

Responses to Khe Sahn, Vietnam Questionnaire - July 27, 2007

1. Did you enlist or were you drafted?

I was in high school ROTC for 3 years and planned for a military career. I enlisted in the USMC mid-way through my senior year and left for boot camp two weeks after graduation.

2. When did you arrive in Vietnam and what led your battalion to Khe Sahn – ordered there by the Pentagon? What date did you arrive at Khe Sahn, did you arrive before the siege or during?

I arrived in Vietnam in March of 1967. I was with Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment. When I was assigned to my unit upon arrival in Vietnam, they were working out of Phu Bai. We ran search and destroy missions, ambushes, etc. around that area for a few weeks, then received orders to Khe Sahn. I believe we arrived there in April or May of 1967 so it was before the siege. We ran search & destroy missions out of Khe Sahn that put us in the bush for up to 20 to 30 days at a time. Sweeping villages and setting up night ambushes mostly.

3. What was your impression of the base upon first seeing it, could you describe it?

The soil at Khe Sahn was something I had never seen before, coming from the Midwest. The dirt was a very fine, like powder and orange/red in color. When you walked in it, the powdery dirt would squish out through the openings in the soles of your boots similar to puffs of smoke. The dirt was so fine it sometimes gathered between your teeth, around your eyes and in pores of your skin.

Our unit was in the southwest corner of the base and we mainly lived in fox holes reinforced with sandbags, but most of the time we were out in the bush.

4. I have read that huge rats and snakes were a problem on top of the other more obvious issues, did you have any run ins with these critters?

We once had a small ARVN unit (South Vietnamese Army) working with us and a couple of our guys caught a large rat. They doused the rat with mosquito repellent and lit it on fire. The rat ran into an ARVN tent, which resulted in chaos and we all got a laugh out of it.

One early evening after chow, our Corpsman had a Pit Viper snake slither over his leg. He stabbed it with a Ka-Bar knife, skinned it and used it as a band around his helmet.

5. What was your job, while at Khe Sahn?

My primary MOS was Machine Gunner and secondary MOS was Vietnamese Interpreter, however, while at Khe Sahn I was a radio-man. I used a PRC-25 radio to communicate with other squads and our Platoon Leader. I carried a 45 caliber pistol.

6. If you were there for the siege, can you give me your recollection of life on the base before and after the siege began?

I was not at Khe Sahn for the siege, but the following may be of some value to you.

While at Khe Sanh I was wounded and medi-vaced to a hospital unit in Chu Lai where I remained for 50 days. Upon returning to my unit I found they had been involved in the battle

at Con Thien, which I was lucky enough to avoid. I was assigned to a clean-up detail to sort through the gear left from the dead and wounded. My job was to determine if the blood soaked gear was re-usable, e.g., canteen covers, cartridge belts, flak jackets, etc. Shortly thereafter, I received orders to join Headquarters 4th Marines to guard the perimeter at Camp Carroll. Camp Carroll was an artillery base that supported Khe Sahn with 175mm howitzers. Like Khe Sahn, the enemy continually bombarded the base with rockets, mortars and artillery to keep us from supporting Khe Sahn. Many times they would send in barrages of 6 or 8 rounds per volley and the rounds would drop short on our positions around the perimeter. Very much like Khe Sahn, we lived in bunkers.

7. During the siege, could you move around much or were you literally stuck in a bunker or a trench for hours, days on end?

The incoming rounds would become intense at times and they eventually brought in a backhoe to dig a trench from hole to hole, to the latrines, chow hall, company office, etc.

Some guys defecated into C-Ration boxes and threw them over the concertina wire so they wouldn't have to come out of their holes to go to the latrine. Others became claustrophobic (shell shocked) and needed to be removed from duty.

There was talk of the enemy planning to overrun our base so the stress level was to the max. Everyone would listen intently for the subtle thumps made from rounds being fired off in the distance. The first one to hear it would yell, "in-coming" and everyone would dive for a hole.

My bunker was blown up three times and I was lucky enough to not be in it at the time. On one occasion, a marine was blown in half and another was killed inside the bunker. Me, and another marine were standing nearby when it went up. My eardrum ruptured, I received a concussion and a few pieces of small shrapnel. The other marine was also peppered with debris and shrapnel.

The marine that was blown in half...we had to pick pieces of his remains off the concertina wire to put in his body bag to be sent home.

I was stationed in that hell hole for 2 months before going home. Those were the two worst months of my life.

8. Were you injured at any time?

Yes. While on a search & destroy mission northeast of the runway at Khe Sahn on July 21, 1967, we were ambushed in the early morning hours. I was shot in the right leg, just above the boot. The bullet grazed across the front of my shin and left a 2 inch hole down to the bone. The wound could not be closed completely so the surgeon put three large stitches across the front of the wound to hold it together, leaving about 1 inch exposed. He then used a scalpel to slice a 1 inch relaxing incision on the outside of my leg to relax the skin. The wounds eventually became infected which caused me to be in the hospital for 50 days.

I also mentioned the injury I sustained at Camp Carroll in item #7 above.

9. How many friends / comrades were killed? How were they killed? (Sorry, if this is too sensitive a subject matter, then I apologize).

When we were ambushed I was medi-vaced out and never knew exactly how many were killed, wounded or later died from wounds. I do know it was a blood bath and many were hit. I saw one guy get his hand blown off, another got shot between the eyes, another took rounds in the chest and shoulder, yet another was hit in the buttocks, another in the upper leg. On other occasions, I've seen one guy get burned with napalm and even some friendly fire. I've seen brains, intestines and bone fragments.

Over the course of my 13 months in Vietnam, we lost a lot of good men. Our unit was involved in a number of fire fights in and around the northern most provinces near the DMZ, and we served during a time considered to be the height of the war.

10. What was your impression of Commander Lowands?

Note: Commander's name mis-spelled, should be Lownds, Colonel David E.

I saw him once. He had a handlebar mustache and was smoking a cigar. I know he was well respected, but I had more connection with my company commander, Capt. DeBona, who received the Navy Cross for heroism at Con Thien. He once told us he would not hesitate to call an artillery strike in on our own position, should it come to hand-to-hand combat.

11. If you were stuck in a bunker, how did you spend your time? Were you too involved in combat? What sorts of things would you talk about, joke about perhaps, with others? Did you write letters home, to whom, mother, girlfriend, wife, siblings, friends? What's sorts of things did you write about? (If that's too personal, again, my apologies.)

Stuck in a bunker was boring most of the time, then in-coming rounds would instantly get the adrenaline running. At Camp Carroll we never left the base to set up ambushes because there was too much threat of being overrun.

We talked a lot about women, sex, home and what we were going to do when we got back to the world. In my case, I could wait to smell freshly mowed grass on a summer day, eat a good steak and take a long, long shower. We told jokes and played cards. Whenever somebody received a "care package" from home, we'd all share the goodies.

The guy who died in my bunker received a care package a few days after his death. We looked at it for three days, talked about the bad luck of eating a dead man's food and eventually rationalized that he would want us to have it. So, one night in the bunker, with a single candle lit, we ate it in his honor.

I wrote to my parents, girlfriend, friends and grandparents. I never told them anything about the war because I didn't want to cause them to worry, although I know they did. I talked about incidental things. The return mail focused on their daily activities with school, Friday nights out with friends and work. I felt disconnected but looked forward to getting mail from home.

12. Did you fear you would loose your life, or were you determined to survive, to come home?

I was constantly on guard for my life and those around me. Fear was something we all lived with for 13 months, but we were all determined to make it home alive.

When you're in a combat unit and live in the bush most of the time, your senses all peak. Sight, hearing and especially smell are all heightened. It's the human's way of survival. You can hear a twig snap, the click of a rifle safety switch, the thump of artillery in the distance. You develop night vision and can see better at night. You can actually smell the enemy when they're nearby. To some guys the enemy smelled different than to others. To me they smelled like freshly popped popcorn.

13. Tell me what a typical 24-48 hour period was like on the base during the siege?

Once again, I was not at Khe Sahn during the siege, but my experiences at Camp Carroll were quite the same being confined to a hole waiting for the next artillery barrage.

We cleaned weapons, did night watches scanning the area outside the perimeter with a starlight scope. In the morning we would go outside the perimeter and turn claymore mines around because the enemy sometimes would turn them to face us.

14. I have read that at times a heavy fog could settle over the base, did you experience this, did it work in your favor or not?

When I was at Khe Sahn I did indeed experience the fog, both on the base and off. On the base I didn't feel it affected us much. We took some mortar fire one day when the fog was thick. Outside the base it was more of a concern because it made it difficult for us to scan the areas around us while on the move. The point man especially.

15. How bad was the barrage of artillery/mortar rounds that hit the base, could you describe to me in great detail what this felt like, sounded like?

You first hear subtle thumps off in the distance of the rounds leaving their guns. Within seconds you hear the screech over head of the round coming into your position. There's the loud crack of the round exploding with the whining/whizzing sound of large pieces of shrapnel flying through the air. Some rounds didn't explode when they hit so there's a loud thump, but you don't know if they're going to explode or just remain stuck in the ground in a live state. I've seen shrapnel up to two feet long by 2 or 3 inches wide. Flying through the air like a machete that can cut a man in half!

16. When, why and how did you finally leave the base?

When my tour of duty was up, after 13 months, I received orders to leave Camp Carroll on April 6, 1968. A chopper, making its normal run to our base, picked me up, without any incoming rounds I might add, and I was flown back to Dong Ha, from there I hopped on a C-130 military transport and landed in Da Nang. We stayed one night there and boarded a Pan Am commercial jet to Okinawa. We stayed in Okinawa one night then flew to Santa Barbara California, where two old ladies welcomed me home. They were seated at a card table in the terminal with a box of donuts and offered me one. I then took a flight to Chicago and a bus to Rockford, where my dad and my uncle greeted me at the bus terminal. They drove me home where my mother mauled me at the front door with tears streaming down her face saying, "they brought my baby home to me."

17. What sort of weapons did you use?

In the Marine Corps, each marine is exposed to a variety of weapons during training so I fired a host of weapons from 45 caliber pistol to 3.5 inch rocket launcher. M79 grenade launcher, flame thrower, hand grenades, M14 and M16 rifles, M60 machine gun as well.

In Vietnam, I used the M60 machine gun, 45 caliber pistol and M16 rifle most of the time.

18. What sorts of things would you guys say to one another during moments when the base was being fired upon by NVA and when you were firing at them? I'm thinking in terms of military talk, what sorts of orders would be given to you, or what orders would you give to others, etc.

During times of combat in the field orders were given over the radio at times and relayed to the men from the squad leader. Sometimes the platoon leader would yell orders regarding troop movements or sectors of fire.

When in a bunker, each bunker had a sector of fire which supported the overlapping fire of the entire perimeter line.

Orders could also come from any marine no matter what rank, a call for the corpsman for instance or someone who might have identified the location of the enemy or where automatic fire was coming from.

On night ambushes there were the "situation reports" (sit-rep) over the radio for each squad to report to the platoon leader's radio man that the situation was all secure.

19. Were you at Khe Sahn when the ammunitions dump was hit, and if so, can you provide me with details about that incident? (sights, sounds, smell)

I was not there when it exploded.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that I was glad to help out with your project, but am very interested to hear or see what the purpose of your fact finding and how it relates to the expected outcome.

I thank you for your interest and the opportunity to express myself regarding my experiences in Vietnam. I have found over the years that it helps with the way I deal with PTSD.

One additional comment:

I noticed your questionnaire did not ask anything about the return home so following is additional information you may find helpful.

As I mentioned in my answer #12 how ones senses are heightened and the relatively quick exit and travel from being shelled daily to my home in Rockford, there was no decompression. I slept on the living room floor for three weeks before I could venture to the second floor of my parent's home to sleep in a bed because I didn't feel safe above ground level.

The sounds of a box dropping upstairs or a thud from outside reminded me of incoming and I reacted by diving on the floor, which I couldn't control. The noise of urban life the smells all affected me.

The unwelcome home I received from the general public, friends and even family was difficult to accept. I could talk to anyone about my experiences because I didn't want my

family to know and my friends and others simply couldn't comprehend it unless they had been in combat. I felt I owed it to my marine buddies who died that sharing it with civilians simply meant they hadn't earned the right to know.

It took me a long time before I could talk about it with anyone. I had nightmares for a long time and it finally came to a point where I thought I might lead to a divorce. I decided one day that nobody was going to help me so I had to pull up my own boot straps and do it myself. I've been working at that a long time and I don't think I will ever be finished.

Your questionnaire is a good thing though because it helps me get it said. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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