

# MARBLE MOUNTAIN



**MARBLE MOUNTAIN**

*Bud Willis c.2017*

**A Vietnam Memoir**

*Bud Willis*





Marble Mountain presents a personal account of a young man's 1966 combat tour as a Marine helicopter pilot. Of the many books I have read about Vietnam, Marble Mountain wins hand down for its raw honesty, youthful naiveté, and pure readability. Through riveting imagery, Bud Willis finally opens a window of understanding for readers of any age to experience the conflicting drama of one of the most challenging periods of American history.

Gripping, heart-wrenching, and realistic, Bud's poignant memoir lingers with the reader well beyond the conclusion of the book with a powerful message that is as relevant today as it was 45 years ago. I thank the author and all of the men of VMO-2 for the patriotism, courage, and bravery that they demonstrated for future generations. They truly sparkled as shining examples of the Marine Corps's promise of "a few good men." This book should be required reading for all Americans, and its timing could make it a bestseller.

Dr. Dianne Sawyer  
American Literature and English Language  
Instructor

Named Tennessee's Outstanding Young Man for service to his community, state and country, Bud Willis has been well recognized for his first book, *Bluestocking*, released in 2009, now in its second printing.

A native Tennessean, Willis grew up in Tullahoma, and graduated from Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville. There, Bud served as editor of the campus literary magazine. His professional career extended through 34 years in the securities industry as Partner with J.C. Bradford and Company. As a successful business man, public speaker, and humorist, his spirited Southern writing style engages readers quickly, with pathos, humor, and new knowledge regarding the lives and labor of young, Marine pilots serving in the mid-60's in Vietnam. Currently semi-retired, Bud lives in Naples, FL with his wife and best friend, Lee. Bud can be reached at: [budsvilla@aol.com](mailto:budsvilla@aol.com), or at 16719 Pistoia Way Naples. FL 34110.







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**I am giving this book to my children so that they will better understand how patriotism shaped our lives during this significant part of American history and a very important part of my young life as a Marine pilot.**

**Semper Fi!**

*Al Barbour, VMO-2, 1966-67  
Marshall, Va*

**Bud's book helped me understand feelings that I did not understand at the time I was living them. Thank you for finally giving me some closure. The riveting details of these Marble Mountain experiences would make a great movie.**

*Tony Pecoraro, VMO-6, 1966-67  
Crème Ridge, NJ*

**A candid and honest account; detailed and accurate. Bud's book adds notably to the history of Marine Aviation, and affirms Esprit de Corps, the collective values that bind Marines. A superlative American memoir!**

*Bill Kirby, VMO-2, 1966-67  
Norwichtown, CT*

**Bud Willis' memoir is a gift to those of us who have been unwilling or unable ever to say much about our Vietnam experience. He has produced a gem. I think all Vets, from any war, and especially old "rotor heads" like myself, will be grateful for this.**

*Sheppard Spink, VMO-2, 1966-67  
Ponte Vedra, FL*



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## OLD SALTS

While VMO-2 and its pilots were preoccupied with the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the NVA problems of the northern portion of the I Corps area, VMO-6 out of Chu Lai, already shorthanded, was being asked regularly to supply planes and pilots to Marble Mountain for priority missions in our neglected Danang tactical area. While I was at Dong Ha on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November and Major Plamondon was our commanding officer at Marble Mountain, Tony Pecoraro was one of two pilots assigned to assist with our squadron workload. The story that unfolded on that day would make VMO history, and it involved one of the most decorated pilots in all of Marine Corps aviation. I was able to hear pieces of that story from others but had never heard it directly from Tony until 2009. Here is the story in Tony's words:

*"By November 1966 some of us were becoming Old Salts in our squadron. All the original VMO-6 guys were gone, and there were about six of us who had been in the squadron for almost 10 months, and we were the work horses of the squadron. There were only 10 pilots left and we were supposed to have 22. We flew every day and some nights without a break. Most flights did not have a copilot. I remember flying with the disbursing officer, and once with the chaplain in the left seat. They wanted to get a taste of combat, and they liked to take pictures to bring home.*

*On the morning of November 14, Gordon Chadwick and I were asked to go to Marble Mountain to help VMO-2. We*

were told to take two gunships to VMO-2, and we would pick up co-pilots there.

Off we went. I don't remember who the lead pilot was, not that it mattered, but we arrived and landed at the tarmac at VMO-2 as we had done several times. We walked in to the ready room, and the operations officer said they were glad to see us as they were running ragged and needed our help. He said he had a mission for each of us, and he handed us each an envelope with a mission description and contact information. I asked him if he had a co-pilot for me, and he said he did not.

My mission was a truck convoy escort, something I have done many times and had never had an incident. For this reason, I thought flying with an empty left seat would not be a big deal. I was in a hurry to get going, so without talking to Chadwick or asking him what he was doing, I fired up my Huey and went to work. I made radio contact with the convoy, and everything went according to script. The convoy had a smooth ride with no enemy contact. I stayed with them until the last vehicle pulled in to its destination and then said my "adios" and headed back to Marble Mountain. After landing, I air-taxied to the VMO-2 parking area to refuel. On the way to the fuel truck, I noticed that the atmosphere was eerily different. Everything was quiet and completely still. Something was making the hair stand up on the back of my neck and arms. I can't describe it but I knew something was terribly wrong. As I was shutting down the engine, I saw a group of three or four officers, two of them wearing khakis, walking toward me. When I got out and approached them, they told me that Chadwick had been killed.

*I was dumbstruck and shaken. What happened? We*



*each got a mission envelope, and mine went as smooth as silk. Chadwick was a quiet guy and an experienced pilot. We were not that close, maybe because I am anything but quiet, but on this day we could have been brothers. They told me he was flying as a gun support in a troop insertion. The CO of MAG-16 had asked to fly as his copilot. They thought they had been shot down while making a gun run.*

*The CO was still alive, but Chadwick was burned beyond recognition. Doc Brown, the VMO-2 squadron doctor, asked me if I could fly back to VMO-6 and get Gordon's dental records, so they could make a positive identification.*

*Chadwick was kind of a loner, and now I felt like I knew him for the first time. Flying back to Chu Lai alone, I started sorting through the many questions flashing in my mind. What if I had gotten his envelope? If he had a real copilot instead of a non-qualified passenger could things have been different? Was he trying to impress the bird colonel? Or worse, did he let the CO make that gun run? How would we ever know?*

*I flew back to my squadron and gave everyone the news. No one cried. No one was emotional. Everyone seemed to assimilate the facts of the incident and processed them the same way we processed the other hundreds of events that had bombarded us for the last 10 months. They asked me if I would take our own squadron doctor back to Marble Mountain, so he could be the one to identify the body with dental records. I flew Doc Moffert back that night and returned after the Doc did his thing. Suddenly, I was the reclusive one, and all I could think about was how fragile and insignificant we all are.*

*The next day Chadwick's belongings were packed and shipped back home to his family. In less than a week, a new pilot was in his cubical, living in his space, sleeping in his bed, as though Gordon Chadwick had never existed.*

*Chadwick was the third pilot to be killed in our squadron in those last few months."*

As told to me by Tony Pecoraro in 2009.

I did some further research after talking to Tony to find out what happened to Chadwick's copilot. His name was Colonel Kenneth L. Ruesser, our MAG 16 Group Commander and one of the most decorated pilots in the history of the Marine Corps. He had been shot down in three different wars and stories of his unprecedented flying feats can be found easily on the Internet.

Colonel Reusser apparently wanted to be on the scene to direct and coordinate the recovery of a downed CH-46 on what would turn out to be his last combat flight. The 46 had been shot down the day before. Chadwick's Huey had stumbled into a perfectly executed ambush prepared by the North Vietnamese. I found Harley L. Wedel of Fairview, Oregon, who has written a short biography of Ruesser which includes details of this incident. With his permission, I include what he wrote:

*"Heavy fire hit them instantly and killed the pilot (Chadwick). Ruesser was hit in the leg with a large caliber round, and the chopper's controls were shattered. The only place for the chopper to go was down. Slamming into a rice paddy, the chopper was immediately engulfed in flames. The fuel-fed fire swirled into the cockpit from behind, and Ruesser found his shoulder harness quick release*



*mechanism refused to let go. The Huey was broken and partially crushed, and the men in the back were trapped in the flames. Knowing if he was to see another sunset, he would have to rescue himself. Ruesser leaned back into the flames hoping to burn through his unyielding harness. As the fire became more aggressive, it melted the Styrofoam lining in his helmet, badly burning his scalp and ear, and eaten its way down his neck and shoulder. Yet he still was not free.*

*Over and over he lunged against the burning harness until, with one final heave, it parted, allowing him to escape the cockpit and flop into the cooling waters of the rice field. Though his flight suit was still smoldering, Ruesser began pulling and tugging to free the men in the back, all the time being fired upon, and being hit again by small arms fire from the North Vietnamese from their hidden positions. Across the paddy, a corpsman with the ground Marines, ran through a hail of fire and knocked Ruesser to the ground. After rolling him around in the rice paddy, he picked him up and carried him to another CH-46 and evacuated the colonel to the nearest medical unit. He was in critical condition with burns over 35% of his body and two bullet wounds.*

*That night Ruesser overheard the doctors saying that there was no way he would live through the night, but this die-hard Marine recovered with skin grafts and reconstructive surgery to live until 2009."*