

THE BATTLE AT NONG SON

by

Johnnie M. Clark

THE BATTLE AT NONG SON is adapted from a chapter in Mr. Clark's latest book, GUNNER'S GLORY, a nonfiction book published in November 2004, by Presidio Books, a division of Random House.

Contact:

Jeanne Drewsen

Jeanne Drewsen Agency

250 Mercer Street, #C505

ph. 212-433-1885 / 917-371-6400

fax 212-414-3231

jdrewsen@aya.yale.edu

Nong Son, Vietnam
July 4, 1967
(27th day of the 5th month, Year of the Goat [Dinh Mui])

(US Counteroffensive Phase III)

1st Platoon, Company F (Fox Company)
2nd Battalion/5th Regiment of the 1st Marine Division
is holding a key position at the Coal Mine

Characters (in order of appearance):

Corporal Thom Searfoss

Lance Corporal Michael Harris

Corporal Dean Johnson

PFC Don Rouzan

Corporal Roger Hug

Corporal Bob Bowermaster

Lance Corporal Ray Alvey

These men were all age 18, 19, 20

The World Premiere of **THE BATTLE AT NONG SON** was presented as part of the TSI Playtime Series, at TSI (Theatre Studio Inc.), at 750 Eighth Avenue, New York, New York on Saturday, May 1, and Sunday, May 2, 2004.

The Producing/Artistic Director of the TSI Playtime Series is A.M. Raychel.
The play was directed by Jason Grant.

The Original Cast (in order of appearance) was:

Corporal Thom Searfoss	Brian Hathaway
Lance Corporal Michael Harris	Brad Heikes
Corporal Dean Johnson	Michael Mastroddi
PFC Don Rouzan	Josh Stein-Saper
Corporal Roger Hug	Ian Campbell
Corporal Bob Bowermaster	Jeff McDonnell
Lance Corporal Ray Alvey	David Crane

THE BATTLE AT NONG SON was presented to the Playwrights and Directors Group at The Actors Studio, 432 44th Street, New York, New York on Monday, January 24, 2005, directed by Rita Gam.

The Cast in The Actor's Studio production (in order of appearance) was:

Narrator	Peter Powell
Corporal Thom Searfoss	Andrew Fisher
Lance Corporal Michael Harris	Brad Heikes
Corporal Dean Johnson	Colin Clark
PFC Don Rouzan	Mark Vance
Corporal Roger Hug	Lucas Blondheim
Corporal Bob Bowermaster	Ian Unterman
Lance Corporal Ray Alvey	Josh Stein-Saper

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Johnnie M. Clark joined the Marine Corps at 17 years of age after graduating from St. Petersburg High School. He served as a machine gunner with the famed 5th Marine Regiment during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. He was wounded 3 times, mortar round, grenade, and gunshot.

During his rehabilitation from gunshot wounds in Okinawa, Mr. Clark began training in Martial Arts as part of his rehab program. He is now a 7th Dan Black Belt Master of Tae Kwon Do, a Korean martial art. He owns and operates a school in St. Petersburg. He is a lecturer and winner of the U.S. Marine Corps Combat Correspondents Association Brigadier General Robert L. Denig Memorial Distinguished Service Award. His books GUNS UP! and SEMPER FIDELIS are recommended reading by Lt. Col. Madonna, former MCG, to all newly commissioned officers at The Basic School. Johnnie Clark is a graduate and writer in residence at St. Petersburg College.

Mr. Clark has been awarded America's 3rd highest medal for bravery and gallantry in combat, The Silver Star, 3 Purple Hearts, The Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm, The Civil Action Combat Medal, The Marine Combat Ribbon among other decorations.

Mr. Clark is the author of:

GUNS UP! Nonfiction / Random House. Now in a 28th printing and available in Audio.

SEMPER FIDELIS Fiction / Ballantine

THE OLD CORPS Fiction / Ballantine

NO BETTER WAY TO DIE Fiction / Ballantine

THE BATTLE AT NONG SON is adapted from a chapter in Mr. Clark's latest book, **GUNNER'S GLORY**, a nonfiction book published in November 2004, by Presidio Books, a division of Random House. The chapter is entitled "Melvin Earl Newlin."

Excerpt from **GUNNER'S GLORY**
by Johnnie M. Clark

“The life expectancy of a machine gunner in Vietnam was somewhere around seven seconds after a firefight began. There are a couple of reasons why that startling statistic is accurate. Every good army is taught to knock out the machine gun first, the firepower and the heart of an infantry platoon. A battle at night is a black world with white muzzle flashes that are gone as quickly as they appear. At night the machine gun is usually the only visible target. Every fifth bullet in a belt of machine gun ammo is a tracer round. When a weapon is firing 550 or 600 rounds per minute those tracer rounds turn into a bright orange or golden arrow that allows the gunner to see where his fire is hitting. It points out enemy targets for the infantry and pinpoints enemy positions for pilots above. With that gun you lay down a wall of lead to cover Marines on the move or to protect a corpsman helping a wounded man. The machine gun can stop an onslaught or begin the assault. A machine gun can cut down a tree or blow holes through concrete block buildings to kill hidden enemy soldiers.

That golden arrow of tracer rounds that is so vital is the same arrow that points right back at the machine gunner pulling that trigger. While rifles flash on and off like lightning bugs in the night never giving away their position for more than an instant, the machine gunner is not only the one visible target but the most important. You know that truth every single time you pull the trigger. You know every enemy soldier will see your position the instant you open fire. The gunner knows that the enemy will throw everything they have at him, mortars, rockets, grenades, satchel charges, rifle and machine guns. I served as a gunner with the famed 5th Marine Regiment. During my tour with the 5th Marines I knew of no machine gunner in the Regiment that was not killed or wounded. Many were wounded more than once. It was the same for every Marine gunner no matter which war they were fighting.”

THE BATTLE AT NONG SON

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: Me and Bob Bowermaster were stuck in Okinawa together waiting to turn 18 years old before they would ship us to the Nam. We hit the bush at the same time and in the same squad. We were put in the 2nd Platoon of Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. We went on Operation Union II in June, 67. It was brutal. I was in the paddy that day on June 2nd with Anderson, Sugar Bear, Weed, Holloway, Gomez, Lt. Shultz was there, Richardson was there, he was humping the radio for the Lt. We had 'guns with our squad that day, Hernandez was on the gun, he was a crazy one that had just extended in country for 6 months. He had just gotten back from his leave, 30 days came free if you extended. We had just moved out of a tree line, on line across a 1000 yard rice paddy. We left our 60mm mortars set up in the tree line. We was about half way when Richardson yelled out that 60mm was going to fire a couple of rounds into the tree line ahead of us. One of the 1/5 companies had just moved through to our left. See, we were spare-hawk to 1/5 for this OP, operation. Boom! About fifty-yards ahead of us, "Short round!" Everybody starts yelling at once. Half of us had dropped to the ground. To our immediate front holes appeared in the paddy dikes. NVA jump up right in front of me and Anderson, coming out of spider-holes. The entire tree line opens up with red and green and blue tracer rounds, zeroing in on Marines all over the paddy. Enemy mortars was being fired from the tree line in front of us and was getting closer. We couldn't put our heads above a paddy dike. Weed was hit in the neck, Sugar Bear was also hit in the neck. Lieutenant Shultz was hit in the leg and was bleeding bad. Richardson was hit in the head and a chunk of his head was gone, about the size of a silver-dollar, he was alive and

functioning. One of the ammo-humpers for Guns was shot in the jaw and the lower jaw was gone. This was only the very beginning of this battle. We killed over 700 NVA that day.

The outfit was recuperating and rebuilding from the slaughter of Operation Union II. Casualties had been very high and there were not that many old salts left so it was a pretty green company. Anytime you got to sit on a hill or a bridge that was considered R&R for the grunts. Anything other than setting up ambushes every night or humping through the worst terrain on earth in 115 degree heat or monsoon rains during the day was an absolute vacation.

The coal mine at Nong Son was the only active coal mine in South Vietnam. We were on Hill 351 to set security while a little defoliant was sprayed around the under brush, the brush was getting real thick and the gooks could sneak right up on top of you. The defoliant was in these big orange 55 gallon drums. We had two squads on top of the mountain and one squad on the 105 level about seventy-feet below the top. The 105 area was leveled out and cleared for the artillery and the 106 recoilless. On top were 2 squads, a couple of 81mm mortars, the Command Post and two engineers for the chemicals or defoliant to get rid of the vegetation creeping up the hill.

There was an Army team on the top with a Jeep that had a big spot light mounted on it for night vision into Antenna Valley across the Thu Bon River. Across the river was Hill 401 or Recon Mountain. At the other end of Antenna Valley was the saddle, two mountain peaks that formed a saddle. The other two platoons were set in the middle plateau of the mountain and around the base of the hill in their bunkers. The bunkers at the base was about 200 yards apart with trenches and firing holes connecting them.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: In early June I was sitting in the EM Club at An Hoa Combat Base having a few beers and shooting the breeze with some of my buddies from the 81 mortar platoon. One of the Marines mentioned that it was his birthday. Well there was a tradition we had about giving the Marine having the birthday one of our two beer ration. We were laughing and jaw-jacking and one of my buddies asked me when my birthday was. "September 27th," I said. We were at a big table with Marines from various units.

Somebody yelled, "Of what year?"

I looked around to find a face to go with the voice and this baby faced Marine was looking at me waiting for an answer. "1948."

He looked surprised. "Hey, I was born September 27th, 1948."

He introduced himself as PFC Mel Newlin, a machine gunner with Fox Company. We hit it off immediately and became friends. He was easy to talk to and a good guy. An Hoa had a shack of sorts where you could watch movies. Mel and me went to the movies and watched re-runs of the old television series, Combat and then we watched Batman. It was great seeing anything that reminded you of home. We called back home, back in the world. Nam was so primitive and deadly and we became primitive and deadly too.

Sometimes it was hard to remember what the "world" was like. Batman helped.

That night Mel came back to our hootch and Gary Nolan, Henry Marshall, Mel and me played some "back-alley". That's a card game that the Grunts were always playing when they had a few minutes to sit. Mel told me that he was from Ohio and that he was proud to be a Marine. He said that he was proud to be serving his country in Nam. The truth was that even though it was scary, most of the Marines felt that way, even the ones that never said it.

Mel was really young, only 18 just like me but he looked even younger than 18 years old. I think he could have passed for a 15 year old. But his pride in being a Marine wasn't young, it was as old as the Corps itself.

The 5th Marines were rebuilding and resting up after the fierce battle of Operation Union II. The 5th Marines took heavy casualties on that Op but probably killed more than a thousand NVA. I had just come in from the conclusion of Operation Arizona where I had served as the FO, Forward Observer, attached to Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. A week or so after the conclusion of Arizona I was permanently attached to Echo Company, 2/5 as their FO. We stayed in An Hoa for a few weeks. Mel and I had a chance to become friends and talked a lot about home. Home was everybody's favorite subject. Most of the guys would dream about girls or cars. We gabbed about our families and what we were going to do when we got home. Mel looked at me and said, "I really want to get a college degree."

"Yeah, that's a good plan."

"I hope I live long enough to accomplish that goal."

I told him that he would be just fine. That's the way things went for the next few weeks. We'd go to chow together, play cards, go the movies at night or just sit around talking about how home sick we were.

On June 23rd, Mel and I had chow together at the mess hall and afterwards went back to his hooch and he showed me pictures of his family and friends. We skipped the movies and just sat around jaw-jacking. I told him that I was going to be leaving with Echo Company the morning of the 24th to deploy to the Nong Son Outpost. It was getting late and

I told Mel I better be getting back to my hootch in the 81 mortar platoon area. He wished me good luck and we gave each other a, Semper Fi.

CORPORAL DEAN JOHNSON: Pete Newlin and me had been in Operation New Castle, Mountain Goat, Union and now Operation Calhoun. Union II was the worst. We lost our CO, Captain Graham two or three weeks earlier in Operation Union II. He was awarded the Medal of Honor. I was sitting against a sandbag bunker at An Hoa Combat Base, sweating like a pig and talking to Pete. I don't know if anyone even knew that Pete's real name was Melvin. Pete and I were gunners. He was my best friend and we'd talk about going back to the world most of the time just like all Marines did. I know we all got a feeling every now and then that we wouldn't make it home. But there was something different about the way Pete sounded. He looked right into my eyes and said, "I don't think I'm going to make it back home, Dean." He wasn't being dramatic, he just seemed to know.

We got the word to move out of An Hoa Combat Base about a week later. An Hoa Valley was a maze of booby traps and any movement was always dangerous. When we finally reached a river. Villagers from Nong Son brought us across the river in little boats, two or three Marines at a time. The hill was sloped on one side and real steep on the other. Fox Company had a platoon on top and one in the middle and one further down near the base of the hill. I didn't see any Marines on the steep side of the hill. As machine gunners we got thrown in with different platoons depending on who needed us. There were six gun teams to a company, two went with each platoon. A lot of machine gunners didn't last too long, that M60 would draw everybody's attention once you opened fire. You might be with 1st Platoon

one day and if 3rd Platoon got a couple of gunners killed, then you could find yourself with 3rd Platoon the next day.

PFC DON ROUZAN: Fox 2/5 arrived at the Coal Mine, Nong Son, near the end of June, 1967. This wasn't that long after Operation Union II. That was a blood bath and we took casualties. I think that was one reason we were put at Nong Son to guard the coal mine. For grunts, any duty that got you out of humpin' the bush was considered skate duty. If you were guarding a bridge or sitting in bunkers on some hill, that was easy living. A chance to rest, maybe actually get some sleep. I was with the 1st Platoon and we were assigned to the top of the hill and 2nd and 3rd Platoons were assigned below us. There were about four 105mm artillery guns on the hill below the First Platoon level. We called it the 105 level. There was a small village at the bottom of our hill.

We were allowed to go into the Vill for haircuts and stuff like that. I went into the Vill and bought loaves of bread and sodas. Shortly after we arrived rumors from the villagers started flying around that the VC were going to hit us. Apparently that info was taken lightly because I don't remember any extra precautions being taken.

I'd only been "in-country" about three months at that time and really didn't get to know Newlin that well. Hi and small talk was about it.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: On the morning of June 24th we deployed to Nong Son Outpost. Echo Company arrived via choppers in the late morning hours. I was ordered by Captain Blessing to deploy to the top level with Lieutenant Bertolozzi's platoon. This made me pretty happy because that was where the 81 mortar

section was deployed and I had some good buddies there. PFC Harry Marshall was one of my buddies, his dad was a full bird Colonel in the Corps. Lance Corporal Walt Buschleiter, PFC Ron Reyes, Sgt. Mendoza, the section leader, and my best friend, Cpl. Danny P. Riesberg. Danny had just returned to Vietnam from 30 days of leave in the States. He had extended his tour of duty in Nam for an additional 6 months.

I stored my gear in the bunker with Walt Buschleiter on the east side of the outpost. I ran daily patrols with Echo Company and made only minimal contact with NVA and VC. On a June 30 patrol in Ninh Binh Valley through thick jungle canopy the pin on a Marine's grenade caught a tree limb. The pin pulled and the grenade fell to the ground and exploded. It killed two Marines, including one of Echo Company's finest and most experienced squad leaders.

Near or on July 1st our worst fears were realized. Captain Blessing, our Company CO, notified us that we were going to be leaving for Antenna Valley on July 2nd to conduct patrols in the valley in hopes of drawing large NVA forces out into the open to fight. Once contact was made, a large Sparrow Hawk, that's a unit of Marines waiting and ready to join the fight, would be choppered into the valley to engage and destroy the enemy in what was hoped to be a major battle. Intelligence had reported significant movement in the valley by elements of the 2nd NVA Division.

On the afternoon of July 1st, elements of Fox Company 2/5, 2nd Battalion 5th Marines, were choppered to Nong Son to relieve us of our duties at the outpost. Scuttlebutt was that Fox was sent to replace us because they were still refitting after Operation Union II in the Que Son Valley. I heard that they lost somewhere in the area of 46 KIA, and more than that number wounded. Those are terrible losses for a single company to suffer. There were some

companies in Nam that barely had 80 men in the first place. Nong Son was considered skate duty because nothing ever happened there. It was a perfect place for Fox to rest and fill in the ranks with new boots.

Fox Company began arriving in the afternoon and Nong Son became a very crowded place. I was surprised and elated to find out Mel Newlin's M60 machine gun crew had been assigned to the top of the hill. Mel and I had a great last day and night at Nong Son. Mel and some of his buddies, and some of my buddies from the 81mm mortar section started playing cards. We gambled for cigarettes, playing craps. Later that night I went down to Mel's gun position near the road and visited with him while he stood watch on his M60.

The following morning, 2 July, I geared up, said goodbye to Riesberg, Marshall, Reyes, Buschleiter, and Mendoza from the 81 mortars platoon. I left the perimeter on top of the hill with Lt. Bertolozzi's platoon. As I passed Mel's gun position he gave me a smile and a "Kick butt!" thumbs up. I returned the salute and made my way to the bottom of the hill to join the rest of Echo Company, never dreaming that Nong Son had been targeted by an experienced Main Force Viet Cong Sapper attack for July 3-4. It was the last time I would see Melvin Newlin alive.

CORPORAL DEAN JOHNSON: Pete and me wanted to be together but that isn't the way the Marine Corps works for machine gunners. You might be together one night and separated the next if another platoon loses a gunner. We took so many killed in Union II that most of the company were new men or guys coming back from hospitals. On July 3rd Pete joked about it almost being the 4th of July and said that the fireworks would begin tonight. Perry Jones from Ellabelle, Georgia was my gun team leader that night. My platoon was put

in the middle of the hill and Pete was on top. He was with 4 other Marines in a machine gun bunker beside the road right near the top of the hill.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: After Operation Union II, I started wondering if I was going to make it home. Me and Thom Searfoss had spent about six months on Okinawa together because we were too young to send into a combat zone. We had to stay on Okinawa until we turned 18 years old. Now we were the old salts in the company. Like everybody else I was really glad to be riding on Am-tracks out of An Hoa. We had a convoy of Am-tracks and an Ontos behind us. I took a picture of the Ontos. We had to cross the Thu Bon River to get to Nong Son Village. There was a village on both sides of the river and the coal miners and their families lived in Nong Son. We were to guard the only working coal mine in South Vietnam. It was “skate duty”.

There was a winding narrow dirt road that led to the top of the hill and once we crossed the river on these little boats we were trucked up to the top. I don't know how they got those Marine trucks across the river but I think they had some sort of barge that they pulled across. On top of the hill was some 105's, artillery, at least one 106 recoilless, a half-dozen or more bunkers, some 81mm mortars, and an Army spotlight unit. The Army guys had a Jeep with this giant spotlight on it that would light up Antenna Valley. We were way up. The view from that hill was spectacular. I mean beautiful. Across the river was Recon Mountain which was even higher than our hill.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: My MOS, military occupational specialty, 0351, anti-tank assault, rockets, flame-thrower and 106 recoilless rifle. I was attached to

Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, Flames. I had been all over Nam, up on the DMZ and down to Chu Lai and Da Nang. On the 3rd of July I found myself stationed at An Hoa combat base. An Hoa was just a big ring of barbed wire and sandbags near the village of An Hoa. There was a corrugated steel airstrip big enough for a C130 to land but it was mostly choppers coming and going. An Hoa had a pretty big artillery battery there, with 105's and the big 155's. An Hoa was pretty safe other than an occasional rocket attack or something and I could have been comfortable just spending the war there though I'd rather be back in Louisville.

The Lieutenant came in to our tent and told us to saddle up. He told us to bring Flame Throwers, we were going to burn off the side of a mountain at some place called Nong Son. I never had any idea how high that mountain was and I never had any idea how it would change my life forever.

CORPORAL ROGER HUG: It was July 3rd at the coal mines. Just got back from an all day patrol and I felt really bad. Not just the normal Nam fatigue that came from humping through the worst terrain on earth in 110 degree heat with a hundred pounds of gear hanging off of you. My stomach was a mess. I think I must have had some bad water which was about the only water in Nam. You never knew what you might be putting in your canteen. You could fill up in what looked like a nice clear stream and find a rotting, dead gook up stream. It was miserably hot and I may have just had too much sun that day, sometimes the heat would make you sick even if the water didn't but whatever the reason I was feeling lousy. I was at the bottom of the mountain and had to get up to the middle platoon. I was thanking God I didn't have to hump it all the way to the top.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: On July 3rd we had one platoon down near the bottom of the hill near the village and one platoon in the middle and one platoon on top. We really did think it was pretty secure but I kept complaining about the brush on the river side of the hill. It was real steep on one side. There was one part of the hill that really bothered me. The brush there was so thick that I knew the gooks could make it all the way to the top of the hill before anyone would see them. I started griping about it. I don't know where they came from, trucked them in or by chopper, but we had these 55 gallon drums of Agent Orange with sprayers attached to the tops to spray defoliant all around the hill to kill the brush. The drums were up on the very top near a lot of the bunkers. I don't know when they planned to use the defoliant but I guess somebody decided to burn the brush off temporarily because they brought this Flame Thrower detachment to the top of the hill. I was glad to see that somebody heard my gripes.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: We got paid and got a little liberty down the hill to the village that was at the base of the mountain. We got haircuts, shaves and even some fried rice served on newspaper. For those that was tough, there was warm "Tiger Piss" beer. All in all it was a good day. Things was so quiet in the area it seemed like we were on R&R. We started setting in for the night. Everyone on the 105 level was up 'til about 2300 hours because of July 4th approaching. We went to 25%, one out of every four Marines on guard in the trenches, bunkers and LP's, listening posts.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: We left An Hoa real early walking behind a bunch of Am-tracks. We carried rifles and our Flame Throwers and gas were aboard the Am-tracks. We got to Nong Son just before noon or early afternoon. The Am-tracks brought up 55 gallon drums of gasoline that we used to mix up our napalm for the flame throwers. We test fired them and had orders to burn the side of the mountain off but it was getting late and they put it off for the next morning for some reason. The hill was really high up, I mean it was like looking down from an airplane. I could see clouds beneath us, actually lower than the top of our position on top of the hill. There were bunkers on top of the hill, an Army unit with a big spotlight mounted on a jeep. There was some 81mm mortars and about four 105's and a 106 recoilless on a cleared and leveled area near the top. As an 0351, the 106 recoilless was part of my MOS. That sucker had a serious backblast and it had to be pointed in such a way that the backblast didn't kill anybody inside your own perimeter. It could be moved around to new positions either by a few Marines picking it up if it was on a tripod or by moving it around on the back of the little four-wheel mules we used to haul stuff. Changing the positions of your crew served weapons was a good idea so the enemy couldn't know for sure where they were. Machine guns too.

Around 1600 the paymaster showed up on top of that hill and we got paid. I got about \$150.00 and Jack Melton got about the same. There was a village down at the bottom of that mountain and you could buy drinks, food and get haircuts and that was a big deal to grunts who were usually in the bush and didn't get their pay sometimes for months because they couldn't spend it anyway. I guess that since we got paid somebody allowed a Vietnamese barber to come to the top of the hill to give the Marines haircuts. The next day, after the battle, I heard that we took maps and papers off dead gooks. Word was that we

discovered that the barber went down off that mountain and made hand written changes on the enemy maps showing the changes in Marine positions on the hill. That evening we were taking it easy, cooking up some C-ration hot chocolate and talking about R&R with J.E. Ball and my friend John K.. They had both been on R&R and were showing the rest of us their photos. They both had photos of some of the girls they met in Bangkok, Thailand and some photos of high school sweet hearts. Thinking of home was about the only pleasant thoughts a Marine in Nam could muster. We'd hear about the war protesters and we hated them. Sometimes it seemed like nobody back home cared about us other than family or close friends.

We finished our hot chocolate as the sun was setting and everybody headed for their bunker. Me and John K. and Jack Melton had a bunker together right there on top of the hill. J.E. Ball was an M60 machine gunner and he headed toward his gun position about 30 or 40 yards down hill right on the side of the road that came up to the top. He was a machine gunner with a five man team that included PFC Melvin Newlin. J.E. Ball was one tough Marine. He was real handsome too. That guy was better lookin' than Elvis Presley. He was a "short-timer". He'd been in Nam for 12 months. Thirty more days and he'd be back in the world. J.E. Ball had been in some of the bloodiest operations of the war and that old boy was a Marine. He was a fighter. He was on Operation Prairie and Union I and Union II and I don't even know what else but he was as tough as he was handsome, a billboard Marine. Those Fox Company boys had just come off of Operation Union II, Captain Graham had won the Medal of Honor there, the men loved him and when he got killed it affected a lot of the guys. Fox Company had lost so many men in that OP that there were a lot of new "boots" so

the outfit was filled with green troops. That's why old salts like J.E. Ball were so important. Young Marines clung close to guys like that.

Jack got the first watch up on top of the bunker while me and John went below to sleep. I took my money and Jack's and stashed it in this little Marine Corps diddy-bag to keep it safe. I laid the bag on an ammo box and used it for a pillow. We got eaten alive by mosquitoes and I had a mosquito net that I put over my helmet and tucked into my shirt to cover my face and neck. We felt pretty safe that high up and in those bunkers with a couple of platoons below us, one in the middle and one near the foot of the mountain. That mountain was big though, and covering the whole thing with one single company was impossible. I put my hands in my pockets so they wouldn't get sucked dry by the mosquitoes and fell asleep.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: They test fired those flame throwers but somebody decided to hold off until the 4th, maybe they wanted to fire up something to celebrate. That steep side was covered with brush. We didn't know it but the gooks had been building steps into the mountain to climb up. They had already placed their weapons and explosives in the brush so they wouldn't have to carry them up. They were there right now and if we had burned that brush we would have seen it. Everything, gook flame throwers, B-40 Rockets, Ak-47's, and I guess they had machine guns hidden there. They also had satchel-charges.

CORPORAL ROGER HUG: It was dusk now and my platoon was set up in positions in the middle plateau of the mountain. My machine gun team took turns on watch.

We had a platoon below us and one on the top plateau of the mountain. I sat and stared into the black jungle like I did every night, until shadows become people, your mind plays tricks on you at night in the bush.

PFC DON ROUZAN: On 3 July, at about 2200 hours, myself, Bob Bowermaster and Chuck Lloyd went out on an LP, a Listening Post. On our way out we had to pass Newlin's bunker. His bunker was at the gated entry to the top of the hill, beside the road. We made some small talk with Newlin and his boys and off we went outside the wire. We set up our LP about thirty or forty yards down from the top of the mountain. We found some cover along the side of the road and set in. Not a foxhole but a little cover. The road twisted and turned all the way down the mountain so from where we were beside the road we couldn't see Newlin's gun bunker from our position if we looked back. Bob Bowermaster had the radio.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: Bob Bowermaster and me had been together a long time. We had been in Okinawa for six months together just waiting to turn 18 so we could get to the Nam. We were two of the few that made it through Union II and Bob was one brave Marine who should have been decorated for heroism. I knew Bob Bowermaster and had worked the radio with him before. About 11:30 I was on because I wanted all my sleep at once so I took the first watch. I was listening to the radio checks that was going around from the LP's and other positions. Bob and the two new guys with him were below the 105 level and outside the perimeter.

PFC DON ROUZAN: Me, Bob Bowermaster and Chuck Lloyd were out there for about an hour when we noticed what appeared to be lightning bugs between our position and the hill perimeter. I had been on Union II and survived so I wasn't total boot and between the three of us we didn't remember ever seeing lightning bugs in Vietnam. It was common knowledge that Charlie got stoked up on opium sometimes before sapper attacks. We radioed the CP about the lights and got set up for the night.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: Bob was about 150 yards away from me. Sergeant Clark's squad was on the 105 level about seventy-feet below the top. There was a path up to the east side of the hill running from the 105 level to the top. The 105 level was accessible only through the wire, all three sides were steep and thick with vegetation. Earlier in the day we heard chatter from Recon Mountain across the river saying they had seen movement but it wasn't serious. Recon Mountain had a commanding view of the Coal Mine and the bend both ways in the river. From the river south was Antenna Valley and on the other side of that was 1/5's area, 1st Battalion 5th Marines. I heard Bob Bowermaster radio in about the lights but I didn't see anything from my position.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS, Forward Observer for 81mm mortars: We had made very little contact in Antenna Valley on 2-3 July. I had called in a half dozen or so close fire support missions in support of Echo Company, but we made no significant contact with the NVA up to the night of 3 July. In the early evening of 3 July, Echo Company was advised to set up for the night in the village of Ap Ba (4). Accordingly, I radioed Sgt. Mendoza, the 81 mortar section leader back at Nong Son, and gave him a pre-

arranged fire mission for illumination fire should we need to utilize it. I gave Sgt. Mendoza the code name, "Whiskey Echo." If we were to require illumination that night all I would need to do is raise the 81 mortar section on the radio, identify myself, and give the code name Whiskey Echo. Illumination rounds would be fired in seconds. After a briefing with Captain Blessing I grabbed my poncho and found a hole for the night.

At 2327 hours on 3 July, we were comfortably set in for the night. I was tossing and turning for most of the night trying to keep the mosquitoes and other bugs from eating me alive.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: I was still listening in on the radio and still on watch and still staring at pitch black from the CP on top of the hill. Bob Bowermaster radioed in to the CP, "I got movement all around us!" Fred Painter was the CP radioman. The new Lieutenant was there too, with Sgt. Baldwin. Sergeant Baldwin had just come back to Fox Company after being wounded in Union II. Sgt. Hollaway was in the CP on top, he had just returned from being diagnosed with shell shock on Union II, June 2nd. I liked Hollaway but he was never the same after Union II. Sometimes he would just sit and stare. He was a brave Marine who had seen too much and needed a longer rest.

There was a path up to the east side of the top of the hill from where the 105's sat. We ran back and forth from the top to the 105 level. I told Sgt. Clark the Listening Post had movement and we secured the 105 level and went to 100%. I went back to the Top. Then Bowermaster radioed in again, "I need ammo! Now! I've only got a couple of magazines out here!" The CP radioed something back as I grabbed an ammo can and started scrambling to load it with all the magazines we could fit into it. The Command Post radioed Bob again.

“Are you sure?”

Bob didn't answer. He keyed his hand-set, which gave a static sound. I'd been with Bob since boot camp and knew that if he was keying his hand-set that meant the gooks were so close he couldn't talk. I snatched up the magazines and headed for his position. Sergeant Clark closed the concertina wire behind me and my squad. I was the last one out of that side of the 105 level. We headed towards Bob's position, Mike Byrd was one of the Marines with me. Just a few seconds after Bob keyed his set, his LP opened fire with small arms fire. Bob, Lloyd and Rouzan were blasting, sounded single shot but it was constant and I knew they had some serious targets to shoot at with that much ammo being expended.

About 30 yards out from the 105 entrance a pop-flare went up. My eyes bugged out. The gooks was thick, everywhere, and heading straight for Bob's LP which was about 150 yards from where I was. I dropped to my knee and seen several women in black moving away from the wire around the hill. Word was they were dragging bodies away. The M60 machine gun was working overtime and Ball and Newlin's gun team were putting out some serious led, tracers would hit and skip through the black night like shooting stars. It got real black as the flare burned out.

PFC DON ROUZAN: Those lightning bugs we were watching must have been old Charlie firing up his courage with plenty of dope for the attack, because all hell broke loose. Small arms fire and explosions everywhere. Loud explosions everywhere that shook you mind for a few moments when they hit nearby. Illumination rounds went off, the place lit up like daylight and gooks were all over. A lot of them already between us and the top of the

hill. The three of us in our LP jumped out of our shallow foxhole and found better cover immediately. We opened fire back up the road.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: Those lightning bugs down and to the right of our position must have been the gooks smoking stuff to build up their courage for the charge because it was like the dam broke. Explosions everywhere, the gooks were throwing satchel charges into the bunkers on the top of the hill. Our foxhole was only 3 feet deep and we were in a bad position if they fired down on us. We jumped out of our hole and got on the other side of the berm of dirt around it so we wouldn't be in the open as the gooks were overrunning the top of the hill behind us. Me, Lloyd and Rouzan started firing up the road at the gooks on top. Illumination rounds went off and we had a target rich environment! I yelled, "Fire single shot! No automatic! Save ammo!"

CORPORAL DEAN JOHNSON: I nudged Perry Jones, my gun team leader, "Do you see that?" I pointed out at the tops of all these pointed rice paddy hats. They were visible about 30 yards away. Perry said, "Yeah!" We opened up, I laid on the M60 machine gun while others fired everything else. Somebody showed up and told us to cease fire. They said we had an LP out there. No one had told us we had a Listening Post out there and I was scared to death I might have killed Marines. Later I heard that a Corporal in that LP had been killed. I was sickened over it. But our corpsman assured me that the Marine was not killed by the "sixty" fire. I still worry about it, I'll always worry about it.

CORPORAL ROGER HUG: All of a sudden all hell broke loose. From the middle plateau of the mountain we could see explosions on top all over from NVA rockets and incoming mortar rounds. They seemed to have every position zeroed in on, except Mel Newlin's gun position and he was taking advantage of it. Melvin's M60 tracer rounds just covered the plateau, sweeping back and forth, then it looked like he was running around firing from different positions to get control of the situation. I started yelling that I had to get my machine gun team up there. My platoon and gun team were at the bottom of the hill after our patrol. Mules, those little four-wheel jobs that only had a steering wheel passenger seat and small platform in the back hauled us from the bottom of the hill to the top. We went up the road as the battle was going on. We grouped at the middle plateau all within an hour. I was anxious to get there, it was obvious that the Marines on top were in deep trouble.

CORPORAL DEAN JOHNSON: Perry Jones was our gun team leader and a good Marine. It was pitch black except for the explosions way up at the top. Everything up on top was exploding and I knew we should be moving out to help but I never got the word to move out. In the chaos I just never got the word. I knew Pete, Melvin Newlin, was laying down a lot of fire and he was in it deep and I had to get up there to help so I took off on my own. I don't know how long it took but three-quarters of the way up the hill the bullets and explosions were getting closer. It was still pitch black. All of a sudden some Marine shouted from the blackness, "Who goes there!" I knew the next words were going to be spoken by an M16 and grenades. You never heard somebody talk so fast in your life. I started yelling everything I could think of to convince them that I was a Fox Company Marine gunner. I was told to come on in and we stayed grouped up there 'til daybreak.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: At 2330 hours I heard the sound of rockets and mortars as they were fired. I assumed that they might be firing at our position in Antenna Valley and so did some of the other Marines from Echo Company as a few shouts of “Incoming!” were heard around the perimeter. We were seven clicks away from the Nong Son outpost and we could clearly hear the explosions as they resounded through the valley. The sky was set aglow with each new blast. This was the initial attack designed to drive the Marines into their bunkers to take cover from mortars. Then 250 to 300 VC Sappers came up onto the hill and began dropping satchel charges into the bunkers where the Marines on top had taken cover. One satchel charge was dropped into the 81mm mortar bunker. It set off the ammo in the bunker and the explosion could be seen and heard and felt by us, seven clicks away. Luckily that 81 position contained mostly illumination rounds. Word reached Captain Blessing that the Nong Son outpost was under heavy attack and Echo Company was ordered to make it back to assist Fox Company.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: I heard this loud explosion, then another and I jumped! My friend, John K. said, “Let’s get out of here! We’re being overrun!” As we rushed to exit the bunker a loud explosion took our bunker out. All I saw was a flash and my face was burning and blood was coming out of my ears but I could still hear okay. I didn’t even have a rifle to shoot back. Outside our bunker was a trench that led to another bunker. The gooks were running right through their own mortar and rocket fire. John led us down the trench line to another bunker where Jack Melton, the Marine who was on watch,

had his whole back blowed up and was hollering loud. He was covered with dirt, the blast had half buried him.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: The top of the hill was getting pounded. I ran to help someone who was screaming. Mike Byrd was digging Jack Melton out, he was covered with dirt and screaming. Mike dug Jack's head and shoulders clear of dirt and Jack wanted a weapon. We gave him an M16 and a bandoleer, then ran downhill to help Bob Bowermaster's LP as it was getting overrun.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: We crawled along the trench to another bunker. There was two Fox Company men in the bunker, one was black and the other one was a Spanish kid and they were writing letters home! John K. started yelling at them. "We ain't going to a homecoming dance! You idiots!" He turned and yelled at me, "I ain't stayin' here!" And he left. Everything broke loose then. Explosions all over. I took up position just inside the entrance of the bunker and to the right. One of the Marines in the bunker moved to the entrance and opened up with a burst of fire. He must have hit some gooks. The gooks threw a satchel charge. I grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around my head so the explosion wouldn't blow it off. I curled up in a fetal position on a bunch of ammo boxes and just waited to die. The explosion was horrible. I could hear the VC chattering all around us. Then I heard a grenade come into the bunker. I curled up on the ammo boxes and gritted my teeth and waited. It went off and I could feel the steel going into my arms and legs but I didn't scream, I played dead. Marines were screaming in agony all around, boys calling for their mothers. One boy was saying, "Please mom! Don't let them

kill us.” Then it went quiet and I heard the gooks talking again. They threw in another grenade. I never made a sound. They threw in another grenade and I bit the blanket and didn’t scream but I wanted to. They waited and soon another grenade came in. My legs and arms was just getting ripped up but I didn’t scream, I didn’t make a sound. They threw in ten to twelve hand grenades. I would just count in my mind how long between blasts. It seemed like forever.

After awhile I knew the other Marines in the bunker were dead. I guess I was losing my mind and I seemed to have this out of body experience. My whole family was over me in a casket at this funeral home in Louisville. I started praying to Jesus. I just knew this was it. My life was over and I kept thinking how I was only 19 and it didn’t seem right. I could hear the Huey Helicopters in the distance and I thought it was angels from heaven. I just knew everyone was dead and I started wondering how I would get back to An Hoa. Then I could feel our own artillery coming in on the hill, shells picked me up and slammed me into the ground.

CORPORAL ROGER HUG: Constant explosions seemed to be blowing the plateau of the mountain off. Enemy tracers, green in color were mixing with orange M60 tracer rounds all around the plateau. Thousands of bullets were being spent. It was quite a show. We were preparing to go topside to help out. There was a back door trail to the top that only a few people knew about and we had a point man to take us there. It had been about an hour and a half and we were seeing red smoke from the top, that was the signal no Marine wanted to see, that meant they were being overrun. We started taking incoming and the gooks were probing the middle plateau. I was gun team squad leader and got word to

take my two gun teams up now and hold on for back up that was coming. We made our way up, closer and closer to the fighting, it got louder and louder. At one point I could see Melvin Newlin just working that sweet M60 and he was doin' the Corps proud. A lot of gooks in Mel's field of fire were gonna' be seeing Buddha in hell.

We hit the top and VC were running all around us. We surprised them. One VC went running right by me like he didn't even see me. I shot him with my M16. Another gook jumped behind the steering wheel of one of the little mules that had a 106 recoilless on the back of it. He took off down the mountain and my number one M60 machine gun team put a burst into him, a tracer round hit the gas tank and gave him a real ride.

We split up in the trench line around the back of the mountain top and hoped for back-up Marines to start showing up. I could still hear Melvin Newlin's gun working. He was on the other side of the plateau and we put down a lot of fire to cover his backside. The next Marine in my trench line was about fifty-feet away. The VC were still coming up the hill and trying to get in. They'd throw grenades and satchel charges into the trench line and we'd jump out, wait for the blast and then jump right back into the trench. Illumination rounds were going off and we could see the enemy plainly.

Suddenly a gook came running up behind us with a 3-foot machete. The Marine on my right saw him and jumped out of the trench and ran at him with his K-bar knife. The Marine knocked the gook flat, stuck him in the eye with his K-bar, then kicked the K-bar with his jungle boot right through the top of the gook's head. Just then another VC jumped in the trench with me and came running at me with a machete and screaming. I had run out of ammo so I grabbed my barrel and shattered the stock of my M16 across his face. That stunned him and then I shot him with my .45 pistol. I ran to the back door where we had

come up the hill and into the trench and found a VC sneaking up and into our position. I shot at him with the .45 and hit him in the knee. He did a flip and slid down the slope and went behind a bush. I watched and waited for a shot and saw him strike a match and light up on dope right there in the middle of the battle. All those suckers were doped up out of their minds so they wouldn't feel the pain. My number two gun came running up to me and I grabbed the M60 from my guy, turned just as the gook behind the bush came running up at me again with his machete. I shot him right across the waist, don't know how many rounds but it nearly tore him in half.

I tossed the M60 back to my gunner and searched for a weapon. I found an M79 blooper gun, 40mm grenade launcher, just laying in the dirt on the hill top. I ran over and grabbed it up along with a satchel that had a few rounds in it. It loads like a little shotgun. I got down, snapped it open and shoved in a 40mm round, then I stood up. A gook saw me stand up and ran at me. I raised the M79 and shot him at about fifteen or twenty feet away. The 40mm round hit and lodged in his throat, just below his left jaw. It spun him around two times and it went off on him. There was no time to look at anything for long but I'm sure it blew his head off. I ran back and dove into the trench and looked for anything moving that wasn't a Marine.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: I don't know how much time went by but I know the gooks were everywhere. I was in a lot of pain from all of those grenades but I refused to make myself known to anyone by yelling. Eventually it got sort of quiet and I could hear "Puff The Magic Dragon" working out and that mini-gun was kicking some butt. I could hear this horrible noise getting closer and closer. It would whirr and whoosh and then

I could hear Marines screaming in agony. It was a gook flame thrower and it was getting closer and I laid their playing dead with no weapon and praying for Jesus to save me.

CORPORAL ROGER HUG: I was crouching in the trench when a VC ran across behind us with a home made flame thrower. One of my gunners jumped up and bashed him and took the flame thrower away from him. The gunner lit him up all the way down the hill with it.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: I opened my eyes and the three layers of sandbags that used to be over me, were all gone. There was a Marine kneeling in front of me with a radio on his back and I could hear the radio going on and off. I heard myself calling out, "Corpsman!" I yelled loud.

The Marine with the radio said, "Shut up!" He pitched me a K-bar and that knife was the first weapon I had my hands on up to that point and for the rest of the night. I could feel the wounds all in my arms and legs and it felt like somebody was putting out cigars in my flesh. I was good enough to crawl so I crawled out of what was left of that bunker. There were blue and red tracer rounds flying everywhere from our machine guns and theirs. The gooks fired this greenish blue tracer and we fired this orange, sort of red tracer. There were so many machine gun bullets going through the air that the tracer rounds looked like a laser show.

Illumination rounds from Puff and some more being fired from An Hoa lit up the battlefield. I saw a group of gooks remove one of our machine guns from a bunker and bring one of their machine guns into that bunker about 30 yards away. That Marine with the radio

had a LAWW on him. A LAWW is like a small bazooka. It's real light, cardboard and plastic, but it fires a rocket that can stop a tank if you hit right. That Marine saw those gooks setting that machine gun up in that bunker and he knelt down on one knee. Broke the LAWW open, pulling off the safety tab and aimed it with this little site that you pull up. With bullets and explosions everywhere, he just calmly sited in and fired that rocket right into the entrance of that bunker. The gooks that didn't die right away came running out of that bunker screaming, slapping their bodies trying to put out the fire in their flesh but it was no use, the white hot stuff that was in their flesh was burning right through their bodies and they ran and jumped off of the steep side of the mountain to their deaths. They screamed all the way down.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: After getting orders to move out to help Fox Company we hastily got our gear together and began a double time run back to the outpost. We ran so fast that we later learned that our speed saved us from an ambush. The NVA had anticipated our movement following the initial attack on Nong Son and they set up a two-company ambush on the road leading out of Antenna Valley. We found out later that we came out of the valley a couple of hundred yards ahead of their ambush. No one, including the enemy had estimated how fast we wanted to get back to that hill to help our buddies. We continued our run through the pitch black jungle knowing Marines were fighting for their lives and every second counted.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: When I passed the gun position on our way to help Bob, L/Cpl. Ball was on the M60 machine gun. I could see the gun team from my

position on the road. We were on the northwest section of the hill. I moved my team to the edge of the road leading down the hill. Guns was starting to cook. We started throwing grenades down the hill at gooks moving. Explosions were getting deafening.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: I think the incoming mortars had stopped or else the gooks were running through their own fire. Now the top of the hill was being blown to bits with gooks running around throwing satchel charges. Gooks were coming off the top of the hill, retreating down the road. The three of us were dropping gooks all over, it was easy pickings but we were low on ammo. I'm not sure why they were coming back down that road toward us but Puff was dropping parachute illumination and the place lit up like daylight.

PFC DON ROUZAN: When the illumination rounds started dropping it was like broad daylight and the gooks were everywhere. I think they were fleeing. We were shooting them and firing single shot to save ammo. It got quiet, then we heard a noise very close. A wounded gook crawled across the road and right into our original LP hole. He looked over and spotted us. He was in a khaki uniform and maybe a pith helmet but he had no rifle. I immediately jumped up with my M16 as he reached for a pistol. I don't know who fired first but I was shot in the left wrist and I shot him once and my rifle jammed. I grabbed Corporal Bowermaster's rifle and shot him several more times, this one I know I killed.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: The gooks was falling all around us as they retreated from the top of the hill. Suddenly the new guy, Rouzan was hit in the wrist. I

thought he was going to bleed to death so I grabbed the PRC 25 radio to call for a corpsman. I brought the Mike up to speak and saw a flash from a rifle just off my left shoulder. The bullet hit my right ring finger, through the Mike, through my flak-jacket and then through me.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: Bob radioed that he was hit and he thought that the others were dead. “There’s gooks all around with satchel charges.” We propped Jack Melton up with an M16 and took off as fast as we could. We passed the M60 and L/Cpl. Ball was firing and Newlin was his A-gunner and they were putting out constant fire and had already repelled one attack from that direction.

PFC DON ROUZAN: Bob was hit bad and I knew it. He was calm and didn’t panic a bit. I wrapped something around my wound, stayed quiet and tried to hold my weapon with what was left of my hand and wrist.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: I thought I yelled out that I was hit and the new guy yelled to shut up so they wouldn’t know our position. I thought he and the other new guy, Lloyd had been killed. Since we were all shot to pieces I wanted real bad to yell back him, guess what pal, they already know where we are! Then I hear that sucking sound and I knew it was coming out of me. I had the classic sucking chest wound just like they taught us in boot camp. I pulled my flak-jacket apart and stuck my finger in the bullet hole in my chest. The noise stopped. I pushed this dead gook off of me, maybe more than one. It was getting hard to breathe.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: When we got to Bob, Mike Byrd and me put him in a poncho. He pointed to his mouth. I gave him mouth to mouth and he was okay. We lifted him, Mike had two corners and I had the other two. We could hear Ball and Newlin's Gun cooking out M60 rounds so continuous that the barrel had to be smoking.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: God, was it good to see Thom's face leaning over me! He gave me mouth to mouth, then they put me in a poncho. I felt myself going and reached up and tugged on Thom. They dropped the poncho and he gave me mouth to mouth again and it worked. They lifted me up again and headed for the top of the hill. I felt myself going and pointed at my mouth again. They stopped and Thom gave me mouth to mouth for the third time and I could breathe. He flat out saved my life three times.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: We were going to hold the top of that hill so there was only one place to head. We took the smoothest, fastest way to the top, right up the road to Jack Melton's bunker. When we topped the hill I saw L/Cpl Ball in a rage as the gun had jammed, the barrel had melted. Melvin Newlin was changing that red hot barrel with his bare hands and putting in a new one. We crossed the trench with Bob in the poncho when an RPG hit to my right, in front of Melton, it covered him up again pretty good. The explosion slammed my face into the bunker. I actually saw the dirt blowing over Melton as I hit. Bob was still in the poncho and I still had hold of one corner. Mike Byrd was able to keep hold of both of his corners of the poncho. We laid Bob in the trench with his feet sort of up on dirt from where the trench had been blown in. We got Jack's head out of the sand and dirt so he

could breath. We had no idea how bad Jack was hit, he was half buried and firing away and talking so we thought he was just buried, but he was nearly cut in half.

Ball and Newlin's gun went silent as we were picking targets from the trench. Somebody said Ball had been killed. Newlin was changing the barrel as the NVA were rushing towards him. We had so many new guys that I didn't know Newlin's name, he was just an FNG, a boot, a new guy to us. The gooks were closing in on his gun so fast that they were within five-feet when he opened up. He was able to repel that attack, killed a bunch of gooks, but I believe he was badly wounded. The corpsman ran to him with bandages that shined in the light of the explosions and tracer rounds.

The gooks came back up over the hill with what looked like about 30 of them. From where I was I couldn't fire as the gun team was directly opposite me. Guns opened up and the fire was heavy and accurate but they could only fire in a small radius because there were Marines everywhere. The enemy was inside the perimeter so you couldn't just shoot wildly. As that group were attacking the gun position, several enemy sappers were running around on top throwing satchel charges.

PFC DON ROUZAN: When Thom Searfoss and his squad got to us we made our way to the top of the hill. Everything got sort of foggy. Explosions and machine gun fire. I think they laid me out with the dead and wounded.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: You couldn't lift your head up there was so much fire. I could hear Melvin's machine gun just working non-stop, he worked the gooks over good and that M60 sounded sweet. Then it finally went silent. I crawled along the

trench. I'm not sure what I was doing but I stabbed any gooks that I crawled past. I ended up in some blown up bunker and there was gooks all around. I could hear them. Then I heard this one standing right on top of the bunker screaming orders to the others. I could see him and he was real big, much bigger than the Vietnamese. He wasn't speaking Vietnamese. He was shouting orders in Chinese.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: I was holding my finger in the bullet hole in my chest and I had an AK-47 that I took off a dead gook nearby. I had the AK-47 resting between my boots and pointing down the trench toward a blown bunker. I was drifting in and out and praying to Jesus.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: After we got Jack propped up we gave him one of three M16's laying around in the dirt. The trenches were pretty caved in from all the blasts. I laid down in the trench next to Bob facing in the opposite direction. Bob's boots were up on a pile of dirt from where the trench had caved and he had the barrel of an AK-47 resting between his jungle boots. He was going in and out of consciousness. He had a sucking chest wound and it started making that sucking sound and gurgling so I stuck my finger in the hole in his chest and it worked real good. I held my rifle with my free hand and shot any gook I saw. Mike was aiming towards the top of the hill, Jack was pointing down hill and me and Bob had the flanks down the trench line. We had our own little perimeter.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: I saw this big gook jump up on a bunker, he had a different uniform on, he looked too big to be Vietnamese. I was weak and a little

foggy but then I'd be clear enough to see everything. This big officer saw us and he pointed a pistol down at us. He was close.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: I laid still with nothing but that K-bar and stared out of that bunker at gooks running around and this big officer standing sort of above me. I could hear the Huey Gunships and good ol' Puff working out from above and the gooks were taking a real beating.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: The big gook was right on top of us when Bob fired that AK. I glanced back. Bob was firing up at him and the gook had an automatic pistol that had jammed. The trenches was pretty well caved in so Bob's boots was in a natural position higher than his head, worked real good. The gook was just a few feet from us trying to fire a little black automatic pistol at us but it was not firing. Mike Byrd ended up with that pistol as a keepsake.

CORPORAL ROGER HUG: After one of my gunners took that flame thrower away from that VC and burned him, I noticed that for the first time I couldn't hear Newlin's machine gun firing anymore. More Marines were coming in the back door and we were starting to take the top of that stinking hill back.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: I crawled down hill to try to get to Melvin Newlin's machine gun position and found a Marine with no face. I thought it was Melvin. The gooks had cut this Marine from ear to ear after he was dead, then they peeled his face

back over the top of his head. I don't know why or how I did it, but I sat there and pulled that boy's face back down and tried to make him look right. I took his dog tags, placed them in his teeth and closed his mouth down on them so he could be identified. Even as I did this it did not seem real or possible to me. I remember wondering how could anybody be this cruel, and would anyone back home ever understand or care how heroically these Marines were fighting this kind of evil. During all of this it didn't feel like it was really me doing it.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: We made it back to the banks of the Son Thu Bon River, across from Nong Son at about 0030 hours. We had run the five miles in about an hour with full gear and in pitch black darkness. Captain Blessing left part of his company with the ARVN unit, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, on one side of the river and the remainder of the company crossed the river to get to the hill. We made an outpost. We reached the command bunker at about 0115 hours. The Company Commander of Fox Company, Lt. Scuras had already taken a relief force to the top of the hill to help the battered Marines. The remainder of Fox Company was told to stay in their positions until the arrival of our company and then they were to proceed with caution to the top of the hill. The Lieutenant from Fox Company who was designated to lead the relief force to the top of the hill upon our arrival immediately shouted to his Marines to move out. I requested permission from him and Captain Blessing to go with them. I explained that once on the top I could turn the 81's, mortars, on the fleeing enemy forces. I was granted permission to proceed. My best friend, Danny Riesberg and many other buddies were up there.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: I laid there with my feet up on the dirt holding the AK. Thom had his finger in the hole in my chest. I kept asking them which lung had been shot, right or left because I could feel it filling up with blood and I wanted to roll onto that side so I wouldn't drown from my own blood filling both lungs. Thom looked at the wound. I can't tell, he said. It's like right in the center of your chest.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: A big Marine from Texas was near me. He told me that he had a record player in his bunker. This gook stuck his hand in and took the record player. He started to play it. The big Texas Marine told me that the gook took the record that was on the player off and reached in and grabbed another record to play. "I couldn't believe it! Right in the middle of this!" The Texas Marine said. "I grabbed him, pulled him inside the bunker and choked him to death, then ran out of the bunker. Gooks ran right up to me as I exited the bunker and they didn't shoot me! They were all over and none of them shot me. I jumped over the side of the mountain and I hung onto a tree."

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: Somebody laid me out with the dead and wounded. There was still a lot of gunfire. A corpsman put a shot in me and plugged my bullet hole up. I had a stab wound in my side and didn't know when that happened but it figured. We shot a lot of gooks and they fell all around us. I remember pushing dead gooks off of me and I guess one of them wasn't as dead as I thought. I could see a bright light and thought I must be dying. After that I drifted in and out of it, but I knew the guys were still fighting, a lot of gunfire. In spite of all of the gunfire, I felt at peace, it was very cool at the time, the peace and comfort.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: Women in black were dragging away the dead gooks.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: I could hear women chanting this mournful chant as they dragged away the dead gooks from the perimeter wire. It was really eerie and weird, like some death chant.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: Puff the Magic Dragon had flown away to refuel and reload and for that moment there were no choppers and there was no shooting. It got real strange and quiet. The wind was just right and in the distance I could hear Marines huffing on a full run, crashing through the black jungle valley like they were mad and lookin' for bear. Somebody said it was 1/5, 1st Battalion 5th Marine Regiment, coming to help and man they were coming hard. God, it was the coolest thing I ever heard. They weren't even trying to be quiet, they were just determined to get here. It felt real good. Friggin' Marines are crazy, man.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: I got to the top of the hill sometime near 0200. As I walked into the same perimeter that I had walked out of earlier, I couldn't believe the carnage. Medevac choppers were already landing and picking up the most critically wounded Marines, while those who were declared to be dead were lined up in a neat row in a specified area of the hill near the helicopter landing area. There were other bodies of Marines set aside in another area. These were designated as unidentifiable. I went

to Mel Newlin's gun position and it was totally destroyed but I didn't have time to survey the site completely, there were more pressing matters at that moment. I ran to where the 81 mortar command bunker was located and found Sgt. Mendoza. He was staring and wide eyed and in a state of shock. I looked around and saw an 81 mortar destroyed. Every few minutes an illumination round would cook off and explode from the heat of the fires all around.

I searched the area and discovered an 81 that was still in tact and had plenty of HE rounds available. When the VC blew the bunker with illumination rounds, it caused so much smoke that it had concealed the other 81 mortar and all of the HE, High Explosive, rounds. I yelled for Sgt. Mendoza to assemble the Marines still alive from his section and prepare for fire missions. He just sort of stared right through me and I knew he wasn't all there. I yelled louder in Marine fashion and he responded in Marine fashion.

For the next hour we fired one mission after another against the enemy routes of egress. I planned the missions and helped the Marines in firing the rounds. I also helped prepare the rounds to be fired. We had inbound choppers so we ceased firing until they came and went. Then we opened up again as fast as we could fire. The barrel overheated so we got cans of water and poured water on the barrel, then continued firing. When we shot off the last round of our ammunition the Marines around me collapsed from fatigue. I walked over to Sgt. Mendoza and the utterly exhausted group of Marines. I thanked them for a job well done.

PFC DON ROUZAN: I was medevaced out on a chopper along with several others to Chu Lai and later to the U.S.S. Sanctuary hospital ship for two months. Then I went back to the 5th Marines.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: I sat watching the horizon as the sun came up and crying. I couldn't believe it had happened and yet I felt like I had been here before and done this before, it was real strange. I looked around. I looked at Newlin's machine gun position and knew that no one would ever know how heroic people like PFC. Newlin was. None of those protesters back home would know how he could have played dead when the gooks shot him and blew him up and ran past him. He could have played dead. You couldn't even lift your head there was so much firing, but he lifted his head again and turned that M60 on the backs of those gooks and shot 'em down just before they would have opened up with that 106 recoilless on us.

CORPORAL DEAN JOHNSON: He was Pete to me, not PFC Melvin Newlin. When I got to Pete's gun bunker I found him laying dead behind the M60. He had a bunch of shrapnel holes but his body was in tact. He had a hole near his heart and I figured that was the one that killed him Pete had no shirt or flak-jacket on, only camouflage shorts & boots. Me and two or three other guys carried him in a poncho to the center of the hill and laid him alongside all the other bodies lined up in a row. The 106 recoilless was about forty to sixty-yards away from Pete's gun. It was turned around and facing Marine positions but the gooks never got a round off because of Pete. There were dead VC near the 106 and one of them had a flame-thrower on his back. The only body parts I saw around were all VC.

There was a winding road along one side of the hill. Two or three days later they brought up a truck and we had to gather up all the dead Viet Cong that had not been dragged away. My gun team went back down with the truck for fire support. There was no place to stand but on top of all the bodies in that deuce & half truck. It was sickening. When you moved their skin peeled off under your boots. From the heat, I guess. It was filled with whole bodies and body parts. Feet and arms and legs. We took them to the village at the coal mine at the bottom of the hill and dumped them off.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: I found Lance Corporal Ball's body. He must have been hit by something big, he had a hole clean through his chest the size of a tea cup. It just broke my heart to see him dead. He was a real fighter and I do think he was more handsome than Elvis Presley.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: I left the 81mm mortar position after we expended every round and headed for Mel Newlin's machine gun position. I was told later that all four Marine gunner's in that position had been KIA. I finally found someone who was able to tell me what had happened to Mel. They said he had been killed after furiously fighting off one enemy attack after another. I didn't know at the time what had taken place at the perimeter gun position, but I did know that it was something extraordinary. I knew because there were some forty to fifty enemy soldiers laying around the position that had been cut to pieces by whoever was manning that gun.

I walked to the position where all the dead Marines lay. I didn't know how many Marines were dead, total, but there were about eight bodies that had been identified and

laying in ponchos in a neat row. Next to them were three dead Marines designated as unidentifiable. I walked over to the unidentifiable Marines first. I lifted the poncho off one man's face, then another and then the last one. I told a corpsman nearby and another Marine who was supervising the casualties that one body was that of L/Cpl Walter Buschleiter. He had no face. They asked me how I knew this. I told them I'd known him for the last seven months and that he had the tattoo of a big Marine bulldog on his upper right arm. They checked his arm and found it. They tagged him and moved him over to the identified bodies.

I began to check the identified bodies. Under the second poncho that I checked was one of the Marines from Mel's gun team. I lifted the poncho of the third body and it was Melvin Newlin. There was no doubt about it. I felt very sad. The next poncho was PFC Ron Reyes, a friend of mine from the 81 mortar platoon. I sat down in the dirt between Mel and Ron and began to cry. I cried for awhile, then composed myself and continued to check the dead. I recognized another member of Mel's gun team and that was it.

The Marines were still working feverishly to get Marines out of the collapsed bunkers. They did not find many of them alive. One Marine that they did pull out alive died a few minutes later. Once we were positive that we had extracted all the Marines from the bunkers, everyone just kind of collapsed and waited for morning. By that time all of the dead and wounded had been medevaced, some to Charlie-Med and the others to Graves Registration.

It wasn't until first light that we really got a glimpse of the carnage. Nearly every single bunker on the hill had been blown. Both 4.2 inch mortars were destroyed. The 106 recoilless rifle was damaged and inoperable. One of the 81 mortars was destroyed. The lone .50 caliber machine gun was missing. Then somebody remembered that we had LP's still out

in the bush. I heard that they had been killed in the initial attack. At least one LP didn't have a chance. They had reported that there was movement all around them. Then a panicked voice screamed that they were being overrun. A detail was sent out and the Marines were brought back into the perimeter. A medevac chopper was ordered back in and the bodies were taken to Graves Registration.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: The cleanup the next day was horrible. The huge barrels of Agent Orange defoliant had been blown and the ground had turned into this stinking chemical mush. Pulling all those arms and legs out of it was sickening. I found Sgt. Hollaway in the CP bunker that morning and he was not home. Shell shocked. I heard that they medevaced him back to the States.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: They medevaced me by chopper to Da Nang. At the hospital I started to see all these wounded Marines from Nong Son. Each man's story was incredible. My Sergeant Kelly, from Flames was hurt real bad.

John told me that the gooks threw a satchel charge in on three of our buddies. Lance Corporal Hyson from the Bronx lost both his legs and was screaming. John said he fell on top of him to try to help as the gooks ran over them. My other buddy in that bunker had his arm in a cast and only had a .45 caliber pistol with two magazines. A gook ran right up on him after the satchel charge went off and he shot the gook with his .45 caliber pistol. The gook fell on top of him, then the gook started trying to pull the pin on a grenade, so my buddy beat him to death with his cast.

Corporal Hyson died. I felt a great loss. I was in a small building and it was lined with cots. Marines were getting arms and legs cut off. Then the airfield at Da Nang got hit and I started reliving the whole night again.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: We started to clear the hill of all the dead Viet Cong. I don't know if a precise count could ever be made, the enemy dragged away most of their dead. But I believe that out of the 50 to 70 VC KIA we found, many were killed by PFC Melvin Newlin and his M60 machine gun. That was so very obvious and was attested to by the fact that most of the VC dead were found in front of his gun position. Whatever happened that night, there is one thing that is so obvious that a blind man could not have missed it. PFC Melvin E. Newlin, United States Marine Corps 0331 machine gunner, performed one of the most heroic and gallant acts in Marine Corps history. In so doing he most definitely saved the lives of numerous fellow Marines. I feel privileged to have known him and even more privileged to have been his friend.

CORPORAL BOB BOWERMASTER: After I was put on the evac chopper and given a shot I felt safe and went to sleep. The next time I awoke I was on a table in the hospital fully clothed and the nurse kept saying, "Where are his dog-tags? Where's his dog-tags? I can't find them?"

"They are in my pocket," I said. The nurse and others in the room totally freaked-out that I was talking. I looked up and a Priest was at my head giving me last rites. "You ain't needed yet, I'm going to be okay." I went out again and didn't wake up for five days. I came to and found all these drain tubes in my lung and IV's and a real pain in my back. I

asked a nurse what the back pain was and he said it was the bullet wedged between my rib and my skin. So they took me to surgery and gave a local and took it out. The nurse put it on the table in front of me, it was an AK round that was bent a little. I went to sleep and when I woke up my bullet was gone. Don't know what happened to it. I really wanted to make a necklace out of it.

I kept thinking about Thom and how he saved my life three times with mouth to mouth. The Corps is slow, downright stingy about giving away medals but I'll tell you right now, that guy's a Marine Corps hero.

LANCE CORPORAL RAY ALVEY: Somebody came by and pinned a Purple Heart on me and said what an incredible job the Marines at Nong Son had done.

CORPORAL THOM SEARFOSS: It was hot and humid on the 4th of July. It was good to just see the sun come up. I had helped to put Bob Bowermaster on the medevac chopper. Jack Melton too. What incredible Marines. What heroes. And Byrd and L/Cpl Ball. The stuff legends are made of. I wondered if anyone would ever know what kind of heroic Marines had been on this stinking hill on the 4th of July.

The 4th of July. The only difference in this day and any other was the fact that they gave the grunts a treat. Nice surprises came our way in helicopters. They brought us T-bone steak and ice cream, and a special mail call and sundry packages. Of course we ate the steak first as good food was hard to come by. Now the steak was cold, but the flavor was fantastic. To chew it was a major exercise for the jaw, and that just made it last longer. Next we opened the ice cream container with canteen cups in hand. Now the ice cream was just the

opposite of the steaks, hot and runny. But it was Vanilla and full of flavor, just tasting it made us remember home, the world, it did still exist. We consumed all of it, don't know if everybody on the hill got it, it might have been just Fox Company.

The chopper also delivered cases of Fanta Cream soda, and I mean cases. Seems that was all that was left for the grunts in the bush. But being Marines we accepted them gratefully, beat the crap out of muddy hot rice paddy water.

LANCE CORPORAL MICHAEL O. HARRIS: That day as we began the cleanup, I found part of a leg from the calf down. I realized that it belonged to my best friend Cpl. Danny Riesberg. He had been medevaced out alive but in grave condition.

I was re-called to An Hoa on July 5th by my platoon commander and gunny. They wanted me to go to Graves Registration in Da Nang to identify my good friend, Danny Paul Riesberg. It was the hardest thing that I had ever done. I arrived in Da Nang on 5 July and reported to Graves Registration. I walked into this cold, dreary morgue and noticed the attendant sitting at a desk eating a white bread sandwich. I told him why I was here. He took me over to a body bag and unzipped it. There was Danny, my buddy whom I loved like a brother, with his eyes wide open. I started crying like a baby. I stroked his forehead. The attendant came over and zipped the body bag back up. I signed a paper verifying that it was Cpl. Danny P. Riesberg, then I walked out and went to find a place where I could get totally drunk. I found a place. The next morning I got up, showered, shaved, got a hot meal, and caught a flight back to An Hoa. I immediately went to the Gunny and told him I was catching a chopper back to Nong Son, which I did.

Melvin Earl Newlin

Rank and organization: Private first Class, U.S. Marine Corps, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division (Rein), FMF

Place and date: Quang Nam Province, Republic of Vietnam, 4 July 1967

Entered service at: Cleveland, Ohio. Born: 27 September 1948, Wellsville, Ohio

Citation [for the Congressional Medal of Honor]:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a machine gunner attached to the 1st Platoon, Company F, 2nd Battalion, on 3 and 4 July 1967. PFC. Newlin, with 4 other marines, was manning a key position on the perimeter of the Nong Son outpost when the enemy launched a savage and well coordinated mortar and infantry assault, seriously wounding him and killing his 4 comrades. Propping himself against his machine gun, he poured a deadly accurate stream of fire into the charging ranks of the Viet Cong. Though repeatedly hit by small-arms fire, he twice repelled enemy attempts to overrun his position. During the third attempt, a grenade explosion wounded him again and knocked him to the ground unconscious. The Viet Cong guerrillas, believing him dead, bypassed him and continued their assault on the main force. Meanwhile, Pfc. Newlin regained consciousness, crawled back to his weapon, and brought it to bear on the rear of the enemy causing havoc and confusion among them. Spotting the enemy attempting to bring a captured 106 recoilless weapon to bear on other marine positions, he shifted his fire, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy and preventing them from firing the captured weapon. He then shifted his fire back to the primary enemy force, causing the enemy to stop their assault on the marine bunkers and to once again attack his machine gun position. Gallantly fighting off 2 more enemy assaults, he firmly held his ground until mortally wounded. Pfc. Newlin had singlehandedly broken up and disorganized the entire enemy assault force, causing them to lose momentum and delaying them long enough for his fellow

marines to organize a defense and beat off their secondary attack. His indomitable courage, fortitude, and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of almost certain death reflect great credit upon himself and the Marine Corps and upheld the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service.”

John 15:13 And Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”