together for a staff meeting. Comments were made by those who had been on the hill during the day. Someone mentioned that signal whistles had been utilized by the North Vietnamese - a tactic rarely employed during the war. Supposedly the North Vietnamese soldiers had shouted in English “Put on your helmets, Marines! We’re coming after you!” but I don’t recall anybody mentioning that. Staff Sergeant Meier described to fellow Marines how one member of his platoon had been killed — “He got his face shot off.” It was very upsetting to say the least. A few names of those who had been killed were mentioned, including 2nd Lt. “Bussy” Mitchell, although I didn’t know many of them, since I hadn’t been with the company long.

One unusual scary situation which came up was that the forward observer with K/3/9 had been wounded in action and his commanding officer wanted a replacement. I and my radioman were chosen as the replacement team since our company had been depleted of manpower and was scheduled to return to the rear. Our positions were disjointed so that my radio operator and I had to walk across open ground in the dark to join the new company. Everyone was poised for a counterattack, but yet we were ordered to walk over to the position of the other company. I verified that the other company knew we were headed in their direction as I knew we would be challenged by Marines defending their perimeter. I remember thinking to myself, don’t freeze up when challenged by a Marine in a hostile environment. It was a situation in which I was momentarily afraid of my own comrades due to the tense environment following the all day battle for Hill 881 South. A lot of adrenaline was still flowing even after the major engagement.

I didn’t stay with the new company (K/3/9) very long. However, I did stay long enough to briefly meet the command group and “loan” my binoculars to somebody. I never saw the binoculars again as nobody would admit to having them. A couple of months later I would be involved in an investigation of unaccounted government property. Someone was assigned to make a special trip out to our base camp to interrogate me. I just told the investigating officer they had been taken by Marines, and the case was closed.

Mike Company (3/3) was sent back to the rear on May 2, 1967. I volunteered on May 1 for reassignment to the battalion command group, led by Lt. Col. Gary Wilder, as the artillery liaison officer, after being given the options to either return to the rear with M/3/3 or stay in the field. The command group was located about

1,000 meters northeast of Hill 881 South and directed the movement of the rifle companies. I remember watching with the command group the pounding of Hill 881 South on May 1 and part of May 2 by Marine F4 Phantom jets from the First Marine Air Wing. They just seemed to come out of nowhere in a steep dive. They'd release bombs and then shoot back up for altitude as the bombs exploded below. A total of 107 close air support missions and 45 direct air support missions, were flown, "a near record for support of one battalion in one day." It was an awesome display of our weapons capability. It was also demoralizing to know that the bodies of the Marines still on the hill were being chopped up into mincemeat. Whoever was going to clean up the mess afterwards would have the gruesome task of filling up the body bags.

I recall one Japanese magazine reporter coming over to our position and talking to us. I remember thinking as I began to talk to him how our countries had fought against each other more than 20 years earlier and the task of pushing the Japanese defenders off the Pacific Islands had been handed to the Marine Corps. I explained to him what had happened the day before on Hill 881 South. He said he was thirsty and wanted to know if we had some water. I had placed my three canteens down in a foxhole, protecting them from the sun, and offered him a drink. He was quite surprised to find a cool drink in the heat of the day. Later on, he was advised that a helicopter would soon be arriving for transportation back to the Khe Sanh Combat Base. He immediately left, as I'm sure he didn't want to stay out over night with us.

Life On Top of Hill 881 South

The battalion command group eventually went up to the top of Hill 881 South via helicopter after it was captured without resistance on May 2, 1967, —as Marines reported back "no NVA, no trees, no nothin." I arrived with the command group around mid-afternoon before all the bodies of 37 dead Marines, encased in plastic body bags, had been removed from the hill. There was the possibility of the bodies not being picked by helicopter before nightfall. The thought went through my mind that I would be sleeping on top of the hill with my dead comrades-in-arms only yards away from my bunker. However, helicopters arrived before dusk and picked up the remaining bodies. The stench was almost unbearable, even after the dead had been removed, as some dead North Vietnamese soldiers remained buried inside collapsed bunkers destroyed by artillery, bombs, napalm, and cannon fire, and maggots had begun to feast on their corpses. I would stay there for another 10 days and watch as Hill 881 North (north of our position) was taken away from the North Vietnamese by Marines from 2/3, and then, counterattacked unsuccessfully by the NVA (which had emerged from caves as I was to learn many years later). Meanwhile, Lang Vei (south of our position) was nearly overrun during a diversionary attack.

For beautiful views, I could always look to the west toward tranquil Laos and think that was where the battered enemy had retreated in defeat. But primarily I spent most of the time looking east towards Khe Sanh wandering if and when we would ever return to the "rear" where a hot meal and cold shower would be waiting as well as a letter from home.

In the meantime, I saw and talked to OCS classmate 1st Lt. Howell Wright on Hill 881 South, He was leading a scout unit of approximately 20 Marines from 3/9 that were picking up supplies and ammo. They were looking for egress routes to block the NVA from escaping from the battlefield. They eluded the Marines but B-52 strikes killed many of the NVA soldiers before they reached Laos.

A general officer visited the battle ground after arriving via helicopter. He walked around the hill escorted by an aide-de-camp. He finally got off by himself and walked over my way. We exchanged greetings and he said to me, "You all did a great job taking this hill. I was watching from a helicopter and you all did a

great job." I thanked him for his compliments as he continued walking around and talking to other Marines.

I recall seeing from atop Hill 881 South a thunderstorm south of our position over Laos near Co Roc Mountain. I had my back turned to the west when suddenly a flash of lightning came out of the sky. I turned around and looked towards the West end of the hill and saw a Marine running down the South side of the hill holding his head with a couple of other Marines in trail chasing him. Apparently, a lightning strike occurred close by putting him in a state of shock. I think one or two others were stunned, too. They were soon evacuated by helicopter to the rear.

My shelter on the hill was a one of some 40 to 50 remaining bunkers which had been built by the North Vietnamese - they had constructed approximately 250 bunkers. It had 3-4 layers of logs covered by a couple feet of dirt and was located under a tree in which an enemy sniper or forward observer had been screened during the battle. An inscription had been carved by a knife into the base of the tree and was still clearly readable even after the hill had been almost denuded by bombs and napalm. A South Vietnamese interpreter assigned to our unit interpreted the inscription for me. It read, "Life is beautiful. Must have high spirit to fight good." It was quite apparent to all of us that their spirit had been extremely high during the battle and that they at least had to be respected for their tenacity. My only souvenir from the war is a cigarette lighter which has inscribed on it the quotation, cited above, along with my name, unit insignia, and unit name, "CHARLIE BATTERY 1/12."

We had a church service while on the hill. I recall it being held on the West end of the hill in a bomb crater. Both Catholic and Protestant services were held. Some of us sat on ammunition boxes and listened to a Navy Chaplain give the sermon. Usually they went out on battalion size operations, though they never carried a weapon (at least ours didn't). It seemed so strange at times — listening to a beautiful sermon on peace and salvation and knowing full well that if you didn't kill the enemy first, you would be meeting your Maker real fast.

Finally, I remember being asleep one night inside my bunker when I heard the artillery battery fire two rounds from the Khe Sanh Combat Base. It's funny how your senses tell you such things as who fired the rounds and which direction they came from. In this case it was coming from "friendlies," but both rounds just happened to impact close to our perimeter — another miscalculation by the artillery battery. I grabbed a radio and called the battery to advise them to cease fire. I hopped out of the bunker and saw my radio operator holding his jaw. I thought for sure he had been hit, though luckily nobody had been, and asked him if he was OK. He turned around and said, "Oh, Lt. Rogers, I've got such a bad toothache."

Back to the 3/3 Base Camp

After we departed Hill 881 South on May 12,1967 and returned to the Khe Sanh Combat Base, I figured I had spent 18 days in the field without a shower. I could tell my body was beginning to pay a toll, not so much by the B. O., but by the 3 fingernails which had begun to rot due to a fungus. I couldn't wait until I could take a shower (cold or hot — it didn't matter) and clean my body with soap. And, of course, I couldn't wait for mail call for some cheerful mail from the United States.

On May 13, we boarded another Rough Rider at Khe Sanh for our trip back along Route 9 to the Rockpile. We hadn't gone too far down the road when the convoy stopped. It wasn't the NVA this time. It was an accident alongside the road. One of the trucks carrying troops had gone off the side of the road and crashed. I never knew how many Marines were injured, but several were. We later made it back to our base camp

at the Rockpile around mid-afternoon where I finally got a cold shower and warm meal.

The Hill Fights had been a ghastly experience to say the least as some 155 U. S. Marines and an estimated 940 NVA soldiers had been killed, while some 425 Marines had been wounded and maimed. We had all earned our combat pay during that horrendous experience.

Khe Sanh

My last 3 months were spent surrounded by beautiful green mountains at the Khe Sanh Combat Base, the name being derived from a nearby Vietnamese province capital called Khe Sanh, which was located in an area known for its French operated coffee plantations. It was surprisingly calm duty compared to what I had just been through and to what would occur shortly after I departed Vietnam. Most of the late summer action was east of our position around Gio Linh, Con Thien, and Ca Lu, which was located along Route 9 very close to where I had just departed and involved the infantry battalion I had just left. A lot of people at Khe Sanh were interested in the "Hill Fights," which had occurred in the spring of 1967, and I was one of the few around who could relate to the battle. Several of them recalled it as being the battle which prompted a congressional investigation of the M-16 rifle after a Marine wrote home complaining to his parents about how the rifle had malfunctioned during the fighting resulting in excessive casualties.

I also remember attending the 26th Marines regimental intelligence briefings for our battery commander, Captain Pardee. They were held inside (supposedly) an old reinforced French bunker. It was well known that the Ho Chi Minh trail was being used to transport vast amounts of supplies, ammunition, and arms southward thru Laos and Cambodia to South Vietnam. I never really did get the impression from the intelligence briefings, though, that great quantities of what were being shipped down the trail were also being dropped off nearby for an attack against Khe Sanh. Perhaps the stockpiling of supplies didn't start taking place until after I left. Still, I couldn't believe it when several months later I was back in the United States reading about the biggest battle of the war ("The Siege") taking place where I had just left. The shadow of death always seemed to be one step behind me.