

Book II Introduction

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In *Book II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs,"* I relate the stories of Marines and Navy Corpsmen in combat in Vietnam and, as in *Book I*, their uncommon heroism. The following personal narratives tell a unique history of the Vietnam War period. It was a time when idealistic young men served in the Marines in a war between two countries half the land mass of Texas on the other side of the earth to stop the spread of Communism.

Book I dealt with the training of Marine enlisted and officers leading up to Vietnam and the ensuing combat stories from my unique viewpoint of having been an enlisted man and commissioned as an officer through the Enlisted Commissioning Program. Many other Marines and Docs added their insights of being personally involved in fighting the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese as well. *Book II* goes to the heart of both books by relating the stories of Leathernecks and their medical personnel, in the air and on the ground, involved in the Vietnam War from the get-go. This is a book about the bleeding side of WAR.

A perfect example is the opening chapter which tells of a Marine mobile heliborne force codenamed Kingfisher consisting of men from Alpha Co., 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment who are dropped into various landing zones by Sea Knights to cut off the escape of an enemy platoon. Two squads of 3rd Platoon, Alpha Co. Leathernecks chase the fleeing Viet Cong troops into an extensive minefield above Hill 55 either in or near the Da Nang Anti-Infiltration System barrier where they are pinned down by enemy fire and trip numerous devastating mines. The title of the book comes into play as *American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs"* all work together on the ground and in the air to defend, treat and extract the battered squads with their dead and wounded from the battlefield...and annihilate the enemy.

I put my heart and soul into a chapter tracking down nine Marine officers from my officer training class at The Basic School (TBS) at Quantico, Virginia in Charlie- or 3-69 graduating on February 5, 1969, who were killed in Vietnam in 1969-70. Five of the nine officers killed-in-action, KIA, from my class of 238 second lieutenants came from my 3rd Platoon at TBS---Tony Kupka, John Lakin, Nick Huth, Butch Harvey and John Lassitter. Three other TBS platoons suffered the losses of Garry Schanck Jr., Al Nelson Jr., Al Benson and Ted Vivillacqua. Eight of the nine were either in grunt platoons of the 5th Marine Regiment or 1st Reconnaissance Battalion while the ninth KIA was a Cobra gunship pilot as part of Scarface HML-367. It truly was a labor of love to tell these brave young men's stories and how their loved ones and friends felt a void in their lives at their passing. I wanted to give depth and a life lived to the fullest and humanize their loss rather than leave their mark in passing in the Vietnam War as just a name chiseled on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial "The Wall" in Washington, D.C.

All the research and time I lavishly allotted over 20 years to tracking down each story allowed me to solve a mystery of a newfound friend I had made in Vietnam. He ended up missing-in-action, MIA, while on his very first 1st Recon patrol deep in enemy controlled territory. After a firefight with VC soldiers, a wounded 2ndLt. David Skibbe was accidentally left behind in the darkening shadows of the Que Son Mountains, southwest of Da Nang, South Vietnam, as night fell March 2, 1970. A cable line he was attached to and being hoisted up to a Sea Knight transport helicopter snapped sending him plummeting to the ground unseen by his Recon team. His commanding officer, Capt. LaVoy Don "Mac" McVey, would also be declared MIA as he met the same fate as Skibbe in trying to reach the ground by cable hoist to search for the missing lieutenant later that same night. I finally solved the nagging question as to whether the Illinois native survived his approximately 50-foot fall in a surprising revelation by a Viet Cong deputy commander 21 years after he went missing.

Visiting with 1st Recon Marines from Col. Bill Drumright's unit from 1970 at his Tennessee farm in 2003, I had the good fortune of meeting MSgt. John F. Hare. He told an intriguing war story about his good friend Gy.Sgt. Terry Moore whom he served three tours in Vietnam with beginning in 1961.

While on a daring rescue mission the night of September 1, 1970, Moore rappelled down a rope hanging from a hovering Sea Knight helicopter without his Swedish-K submachine gun to be with three of his 1st Recon Marines who had rappelled to the ground before him unbeknownst to them into the middle of a large North Vietnamese force, either a battalion or a regiment! Seems the Recon officer on board wanted to point out green tracer ground fire to Moore and accidentally dislodged the gunny's weapon from his shoulder sending it off into the darkness to the ground. Rather than take time to grab another automatic weapon from someone aboard the helicopter, he never wavered leaping on the rope to rappel to his waiting men below as the helicopter came under fire and had to abandon the four Marines to their fate and prevented the remainder of the team from joining them. Heroism like Moore's or any enlisted man is rarely awarded medals for such actions. Their reward is the respect of their men and an inner feeling of having done the right thing...to live and should it come to it...die with their Marines with honor. It is tough men like Moore...and Hare, that the Marine Corps turns out year after year and takes its mystical tradition and *Semper Fidelis, Always Faithful, to heart.*

For some strange reason through the years nothing beyond a few paragraphs in books here and there has been written about Lt.Col. William Groom "Bill" Leftwich Jr. of Germantown, Tennessee. He was my CO at 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment from May-September 1970, otherwise he might have escaped my notice as well had I not briefly served under him in Vietnam. At 2/1 he managed to earn a Silver Star with his heliborne strategy that wiped out a significant chunk of the Viet Cong leadership south of Da Nang August 4, 1970. Before that he served with the Vietnamese Marine Brigade in 1965 for 11 months as an advisor and earned a Navy Cross as well as a chest full of medals to go along with the Marine Corps' second highest medal.

In *Book I* Leftwich was praised as an outstanding officer who made some major changes at 2/1 as CO upon assuming command without going into his impressive background. In *Book II* exactly six chapters attempt to tell this Tennessean's story and his untimely death in a helicopter crash in 1970. Texas billionaire Ross Perot, who graduated with Leftwich from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1953, awards a *Leftwich Trophy* to the most outstanding Marine captain in combat each year (since 1979). The Commandant of the Marine Corps with Perot in attendance generally makes the presentation. Having personally observed Leftwich in Vietnam, I already had a high opinion of his leadership methods and was impressed he listened to subordinates down to the enlisted ranks. Actually, on several occasions the colonel implemented their suggestions. He had a leadership characteristic that, in my opinion, many great officers have that inspires men in combat and had he lived beyond 1970 would have seen him eventually reach the top position in the USMC, Commandant of the Marine Corps. He led from the front and it ended up getting him killed.

Col. William Covington "Wild Bill" Drumright was another tough combat Marine I was honored to interview before his death in December 2003. I write about Drumright's war exploits from taped conversations during a Memorial Weekend in 2003, over the phone prior to that and comments made in the *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, Vietnamization, 1970-71* publication. The 1st Recon colonel's gravelly voice at 75 was strong as he related war stories and no bullshit truisms about Marines in combat from the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

As was the case in *Book I*, I have included a special feature of this book that entails some of the maps we used in Vietnam with all the grid lines depicting specific points where Marine activities occurred (Dai Loc map of the famed Arizona Territory and Dodge City areas southwest of Da Nang, South Vietnam and Da Nang map located at the back of the book after "Perspectives on the Vietnam War--Part II").

The actual map coordinates of most the activities are shown by a footnote numeral followed by a letter of the alphabet and referred to in the Footnote section under the respective chapter. Not all the activities are depicted on the maps but a fair amount are referenced in that section, i.e., Hill 848.^{1A} Map Reading

101 is simple. Basically the two numbers at the front end of a six-number map coordinate, i.e., (1. Dai Loc map, Sheet 6640 IV: A. AT907507), AT90 are the numbers marked on the map left to right. The fourth and fifth numbers, 50, are the numbers running up and down the map. Where AT90 and 50 intersect on the map will be the 1,000 meter grid square you're working with. Each of the numbers in the third and sixth slots equal 100 meters or 1/10th of a 1,000 meter grid line. AT907 would be 700 meters from the left corner of the intersecting map coordinates moving to the right on the 90 grid line. The 7 or sixth number in my example represents how many meters north or up you go, 700 meters on the 50 grid line, after moving to the right 700 meters, hence, AT907507. Those coordinates put you on the (3) of Phu Nhuan (3) which is roughly 100 meters west of a loose surface all-weather road.

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

"Perspectives on the Vietnam War" at the beginning and end of this book gives a forum to 21 individuals, mostly Marines and Navy Corpsmen, to say what's on their mind relating to their combat experiences fighting in Vietnam. Some of the quotes came from excerpts in interviews I had with these men looking over their shoulder in hindsight at the war while others were a direct request for a heartfelt comment on combat in retrospect almost four decades later. I tried to include a representative response from enlisted and officers, grunts/Recon and Navy Corpsmen, pilots and a crew chief, two ladies one of which lost her brother and the other her fiancé, an *Associated Press* war correspondent as well as a Pulitzer Prize winning *Associated Press* photographer.

For instance, Col. Drumright talks about how he managed the fear he felt when extracting his Recon Marines from a hot landing zone and praying to God for his Marines safe return. LCpl. Howard Ball, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines Forward Observer, says he was the luckiest Marine in Vietnam after his foot crashed through a small well-camouflaged hole almost tripping a wire attached to a large bomb. Sgt. J.D. Barber, HMM-263 Peachbush crew chief, explains his reason for joining the Marine Corps was to be a part of the world's greatest fighting force and more importantly, because he felt that he owed a debt to his country. Lt.Gen. Wallace C. "Chip" Gregson, a 1st Recon lieutenant in 1970, felt his Marines would never get the credit they deserve for serving in Vietnam.

Also, from the beginning I use military time in this book. For those unfamiliar with military time, we operate off a 24-hour time period. For instance, 0100 is 1 a.m.; 1000 is 10 a.m.; 1200 is high noon; 1300 is 1 p.m.; 1600 is 4 p.m.; 2000 is 8 p.m.; and 2400 is midnight. In a war zone a Marine needs to differentiate hours night from day when issuing orders calling for a specific time as he's on call 24/7.

My intentions initially were to write about my time in the Marine Corps, a core of 21 Marines and Navy Corpsmen as well as Dr. Bernard Fall, who wrote extensively about the French Indochina and Vietnam Wars, and was killed among Marines. As my research found other combat stories needing to be told, *Book I* grew into *Book II*. The final tally on individuals covered in *Book II* alone came to roughly 529 Marines (392 grunts/Recon/attachments and 137 Marine Air Wing pretty well evenly split between officers and enlisted men), 16 U.S. Navy Corpsmen called "Docs" in the bush, two U.S. Navy doctors in battalion-level medical facilities, 22 U.S. Army, 15 U.S. Navy, seven U.S. Air Force and one state department personnel. So an interesting little book centered around Marines and Docs in the Vietnam War grew into an historical epic with a cast of thousands...okay, make that roughly 592 men in this book alone.

In the 2-book series, I wanted the reader to feel what the Marines and Navy Corpsmen experienced during their tours in Vietnam through their personal recollections corroborated in many instances by official Marine Operations Journals, After Action Reports and USMC publications. I think the only way to understand what went on in a war, whether it be World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War I or II or the wars still being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan (as of 2011), is to read what the men have to say who have been and understand their sacrifices of life, trauma and loss of civilian innocence. War is not a place for

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the weak of heart or will. It hardens young men into old men and that 1,000-yard stare combat veterans lapse into occasionally is not a myth or an "act" but of horrors seen at war too terrible for them to recount.

Maybe *Books I and II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs"* in some way will help those who have loved ones who have been to war understand them better. The other hope is that the men named in these books are remembered and honored for their service. We who shared combat with them as part of the Marine/Navy Corpsmen brotherhood will never forget our comrades-in-arms.

Semper Fi,
Michael Dan Kellum
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