

My Combat Experiences – by John Lombardo

Wounded in Action (21 Jul 67)

For several days, we (M Co., 3/26) worked a search and destroy operation northeast of the air strip at Khe Sanh. At day break on the final day of the mission, we set out for a pre-arranged location where choppers would be called in to take us back to Khe Sanh. I was the radio operator for the first squad, first platoon; call sign, "Mike 1 Alpha."

At approximately 0830 the point man picked up tracks or some type of evidence that indicated the enemy might be nearby. Within a few minutes, the point man reported hearing rifle safety switches being clicked off at a position directly in front of us. Some guys said they could smell the enemy and warned everyone to be alert.

The NVA had set up an ambush and were dug in along a tree line. A few steps further and they opened up with automatic and small arms fire. I hit the ground and heard bullets cutting through the grass within inches of my head. A few guys in front of me were hit and called out for a corpsman. We were pinned down by enemy fire because the contour of the terrain made it impossible for the second squad to return fire. That squad had not yet flanked the position, so we were still in the line of fire.

PFC Hicks was shot in the hand, which blew off his middle finger, index finger and thumb. Another Marine next to me was hit just below the shoulder and possibly in the thigh. Corporal Sutton also took a bullet in the head and was killed instantly. As more Marines in front of me got hit, the Platoon Commander radioed in a request for air support.

I was hit in the right leg, just above the boot, and the impact rolled me over onto my back. I quickly yelled, "doc, I've been hit," and checked to see if my foot was still attached. I was able to move my ankle, but the shrapnel caused a laceration two inches in diameter and deep enough to expose the bone. I quickly checked the rest of my body to see if I had been hit anywhere else. This was a frantic feeling because you couldn't feel pain and you couldn't inspect other parts of your body, especially with all the gear you were wearing, and you couldn't stand up because the bullets were still flying. I was surprised to learn you only feel the impact of being hit and not the pain. It basically felt as though someone had hit me very hard with a baseball bat.

Shortly after being hit, choppers arrived and began to fire rockets and M60 machine gun rounds into the NVA's fortified position. The choppers had to get in close to our position and I think a few guys up near the point may have fallen victim to friendly fire. The enemy quickly retreated and our corpsman was able to get to me and asked if I had been hit anywhere else. He treated me for shock, applied a field dressing, and yelled for a couple of guys to assist me to an area where other wounded were gathered.

The Medi-Vac arrived and I was helped into the chopper. We were flown back to Khe Sanh. No one assisted me off the chopper, probably because I didn't look as bad as some of the other wounded men. I attempted to walk but pain kept me from applying pressure to my right foot and I started to hop on my left foot. Two high ranking officers noticed me and came to my aid to help me move away from the landing zone. One of them asked what it was like out there. I told them, "They cut us up pretty bad, sir. I'm quite sure they had a 50 caliber machine gun." Later, we got word that our unit had indeed recovered a machine gun mounted on iron wheels and saw drag marks where the enemy had drug off their dead.

At the medical aid station in Khe Sanh, I was given a number of injections and then flown to a hospital in Da Nang, where my condition was stabilized. I remained there overnight and was flown the next day to my final destination, a medical unit in Chu-Lai.

The following day a doctor explained my condition and the impending medical procedure. Three sutures would be used to close the 2-inch wound, but only to an opening of about 1-inch because the skin around my lower leg would become too tight to completely close the wound. A relaxing incision would be necessary on the outside of my leg to relax the skin back to normal.

I was in the hospital for 50 days because the wound had become infected. I was forced to keep my foot constantly elevated otherwise the pain was unbearable. Walking on crutches down a dirt road to the head was sheer agony.

One of my worst memories of being in the hospital, which haunts me to this day¹, is of the Marine in the bed across from me. His legs were burned from an explosion involving JP4 jet fuel. When the corpsmen changed his dressings, he would scream with pain almost to the point that I thought he might pass out. Having to remain in the hospital for such an extended period of time exposed me to enough pain and suffering for a lifetime.

While in the medical unit, a high ranking officer awarded me the Purple Heart and I was allowed to call my parents via radio phone.

Once released from the hospital, my orders were to rejoin my unit, which had just returned from the fighting in Con Thien. My first day back I was assigned to "police up" the blood-soaked gear left from the dead and wounded. I was to separate the reusable from the unusable and stack them into piles. As I inspected each canteen cover, pack, ammo belt, etc., I could envision what those guys had gone through. I was so thankful I missed that one because if I hadn't, I don't think I would have survived.

Constant bombardment – Camp Carroll (1 Feb 68 – 8 Apr 68)

Myself, and a group of other Marines from M Co., 3/26 were reassigned to Headquarters Company, 4th Marines. Our orders were to guard the perimeter at Camp Carroll, an artillery fire base just east of Khe Sanh. We were divided into 3 and 4 man teams, assigned a position on the perimeter and given sectors of fire. Each team was responsible for maintaining their bunker by building it to withstand a direct hit from an incoming rocket or artillery round. We alternated two hour watches each night.

The days at Camp Carroll were some of the worst days of my life. The NVA had pinpointed Camp Carroll as a target for continual incoming bombardments. They watched us closely and anytime they saw movement, they would send in a barrage of 4 or 5 rounds. Everyone kept their ears tuned to the subtle thumps off in the distance of enemy rounds leaving their tubes. The first one to recognize that familiar sound would yell, "*in-coming*," and everyone would dive for a hole.

The NVA would often walk the rounds along the perimeter or up toward the 175mm artillery emplacements. Often there were as many as eight 5-round volleys (30-40 incoming rounds) at a time. They would hit us day and night, but mostly in the daytime when they could observe our

¹ When I had minor surgery back in the 70's I dreaded the thought of having to be in the hospital because I knew it would bring back unpleasant memories. I made it very clear to my doctor that I wanted a minimal amount of anesthesia in order to be discharged as soon as humanly possible after surgery. When the surgery was over I tapped my feet and moved my fingers so I would come out of the anesthesia sooner.

activities. On one occasion, we were pounded heavily, all around us. I was caught away from my hole, so I dove into the closest hole and so did a few other guys who were in the area. The rounds came within a few feet of our position. Some were duds but others shook the earth around us. We all thought it wouldn't be long before one landed directly on our position, knowing that the bunker we were in wasn't built well enough to withstand it. At one point during the close shelling, we all prayed the Lord's Prayer aloud together. It was the closest to God² I have ever been.

Hanoi Hanna was heard on the radio at night. She said she had her eyes on the tank that was positioned at Camp Carroll and was going to take it out. That tank was not too far away from my bunker. We also heard rumors that the NVA were preparing to overrun Camp Carroll, so living in constant fear became a way of life. One of the guys had to be taken out because he became shell shocked and claustrophobic. I saw the 1000 yard stare on a lot of faces, including my own.

A tragic accident

I was the NCO in charge of my hole. It was 0700, Valentine's Day 1968. Night watches had ended, so the last man to stand watch, LCpl Kalb, had fallen asleep when his watch ended. A short time later, a buddy from an adjacent hole came up the hill to our position to get Kalb to go to chow. This Marine³ was a guy who had a comedic personality and would always provide some humor in our dismal days at Camp Carroll.

As he approached our position, I noticed him tossing something up and down in his hand. It turned out to be a flare grenade. As a joke, he pulled the pin and rolled it down into our hole, apparently to smoke Kalb out. Unfortunately, the grenade lodged against a plastic sandbag full of claymore mines, frag grenades and some machine gun ammo. The bag caught fire and Kalb yelled, "Hey, what the hell is going on?" When his buddy had realized what he had done, he ran down into the hole to pull the bag out. He got about half way in when the bag of ordnance exploded. He was thrown out of the hole and literally blown in half just below the hips. His body jerked from the nerve damage, but he was dead when he hit the ground.

I was standing outside the hole with another Marine, Dave Hart. Dave caught small pieces of debris and/or shrapnel in the face. I was slightly closer, about 6 to 8 feet from the explosion, and was hit in the arms and legs. My eardrum was also perforated from the blast and the doc said I had a slight concussion. Kalb, on the other hand, was killed instantly, even though the corpsman put a breathing tube down his throat in an attempt to revive him.

Dave and I were taken to sick bay where we were checked out and returned to duty. I was given light duty because my ears were ringing. When we returned to our hole we were informed that pieces of flesh had to be picked off the concertina to be sent home in Kalb's buddy's body bag. Some of the flesh remained on the wire, they didn't get it all.

During that period of time, the wind would blow down into our holes making it cold at night. Every hole on the perimeter had plastic sheeting up to keep out the wind, however, we were loosely told not to do that and our Platoon Sergeant really didn't enforce it. It was such a minor thing compared to the incoming and the talk of being overrun at any time.

² This had great impact on me after returning home. When attending church on Sunday I couldn't help but focus on various people in the congregation who were there to show off a new dress or to make a presence because of other ulterior motives. Some not listening to the sermon or even falling asleep as I reflected on my experience in that bunker that day.

³ It haunts me to this day that I can't remember his name, only that he was from Chicago. I think his nickname was "Pop" because his last name was something like "Popovich." I've looked for his name on the Wall, but can't seem to find a name I recognize.

When Kalb died, retribution had to be assigned. Because I was the NCO in charge and we had plastic up on our hole, even though it had nothing to do with the bag catching fire, I was given a summary court martial for disobeying orders. I was provided counsel and went before the base commander. I was given a temporary demotion, which meant if I kept my nose clean for 90 days, I would not be busted. I was also fined one month's pay.

In 1980, I mailed a letter to the Department of the Navy requesting any military awards entitled to me, particularly those that had not caught up to me before discharge. One of them was a gold star in lieu of a second Purple Heart with the accompanying Purple Heart Certificate dated February 14, 1968. I think someone at Camp Carroll, who knew of this accident, submitted my name for this award. In my Service Record Book, I found documentation regarding the first Purple Heart but nothing for the second or for the Court Martial. I have always considered it in some way the property of the nameless Marine and if there's a way, I intend to present it to him in the hereafter.

In 1999, I visited The Wall in Washington, DC, where I found Kalb's name but could not recognize the name of the Marine who had caused his death. I have often thought of him and the unfortunate mistake he made that so indelibly impacted the lives of those associated with that moment in time.

I entered a brief comment in Kalb's memory on the Virtual Wall web site and a few months later a school friend of Kalb's contacted me. After e-mail exchanges and with some reservation, I told him how Kalb died. We both agreed not to share that information with his family. I was somewhat relieved.

Memories of the return home

My return home was initially filled with great relief and joy. I was thankful that I had survived the war and truly appreciated the gift of freedom and the comfort of home, family and friends. However, the transition from jungle to civilization, in only a few days, hadn't provided the necessary time to decompress.

The first two weeks, I slept on the living room floor because I didn't feel safe in a bed above ground level. The daily sounds of the city also affected me greatly because all of my senses had been heightened to a survival mode. Noises like a box dropping on the floor or someone accidentally kicking a chair sounded like "incoming," so I literally dove for cover.

Over time, the unwelcome home I received from the general public, and the "oh forget about it" attitude adopted by family and co-workers caused me to become angry. I gradually developed a negative attitude that affected aspects of my social life. I became isolated and didn't want to associate with people. I viewed going to church as being somewhat hypocritical.

I entered the Marine Corps at age 18 and after experiencing war at age 19, I felt like I was 40. The horrifying memories of the war began to haunt me, it resembled a prison sentence. I couldn't express my feelings because those closest to me couldn't begin to comprehend what I had endured and it really wasn't something I wanted to expose my loved ones to anyway. I knew only combat vets could relate but I didn't want to chance their emotional baggage bringing me down any further.

My wife tried to understand why I was beginning to change. She said I had become someone else, not the same man she married. It was frustrating because I couldn't talk about it and it wasn't fair to her because she had to continually make excuses for me not wanting to attend family functions. My antisocial tendencies were putting a strain on our marriage.

I didn't know it at the time but I was experiencing PTSD and back in the late 60's and early 70's little was understood about the condition. The military offered no support so it never occurred to me to seek psychiatric help. It was simply something I dealt with.

What I learned – Advise to other vets

I finally realized I could rely on no one but myself, so it was a turning point. I reflected on my training as a Marine. Marines don't retreat. Marines hold their ground. Marines adapt, they improvise and overcome. I decided to pull up my boot straps and "dig in." I needed to do this myself.

This realization led me to express myself through writing. I wrote what I thought and remembered of my experiences in combat. As I began to write, the most memorable events came out first and as I continued, they began to flow with ease, as if it all happened yesterday. I wrote without caution or concern. It was to satisfy no one but myself. Let me point out that I think it is important to use handwriting and not to rely on the aid of a computer keyboard.

Writing enabled me to begin sharing my experiences with my wife. She was relieved to see that I was beginning to open up to her. I soon realized that she was my rock. Her understanding, love and support have been a blessing to me, and I give her sole credit for helping me deal with PTSD.

Having children and a good job also helped focus my energy into more positive directions. Although the memories of combat will always remain just below my emotional skin, I have learned to manage it and as I approach my retirement years, I would like to help the returning vets from Iraq because I think I have something to contribute that is meaningful.