

OPERATION DOUBLE EAGLE

BY CHUCK JENKINS

OKINAWA

The group of Marines I was with landed in a 141 Starlifter MAC Jet November 10, 1965. I don't have to tell anyone how I remember the date. After approximately 2 days at Camp Butler a big part of us who were mostly boots moved to Camp Hansen. At the very first formation my name along with several other young Marines were called out to make a small formation behind the main one. What we realized was we were all new boots just out of infantry training. Well, I thought this can't be all bad.....wrong again! We were informed we were going to be sent through an accelerated demo school and that we would be attached to an infantry unit as riflemen and demo men. I can remember thinking these surprises are going to kill me. Later we learned we would also be tunnel rats and no formal training for this. I'm not sure how long the training was but not more than a week to 10 days. I do remember that E-4's got extended tours in the Corps for 6 months. Imagine having them for team leaders. Then the day we hooked up with the line Co.'s of 2/3/3 is a memory that will be etched in my mind forever. First off I would like to say later on the combat vets helped us out allot by teaching us certain aspects of Marine combat in Vietnam. But at first when I laid eyes on the vets I was in awe. I couldn't believe the look and roughness to them wishing I was like them but scared as hell that I wouldn't make the grade and was afraid to go through what these

Marines had to go through to get to that point. I have told my good friend Tom Walsh several times over that with their help us boots became rough and tough. Did I make the grade? I don't know but I hope I did. I can't remember what all we did in Okinawa besides draw new weapons, M-14's and given our shots.. We boarded the APA USS MONTROSE in early January, I think, and headed to the Philippines for training. I was attached to Hotel Co. 2/3/3 and I don't remember my demo team leaders name other than he was Italian and a great corporal. Two other team members, one was a 3 1/2 year private and one was a L/Cpl...tall black Marine and a hell of a nice guy.....and me, an 18 year old scared as hell PFC barely old enough to shave but Marine Corps tough. Anyway, I finally had a permanent duty station and was on my senior high school trip in Southeast Asia.

NIGHT BEFORE OPERATION DOUBLE EAGLE - PHASE I

We were in our compartment on the USS Montrose and our squad leader was handing out ammo, grenades, one demo bag per team, satchel charges of C-4 explosives. Each demo man was given at least one 20# satchel charge. Not much memory that evening except myself and some of the other newbies were as our Sgt. called it...jacking around. Our squad leader set us down and explained to us that from now on there would be human beings with one thing in mind and that was to try and kill us. I'll never forget what he said. He was not trying to be mean but ring reality into focus for us. Our squad leader was a religious man and he told us we should pray to God for strength and I did. Later during my tour, my squad leader was killed and I will never forget Sgt. Pagnano.

EARLY MORNING BEGINNING OPERATION DOUBLE EAGLE

It was 0 dark 30 when the order was given....Start going down the nets into the LCVP. I thought, well God, here we go again....Please give me the strength and courage to do this. As I started over the side I remember sailors helping us, two per marine. The ones giving me a hand said to me, "Good Luck, see you back aboard later," and I could tell they meant it. As I was going down the net, I remember a Marine with full combat gear fell approximately 6 feet and broke his leg. That held us up for a short time while they got him back up the net. Finally, I started down the net when someone said get off the net. Now let me tell you, in training going down the net was not bad and the ground was not moving. But when that LCVP bobbed up and down 15 to 20 feet and your thinking time to get off the net and guess what....down I went several feet on my butt....landing on my pack and thinking, "Lord, what all do I have to go through to make the grade." I had no idea. Well anyway, we were packed in like sardines and the LCVP headed for the USS Valley Forge LPH. The trick in choppy seas is to get from our small boat which, yes, was bobbing up and down....to the courtesy ladder. I don't remember allot about it other than the Sailors and Marines already on board had this strange look to them. After I boarded, I realized they thought...There is no way! But we did it. The H-34 helicopters were warmed up and

ready for us to board. The crew chief of the bird told us the last man on was the first off. He said when I tap your helmet you get off. Guess who was the last Marine on?? Then someone said, "Hey, one of these choppers crashed in the ocean during the warm up flight this morning." I thought....damned! You could have talked all day and not mentioned that. I was thinking to myself....How long can I tread water? Well anyway, the bird took off and here I was getting close to landing in a country where the people didn't want us and a lot of them were going to try and kill us.

THE LANDING

I have no recollection how long our flight was. I just remember someone telling us to sit on our helmets while in the air....I won't explain why other than to protect our family jewels. Our bird went into a forward hover and hit the deck quite hard. I could hear those funny pinging noises, later I realized it was some communist shooting at our bird. The crew chief taped me on the helmet and I guess I didn't move fast enough because out I went with help from his boot. We formed up again with our squad as pretrained in the Philippines. I don't remember much about the first few hours on the ground except I'm sure I was scared.

THE FIRST NIGHT

If I remember correctly it rained the first night we were in country and it was so dark. I do remember that I was tired. I'm not sure how long I was on guard but it seemed like forever. I don't really recall any enemy contact. The next day we moved out but not sure where. Also, I know Phase I didn't last long but Phase 2 was about 30 days long if I remember right. We did fly back aboard the Valley Forge over night between Phase 1 and 2. I remember setting up a perimeter and digging in. There were 3 of us in my fighting hole, my team leader and another Marine. I was on guard several times throughout the night and I woke my team leader to tell him I saw a gook down by the river, our hole was on a bluff. I can't for the sake of me remember what we did then.

THE P.O.W'S

I'm not sure what day it was but the squad I was attached to was getting ready for a patrol and another patrol came in with some enemy prisoners, three I think. They were small as I remember and their hands were tied behind them with what looked like wire. I was thinking to myself these poor guys are probably feeling as low as a human can feel and I have to say embarrassing, that my heart cried out for them. My feelings changed within a few hours to a few days and then I had nothing but contempt for the enemy after that and the native people as far as that goes.

THE FIRST BOOBY TRAP

I don't recall what day or fire fight it was on but we were patrolling toward an unknown destination for me. Remember, I was a lowly PFC and that info didn't filter down to me. We were in a village area if I remember right with what appeared to be a tree line on one side and dense foliage on the other. We had stopped for an unknown reason to me and someone came and told us the demo men that there was a mine up the path. My team leader picked me and left the other 2 demo men for riflemen. I thought to myself, well, here we go! I was glad I was going to take care of the mine but on the other hand, scared to death. As we got closer someone told us it was a Willie Pete (WP). I was glad because I really didn't want to disarm a bouncing betty or the like. My team leader and I moved on forward to the field and set up a small charge to blow the Willie Pete in place. I heard a rifle shoot and then the whole damn village exploded in gunfire. I could do nothing but help finish setting the charge. If I remember correctly, we headed toward the village on line. My mind won't let me pull out much more about this fire fight and maybe that's just as well.

THE WATER BUFFALO

I'm not sure what day of the operation it was but I do have a recollection of patrolling and the yell for demo men up filtered back. The 3 1/2 year private and I were on the patrol as demo support that day so we headed toward the front of the patrol. When we arrived we were told the point man had found a gate across a road, actually path, that was booby trapped. We moved forward. I'm not sure of security but I know we had some kind of support. As we approached the fence, I knelt down on one knee and bent a little forward. When I did, the 10 cap box lid came off and the blasting caps fell out. The small latch had broke and 10 blasting caps fell to the ground hitting each other. I remember the noise was slight but the things can be unstable and to me it sounded

like someone banging metal with a hammer. After I realized I wasn't dead because the blasting caps didn't explode, I asked the private for the demo bag. He said he didn't have it because he got tired of carrying it and had buried it by his fighting hole the night before. Honestly, I could have killed him but I knew that was going to extremes. So, since it appeared I was the one setting the charge, I had to crimp the end of the blasting cap to the time fuse with my teeth. Now I never was a John Wayne or Rambo and this was not my favorite thing to do but Marines don't plan...they improvise, so I did it. During my setting the charge of the booby trap, all hell broke out with weapon fire and I believe I almost crapped my pants. I looked around and the private was gone. So I got some distance between myself and the charge as the time fuse was burning. Later I learned a water buffalo had came charging out of nowhere and wanted a piece of my a.....Needless to say, after that day he didn't plow anymore fields.

God he was big.

THE MACHINE GUN

I'm not sure which day of Double Eagle or even what patrol but this incident always stands out in my mind. We were patrolling, I'm not sure, but I would guess platoon size patrol. The best I can remember we were moving parallel to a wooded area and to our right was a vast open area not real wide but long, mostly rice paddy's. I remember the grass hut kind of in the middle of it all. A sniper started firing at us and it appeared and felt like the s.o.b. was aiming at me. After the fact, I realized why.....I was right behind the M-60 gunner and assistant. I probably was helping carry belts of ammo. Anyway, we hit the deck and opened up on the grass hut. The gook didn't have a chance because we cut the hut to pieces. The machine gun didn't fire at that point. I remember a guy standing up and yelling, "I killed that s.o.b." and I'm thinking to myself....how in the hell did he know he hit him with all the firing going on and what a fool would brag about something like that. At that instance, the whole jungle behind the hut came alive like the 4th of July with RPG's small arms and God knows what else. I'm telling you I didn't realize I could press so close to the ground. And then it happened.....the damn M-60 opened up and folks I'm telling you I believe I crapped myself. I guess through all of this I was firing my M-14 and actually hit the target. Thank God for F-4 fighters because I have always believed they saved our butts that day. Everytime I heard an M-60 fire after that I thought you ain't heard nothing until you're right beside it and not realizing the gunner is getting ready to fire.

THE RIVER TOOK MY TROUSERS

If I have my days right it was about the 4th or 5th day of Double Eagle we set up our perimeter close to a river. This happened late in the afternoon but there evidently was time for a few Marines at a time to clean up our filthy bodies a little. I stripped down and thought.....hell, I'll wash my jungle fatigues while I was up in the river. Anyway, I had washed my trousers and thought I had put a rock on them but something happened and when I went to get them they were gone. I guess the current took them down river. Well, luckily I had one more pair in my pack. The problem is that's the only pair I had to wear for close to a month. Since I along with alot of combat troops in Nam, didn't wear boxers or jockey shorts, a problem arose before the months end. The back side of my trousers completely wore out. I'm sure I wasn't the only one but I did have the most tanned butt in Vietnam. The strange thing is Marines in the bush that early in the war trying to get resupplied with clothing was like trying to get a new car price for a trade in vehicle. When we were choppered back to the Valley Forge it took only a few minutes for the rear area commandos to come up with a pair of jungle trousers for me.....imagine that.

A SHORT FUSE

During the operation again, not sure what day, I damned near ended my own life. It happened while I was checking out a tunnel. Now I got my feet wet just like all of us boot demo men going into tunnels and had been in several prior to this one. I've had people ask how did I do that, were you scared? Hell yes I was scared and how does a person breathe? You just do it! We were on what appeared to be more of a force march than patrol and I was with the Cpl. demo team leader that day. The word came back to me that I hated to hear.....Need demo men to check out a tunnel.....So, up we went. Since evidently the platoon leader had a date that night, the rest of the patrol was going to move out and we could catch up with them. Hell, no problem....this was only Vietnam and communist were only trying to kill us. The team leader told me to ground my gear and check out the tunnel, set a charge inside.....at least blow the entrance. I went in with a 20 lb. satchel charge of C-4, a .45

pistol and a flashlight. I'm not brave anyway so if a rat would have farted I would have had a heart attack. Well, I can't remember much about it but the tunnel opened into a large cave which I didn't have time to recon and further more I heard chickens clucking. Now folks, chickens have to be fed so guess what....I'm sure human beings had moved further back in the cave and I don't mean Marines. I moved back closer to the cave entrance and set the charge. I thought a foot of time fuse which takes 30 to 45 seconds to burn would be plenty of time except if the first few inches of time fuse gets wet and dries it will burn faster. Yes I forgot to check a foot to see how many seconds it took to burn. But remember, my team leader and I was the only ones on the scene. I lit the time fuse with the blasting caps secured in the C-4 and headed for the entrance. The opening let you crawl out onto the ground. I crawled out and just stood up when the 20 lb. satchel charge exploded. Down I went again. When it was over I knew I was dead until my team leader started chewing me up one side and down the other. I won't go into detail what he said but being able to hear him except for the ringing in my ears meant I was still alive. And since I am able to write this little ditty means we caught up to the rest of the unit with no problems.

MOUNT TALLER THAN ANY MOUNTAIN

I think it was the same patrol of the cave incident we later hooked up with another platoon and we kept moving through what as I remember was a large basin with coconut trees and a village. My mind won't let me draw up details of firefights but I know we had them because of the grove and all hell breaking loose with gooks in the trees and coconuts falling is what comes to mind but I just can't put my finger on it. Maybe it would be more interesting reading but I don't want to add things that I'm not sure are true. We humped for what seemed like forever and since I was a low life PFC I had no idea where we were going. But the farther we went I remember how the ground started to take an up hill climb. Off in the distance I could see this, what I would call, a very tall ridge or mountain if you prefer. We finally started up the side. Now, I was never much on climbing so this really sticks in my mind. I do know it was real steep and tough going. We had to help each other all the way. When we finally reached the mountain top I couldn't believe it. We could see for miles and I don't have to tell anyone that was in the Nam how clear it could be one day and the next so foggy. You couldn't see very far at all. The mountains had a flat hill top which was good size. If I remember, there were only two sides we could be attacked from and guess where my fighting position was.....you guessed it, the most likely avenue of approach which was a long slow approach to the top with a lot of what I called buck brush here in Missouri. Several clicks away was a large enemy village with boocoo jungle between us and the village. Well, we started digging in and before night fell choppers flew in to resupply us with ammo and rations. At first I was thinking why in the hell did we make that ungodly climb when coming up the side, where my position faced, it would have been alot easier. That was until the machine guns were positioned close to myself and another demo man. I'm sure I asked the gun team to please let me know when they were going to open up because by this time remember the rear of my trousers were gone and the end result could have been damned embarrassing. I'm not sure how long we used the hill top as our base camp but we pulled alot of patrols off of it. One I do remember is doing a search and clear of the village mentioned above. I'm sure we could see alot of other hamlets from our position but I can't remember it now. I do remember cutting our way through the jungle to get to the village using machetes but that's about all except it come to mind destroying the Vietnamese pigs and water bulls after we arrived at the village.

HUNGRY MARINES

One time frame I remember while on the hilltop is the clouds lazily surrounded the mountain for 2 days and we couldn't get chow from resupply. Now when you only have 2 meals of C-rats a day, missing one meal can cause your guts to attempt suicide. When you don't eat for 2 days your guts have given up plus I remember being so tired that when I slept during my 2 hours off guard, I actually laid on the ground with a poncho over me and let the water run under my back not really caring. The C-rats I hated worse than anything was ham and beans. That's not what we called them but you all know that. During this 2 day period, the nights were so dark you couldn't see anything. The word was passed that the gooks were probing our lines. Well hell, we had no concertina so it shouldn't be hard to do. I did have booby trapped grenades set out in from our position, down the slope (trip wire type). It got old clearing them every morning and setting them up every night. But I believe we all felt more comfortable. This one night there was a hell of a noise to the right of my position inside the perimeter. Now friends, this has a tendency to hope you're right with God because as they say there is no such

thing as an atheist when your scared out of your wits. I guess I need to say we had bayonets fixed during these few days. I've spent alot of long nights but this is a damned close 2nd to the longest. I basically had to stay in body contact with the Marines in my fighting hole as we couldn't see each other and also we always had our flack jackets on. The next morning we found out that after word came around that charlie was probing. One Marine was asleep outside his hole and he accidentally rolled into the fighting hole on his partner and the Marine in the hole thought he was a gook and started stabbing the other Marine with his bayonet. Thank God for flack jackets even though they were heavy, hot and everything else you can think of. Somehow they both came to realize they were on the same team. But man, that flack jacket was riddled and luckily no body wounds at all. Now I can't remember if this was the first or last night without chow but I can tell you I wasn't hungry during that night. The weather cleared and then we received resupplies most of all C-rats. Enough for 2 days but hell, that's more than you really want to carry in your pack. I'll give everyone a guess what the first meal I was handed was...You're right!....damned Ham and lima beans.....I figured, what the hell, I'll eat these first cause I'm so damned hungry and save the other 3 for when I'm more picky. Another thing, a demo man with his C-4 is so damned popular and well liked when it's chow time. Every Marine knows why!!

OPERATION DOUBLE EAGLE PHASE II ENDS

I have no idea where we were located when the word got to me we would be heading to an LZ to fly back to the USS Valley Forge. I really can't remember boarding the bird but I remember landing on the Valley Forge. When I set foot on the deck I remember thinking thank you God for getting me through the past few days. The first thing our team leader had us do was go get haircuts after I was issued new jungle trousers, you all know why! When I set down in the barber chair and looked in the mirror I almost died.....my hair which had more than a months growth and was curly anyway, looked like an unkept poodle, dog matted....the whole 9 yards. The barber wasn't happy with me and I wasn't happy with his attitude but we got through it. We slept over night on the deck of the USS Valley Forge. The next day we loaded in the LCVP and headed for the USS Montrose. We pulled along side and Oh God!...there they were...those damned nets. I don't remember the water being so choppy but up the nets we went. When I got to the top railing there were 2 sailors there again to help me over onto the deck. They helped me up and handed me a cold soda which is the best soda I ever drank and believe it or not they said, "Welcome back Marine." I will never forget this about sailors because I know in their heart they meant it. Did I make the grade? I don't know but I do know why the seasoned vets in Okinawa had the look and roughness they did. Was I a seasoned combat vet? I don't know that either, but I did have a different outlook on life, freedom and the greatest country in the world, The United States of America.

Well, up to this point, what I have just finished writing is about all I can remember of hooking up with 2/3/3 and Operation Double Eagle Phase I and II. There is alot of days missing, fire fights, disarming, and blowing booby traps in place on and on.....I know that sometimes when I have the blank stare things flash through my mind so quick. The problem is I can't remember enough to write even a sentence. Either my mind in the deepest parts won't let this come out or I'm refusing to let that happen. I'm sure I'm not the only Viet Vet that this happens to or at least I hope not. Someday maybe something will trigger my mind to bring this out. If so, I will add ditty's to what I have already wrote. If not these pages are my memories of Operation Double Eagle. I know some Marine will write much more interesting things about the Operation and I plan on reading each and every one of them. Thank you for taking the time to read the small excerpts.

Chuck Jenkins

USMC - Vietnam

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