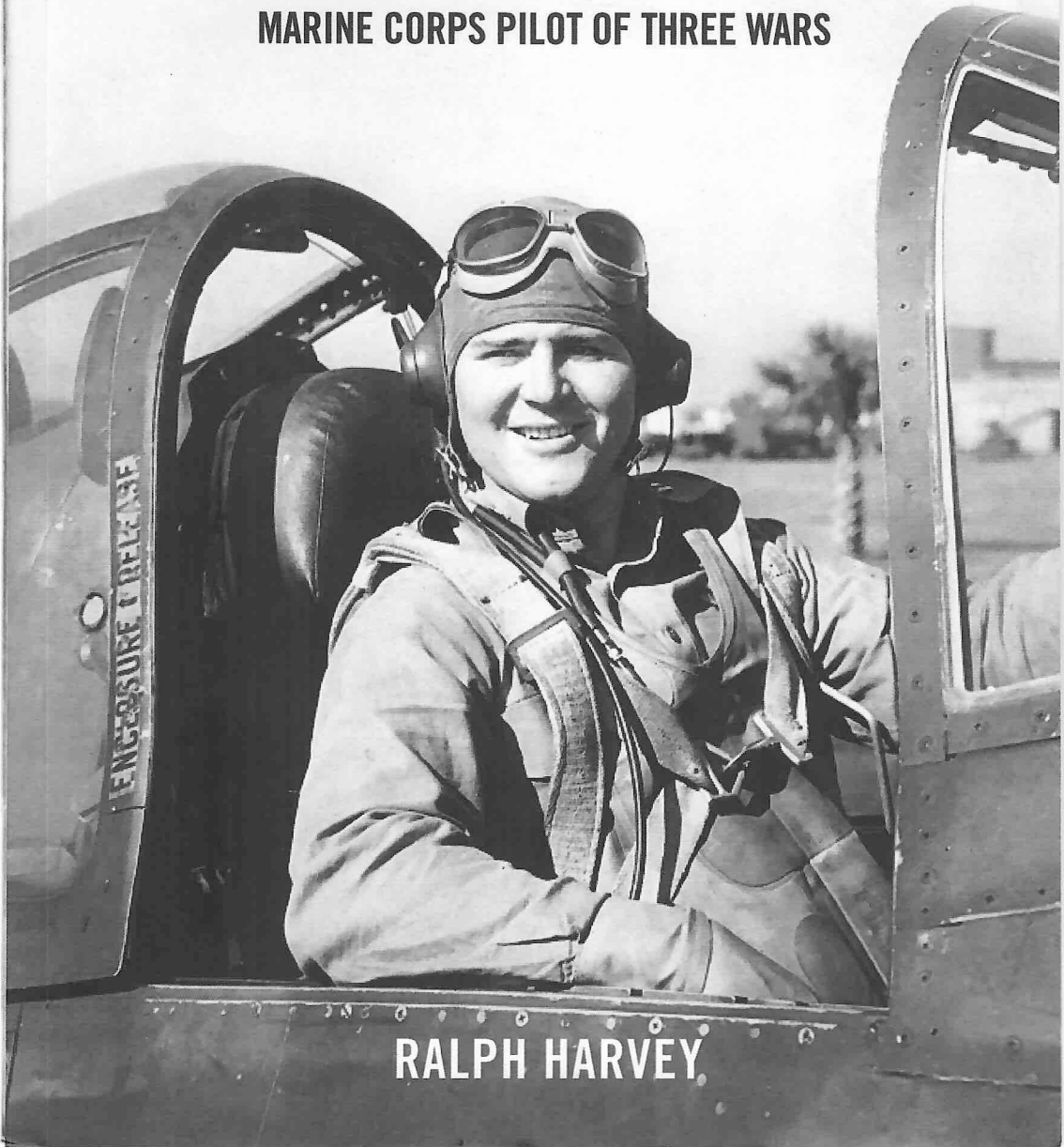


THE FORGOTTEN HERO

COL. KENNETH L. REUSSER, HIGHLY DECORATED
MARINE CORPS PILOT OF THREE WARS



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"This biography goes well beyond the retelling of brave deeds and fearless exploits. Every aspect of Col. Reusser's remarkable life is covered with meticulous detail that left this reader in absolute awe. It is not often that one man's life can cover the sweep of history, but here is a compelling narrative that does so with style, momentum and depth. It should not be missed."

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— Kevin Bennett, general manager of the American Heroes Channel.

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CHAPTER 14

THE LAST BATTLE: COMMANDING MAG-16 IN VIETNAM

He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.

– Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War* (circa 500 BC).

Dr. Goldberg: Still on Vietnam, in retrospect, what would you have done differently?

McNamara: That's a subject I won't discuss.

– Excerpt of an oral history interview between Dr. Alfred Goldberg, interviewer, and former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara on 27 August 1986. McNamara served as SecDef from 1961-68.

Marble Mountain Air Facility, just east of Da Nang's Han River and sitting alongside the South China Sea, was conveniently out of the way. To the 1st Marine Air Wing and Marine Air Group 16, out of the way meant away from the overcrowded conditions at Da Nang Air Base, which in 1966 was about to become the world's busiest airport. With the Air Force reluctant to give the Marines the space and facilities that it needed, the 1st MAW had to get MAG-16 more room to conduct its expanding operations – and quickly. The solution came when the first phase of a nearby auxiliary airfield was nearing completion.

Alongside the ocean on the Tiensha Peninsula, American contractors were finishing one 2,000-foot long asphalt runway at a base that still had no official name. But that was enough for the 1st MAW. On 26 August 1965, just two days after MAG-16 completed a key combat role in Operation Starlite, wing headquarters sent the helicopter air group over to its new home. Several days later, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, approved its name: Marble Mountain Air Facility. The 1st MAW headquarters would remain at Da Nang, but at least MAG-16's new base wasn't far away.

Marble Mountain, the short title that nearly everyone used for the air base, soon became a world of its own. Immediately to the north was My Che, well known for its beautiful oceanfront sand, and which the Americans called China Beach. Just south of the air base was another prominent landmark, namely five red marble peaks named Kim, Thuy, Moc, Hoa and Tho. A paradox of physical proximity and cultural distance, the hills were collectively called the Marble Mountains or, more simply, Marble Mountain. At another time, the land between China Beach and the Marble Mountains would make a fine resort location in a pristine Asian paradise. But in 1966, that outskirts of Da Nang was being subsumed by the rapid military buildup in South Vietnam.

From an operational standpoint, Marble Mountain offered big advantages to helicopter squadrons. Being on the coast near Da Nang Bay, Marine UH-1s, CH-46s, and UH-34s on airlift missions could fly to and from nearby ships within minutes. The new helicopter airfield was also convenient to the areas in which MAG-16 provided operational air support, especially south and southwest of Da Nang around Thanh Quit, Dai Loc and the notorious Hill 55. But despite having a favorable location on the coast, Marble Mountain wasn't completely safe. The base was occasionally visited by enemy insurgents who would suddenly appear from nowhere, make a hit and run attack, and then just as suddenly disappear into the night. As it was later discovered, even the nearby marble hilltops reportedly hid a makeshift Viet Cong hospital for a while.^{1,2} But without telltale conventional forces or distinct targets the enemy's presence was often hidden, shrouded within the kaleidoscope of Vietnam's amorphous guerilla war.

Even aside from the move to Marble Mountain, Ken's arrival at MAG-16 occurred at a time of rapid change. As the American buildup of forces continued, MAG-16 became an all-helicopter operation with a mixed fleet and a variety of missions. And there was an influx of new helicopter pilots, for whom many would gain their initial operating experience in a combat environment. And there were other advantages in operating out of Marble Mountain.

In a war in which helicopters were the key to air mobility, low altitude gunships, supplying troops in remote areas, ship to shore airlift and the recovery of damaged aircraft in the field, the location of a base is important. The next airfield to the south was Chu Lai, located about forty miles south of Marble Mountain. Chu Lai Air Base was strictly a Marine Corps facility, and it was built to accommodate jet fighters and attack aircraft. For helicopter missions between Da Nang and Chu Lai, MAG-16 would get the call. That included a lot of territory, all of which was hostile. Viet Cong troops were experts at hiding, evasion and camouflage; and operated with a considerable freedom of movement.³

Col. Ken Reusser joined MAG-16 at Marble Mountain in October 1966, and settled right into his duties as the new commanding officer.⁴ By that time, his experience with MAG-26 and the 4th MEB had given him a wealth of experience in Marine helicopter operations, and considerable knowledge of MAG-16's diverse

fleet. The Bell UH-1, Sikorsky UH-34, and Boeing-Vertol's tandem-rotor CH-46 were the backbone of MAG-16. Together, these helicopters provided substantial airlift and fire support capabilities. Ken knew those aircraft types well; he had flown all of them. Maj. Gen. Louis B. Robertshaw, the commanding general of the 1st MAW, was Ken's commanding officer and preceded him into the theater by five months. Robertshaw was a proven combat leader and deserves some mention.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Robertshaw entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1932, and distinguished himself as (among other things) a superb athlete. Robertshaw captained the football team, was a member of the All-American football team, and received the Naval Academy Sword for his achievements. After graduating in 1936 and completing The Basic School at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, the young lieutenant served in Shanghai, China with the 6th Marines, 2nd Marine Brigade. After stateside duty and a subsequent tour in China, Robertshaw served as an instructor and athletic coach at the Naval Academy before entering flight training in early 1942.⁵

As a newly minted naval aviator, Robertshaw quickly distinguished himself as a combat pilot in the Pacific (flying the SBD dive bomber). The future general was promoted to major when he graduated from flight training, and was assigned to duty as executive officer of Scout Bombing Squadron 132 in the South Pacific. Becoming the squadron commander due to the loss of his predecessor, Robertshaw was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross twice (in the Solomon Islands region), along with a half dozen air medals. In December 1943, as Ken was about to return to the Pacific, Robertshaw was promoted to lieutenant colonel and preparing to rotate back to MCAS El Toro in Santa Ana, California. His advance to general officer rank seemed almost assured and, like Ken, Robertshaw always found ways to keep flying.⁶

After arriving in Da Nang and upon assumption of command of the 1st MAW, then-Major General Louis B. Robertshaw remained current as a command pilot by flying the McDonnell F-4D Phantom II fighter.⁷ (Presumably, the two-star general had significant restrictions imposed on his flying). Given his own active flying status, it is not surprising that when Ken arrived in October 1966, the fifty-four year old Robertshaw granted the forty-six year old colonel permission to fly as well. Ken did that enthusiastically, choosing to lead by example, and he flew frequently. Once again, the actual logbook entries are revealing.

In November, Ken's logbook indicates that he flew four missions in the Boeing-Vertol CH-46A Sea Knight and two in the Sikorsky UH-34D; all of the other missions were flown in the ubiquitous Bell UH-1E Iroquois, better known as the Huey. The logbook entries for those flights reveal that Ken tended to split the time on each mission equitably; nearly half of those hours were logged as co-pilot time. Generally speaking, those missions involved flights from the Da Nang area southbound down the coast towards Chu Lai, and areas to the west. The Da Nang area would include the prominent peninsula just north of China Beach on which

Marble Mountain (with its radar, Hawk missile battery and SIGINT facilities) was located. Ships in Da Nang harbor or just off the South Vietnamese coast would also be included.

Heading to the southwest from Marble Mountain, pilots quickly flew into a veritable no-man's land where Viet Cong elements of all sizes were known to operate. For example, just ten miles southwest of Da Nang was the once infamous Hill 55, a valuable high point of land just two miles northeast of where three rivers joined. Scattered around the area were small villages, which Marine ground forces sought to protect from Viet Cong (VC) forces. The VC had extensively mined Hill 55, and during the French Indochina War, two French battalions were wiped out on that hill. The Marines decided early on to de-mine and take control of that high point. They did, establishing Camp Muir in the process, after which a sniper training facility and a Hawk anti-aircraft missile battery were established.

Despite the American presence at Camp Muir and other bases, the VC used stealth and fear to establish its presence throughout South Vietnam – as Operation Starlite had aptly demonstrated in 1965. But American and Republic of Vietnam forces had considerable airpower, which often played a major role in those battles. And so it was on 14 November 1966, when a plan to recover a downed Marine helicopter south of Hill 55 was being implemented. Ken assigned himself to that mission, in which he flew a UH-1E gunship (aircraft number 151873) as both the co-pilot in the left seat and as the airborne mission commander.⁸ In the right seat of the UH-1E was the 26 year-old aircraft commander, Capt. Leon Chadwick; in the cabin were Sgt. Dan Bennett, the crew chief and a gunner, and Cpl. Rodolfo Gonzales, the left door gunner. The aircraft and the above noted crewmembers were from MAG-16's VMO-6.⁹

The UH-1E lifted off from Marble Mountain Air Facility and headed southwestbound into the area that many pilots dubbed "Happy Valley." MAG-16 had already lost several helicopters in that dangerous no-man's land, but on this mission there was a contingent of friendly ground forces awaiting the recovery helicopters. Using radio call sign 'Fire Team Fourteen' the operation's ground element had already established its command post roughly five hundred yards south of the disabled aircraft. In advance of launching the flight elements of the mission, the downed aircraft was prepared for airlift through such things as rotor removal and certain weight reduction steps.¹⁰

The airborne element of the recovery mission included Ken's airborne control aircraft (radio call sign 'Charlie Victor One'), a CH-46 Sea Knight (call sign 'Stake') to lift the disabled helicopter with a lowered sling, and then airlift it back to Marble Mount, and a flight of four UH-1E gunships (the flight leader's call sign was 'Best Man Twenty-six'). Ken's flight down to the recovery site took less than thirty minutes, with Chadwick flying the aircraft. Approaching the recovery site, Ken made contact with Fire Team Fourteen, after which both visual and radio contact was made with Stake, the lifting helicopter. With radio and visual contact established

Stake descended to the recovery site, leveling off in a hover and waited as its sling was attached to the downed helicopter. Meanwhile, Ken's UH-1E descended to a lower orbit, keeping a close eye out for any enemy activity. Everything appeared normal at that time, with the Best Man flight of four UH-1Es also operating in a low protective orbit.¹¹ The operation was as safe as it could be.



Left) Marines approach welcoming families and sign at the outskirts of Da Nang, South Vietnam in 1965. Source: USMC photo # A183780. (Right) Marine UH-1 helicopter gunship stays close to the troops on 29 July 1966 as 1st Marine Division troops prepare to sweep an area in search of Viet Cong troops. Official Marine Corps photo # A369245.

Soon the recovery sling was secured around the disabled helicopter and Stake was able to take up the slack. Once that load test was accomplished and the integrity of the sling was verified, Stake began to lift the damaged aircraft and the recovery was underway. Then, just after Stake had lifted its under-slung cargo off the ground and began to slowly gain altitude, concealed enemy forces on a nearby ridge opened fire. The slowly climbing CH-46 started taking hits and radioed for help. Stake informed Ken that the fire was coming from a ridge area to the east, and moved away towards the west. Charlie Victor One acquired the target and rolled in to attack. Best Man flight of four was by then only two minutes away.¹²

In the dive towards the concealed enemy, Chadwick held the aircraft steady while Ken fired all fourteen pod-mounted rockets as well as his M60C machine gun. But on the pull out neither pilot saw the enemy, just the source of telltale signs of the enemy fire. Stake was still receiving incoming fire and taking hits; it wisely jettisoned the load and withdrew to the west. Best Man flight observed the position that Ken's rockets hit, and was nearing a position in the valley where it could commence its attack. But Victor Charlie One was closest to the enemy, so Chadwick rolled in for a second attack on the Viet Cong. It would be the last time Ken would make a firing run on an enemy. Ken adjusted the aim point slightly to the right, at which point the UH-1E was hit by heavy enemy fire in critical areas. Victor Charlie One was in trouble.¹²

As the UH-1E absorbed the numerous hits control was lost, with the nose rising and the airspeed bleeding off rapidly. Ken shouted to Chadwick to lower the nose, but then saw that the command pilot was dead. Taking control, Ken found that his collective and cyclic control inputs had virtually no effect; all that he could do was yaw the nose to keep the aircraft relatively straight. A .50-caliber slug passed through his left hip, as Bennett and Gonzales returned fire with their swivel-mounted door guns. Then came the impact, a collision of aircraft and earth that was so forceful that the tail boom separated from the rest of the helicopter. Almost immediately the Huey caught fire, with the flames spreading rapidly.¹³

Stuck in the left pilot seat, Ken struggled to free himself from the burning wreckage. But the quick release harness was jammed and the flames were getting closer; Ken realized that in a minute or two he would be burned alive. In desperation he leaned backward towards the advancing flames, hoping to use the flames to burn through the nylon straps. It took several of these desperate movements, but the straps then failed and Ken was able to extricate himself through the left cockpit door. Once outside, he realized that the burning flesh was from his own body – he was on fire! Here is how Ken described what happened subsequently (from a 20 November 1966 interview with investigators):

I was able to get out of the airplane – the ammunition was cooking very furiously and it was a ball of flames. I stepped out of the airplane and tried to grab the man's leg in the back, which was sticking up ahead of the inverted skid. I couldn't do anything – I was burning. I submerged in a rice paddy to put the fire out on myself and by the time I got back to the man concerned there was a ground corpsman or one of the Marines there that was pulling me away. I think it was too late to do any good by that time. Anyway, during the entire [period of] getting me out of there, the people that pulled me back, gave me treatment and got me in the [sic] Amtrak. [They] led me across quite a large, exposed area. They were doing all this under intense enemy fire because when that airplane went down an awful lot of enemy came, and these people were all firing – all the way through getting me out.

Ken was pulled away from the burning wreckage by a Navy corpsman who braved enemy fire by running across roughly 300 yards of exposed rice paddies to reach Ken. At that point Ken was trying to pull Sgt. Bennett's body past a jammed left fuselage door. Without delay, the corpsman picked up Ken and carried him away from the burning wreckage, acts of valor that saved his life during the subsequent explosion. Unfortunately, the other crewmembers were already dead when Ken tried to free Bennett's partially exposed body.

Getting Ken first aid was the first step, and one of the Amtracs was able to safely move Ken beyond the exposed area of enemy fire. During first aid, it was discovered that the foam lining inside Ken's flight helmet had melted in the intense heat, running down the back of his head and neck, and into his ears. A

large portion of Ken's body was severely burned, and he had bullet wounds to his right arm, left thigh and hip. Getting Ken to a hospital as quickly as possible was the next critical step, but the Viet Cong guerillas were on the ridge above the flaming wreckage. A lot of unsung heroes exposed themselves to enemy fire that day in order to move Ken via Amtrac to an improvised landing zone, from which point he was airlifted to the 99th Evacuation Hospital at China Beach, just to the north of Marble Mountain.¹⁴

After being examined by doctors at China Beach, it was determined that the prognosis was grim. In addition to the gunshot wounds, over thirty-five percent of Ken's body was affected by very painful second- and third-degree burns.¹⁵ During the night Ken overheard two corpsmen talking about him outside his door, apparently believing that their patient was either asleep or in a drugged stupor. One of the corpsman indicated that Ken was not expected to live, a remark that angered Ken and steeled his resolve; he quietly prayed for his survival.¹⁶ Meanwhile, plans were being made to transport him to a burn unit in the Continental United States.

Back in the states, plans were also being made to notify Pat that Ken had been wounded in action, and to explain both the severity of his condition and the evacuation plans. By design, that notification duty fell to Col. Mike Canan, a good friend.¹⁷ Col. Canan's wife Rita was also a close friend of Pat's and, again by arrangement, Rita was the first to drop by Pat's Alexandria, Virginia apartment. At that point, no one knew how long Ken would remain alive.

"Rita had come to my apartment," Pat recalled forty-nine years later. "She just came to be there when Col. Mike Canan arrived. We were very close friends for years and years. They both stayed with me for quite a while, then they left together."

Ken was airlifted from Da Nang on an air ambulance aircraft on 22 November 1966 – eight days after having been shot down, and on the third anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination. Although the doctors discussed various burn hospitals, Ken requested that he be transferred to Bethesda Naval Hospital so that he could be near his family. That request was granted.

"I also talked off and on with General [Richard C.] Mangrum," mentioned Pat. "He became assistant commandant of the Marine Corps. He used to call and give me updates. They didn't really know about his condition. Then they flew him into Andrews [Air Force Base]. My son and I were waiting for him in Bethesda, but Ken said he didn't want his son to see him in that condition. It was quite an ordeal to send him by plane to Andrews."

The medevac flight on which Ken was aboard landed at Andrews Air Force Base on the 23rd of November, with Ken's body protected by gauze and heavy medication. At the time Patty Jo was living with her husband and Ken Jr. was attending a school in Oregon, so only Richard was living with Pat in Virginia. Despite his wishes, both Pat and Richard were able to briefly see Ken. Both were shocked by his condition, and would never forget the horrible burns and odor from his body.

"I was there with Richard when they wheeled him into the hospital," Pat remembered. "And he looked terrible."

The initial examination at Bethesda produced a diagnosis of "(1) burns, second and third degree, head, neck, upper extremities and torso; (2) gunshot wounds, superficial, right forearm and left thigh."

More specifically, the doctors noted:¹⁸

Examination on admission revealed him to be disoriented due to a septicemia. He had third degree burns of the scalp, neck, left thoracic back and side, left axille, and dorsum of the left upper and lower arms, left hand, right forearm, and right hand; also, second degree burns of the face and neck. Total estimated burn surface was 35%. A gunshot wound of the dorsum of the right forearm and the medial aspect of the left thigh had both been closed previously with wire sutures and were healing uneventfully. There was no evidence of tendon, artery or nerve involvement.

Laboratory studies revealed staphylococcus aureus, coagulase-positive as the infecting organism. Bacteriological studies one month following admission showed pseudomonas aeruginosa as the dominant infecting organism.

Ken was placed on the serious list, received antibiotics and a 0.5% silver nitrate therapy. The results were positive; over a three week period the infection subsided. As Ken slowly recovered, other challenges remained. One dealt with his room. Ken was placed in his own room and near a station for nurses, but was outside of officer's country. That was intended to accommodate family visits and, while the intention was good, the room was drafty and cold at night.

"Dr. Bill Dempsey was one of three [doctors] who took care of Ken," Pat remembered, explaining the doctor's instructions to her: "I don't care what time or day or night it is if you need me, you call me."

"Ken wasn't in officer country. One night in the winter time it was cold and windy and he was freezing. I knew he was going to get sick, so at 2 am in the morning I called Dr. Dempsey. And he told the corpsman to do anything I asked him to do. So the corpsmen were in there at 2 a.m. putting blankets on the walls."

There were some other rough periods for Ken during the early days at Bethesda. On another occasion, the highly medicated patient became disoriented and believed that he was in enemy territory. Thinking that he was being pursued by Viet Cong forces, Ken removed his medical lines, climbed out of his bed and began to hide from the enemy. He was found across the hall by nurses and brought back to his hospital room. Fortunately, the rest of the night was more peaceful.¹⁹

Despite the excellent care, Ken's progress was not linear. During the first few weeks, Ken's outlook was still uncertain. One of the doctors asked Pat if she was going to gather the family. At that point, Ken Jr. was not quite done with the first half of his academic year at his prep school in Oregon. Pat sensed that Ken was

going to survive and that the existing travel plans could remain intact. Her instincts proved to be correct; Ken rallied, and the crisis passed.

On the 20th of December, split thickness skin grafts from the abdomen and thigh were applied to the dorsum of both hands as well as the entire left arm. On 5 January 1967, doctors performed a similar procedure on the scalp and left side of Ken's back. Later that month, Ken had improved enough so that he was permitted to move to his apartment, returning every day for physiotherapy.²⁰ It was a big move, but the colonel still had a lengthy recovery ahead of him. And from time to time, he was back in the hospital; one example was a two week period during which the doctors treated a burn scar contracture. In general, Ken responded well to his treatments, although his future as a Marine Corps officer remained uncertain.

The uncertainty regarding Ken's future was realized when his name came up before a colonel's promotion board in the spring of 1967. At that time, even Ken's survival was not certain. And despite his positive response to the various treatments, it was highly uncertain if Ken would be able to continue on active duty after being released from Bethesda. Therefore, there was disappointment but no surprise when Ken's name did not appear on the promotion list for brigadier general.²¹ Still, there was hope for the future.

In his fitness report for the very short period of 16 October through 21 November 1966, Maj. Gen. Louis B. Robertshaw wrote in detail of Ken's accomplishments during his roughly month long tenure as MAG-16's commanding officer. Noted the general:

... in one month he raised the availability of aircraft significantly. Col. Reusser further improved operating procedures and liaison with the ground forces farthest from the normal point of contact. Much was accomplished to improve Marine Aircraft Group-16 during the brief month under his command.

As with almost all of his previous commanding officers, Maj. Gen. Robertshaw checked the box that stated 'Would Particularly Like to Have' near the end of the fitness report. In addition, Robertshaw recommended that Ken be awarded an additional Air Medal and Purple Heart, along with the Navy Commendation Medal for heroism.²² Ken could not have asked for more.

June came, it was clear that Ken would soon be released from medical treatment. At that point he could have either been assigned to a new duty station or be retired. But first a medical review board would have to evaluate his overall medical condition and fitness for duty. That decision was rendered on 29 June 1967, and it concluded that Ken was fit for duty. The recommendation was that Ken be returned to full duty; no restrictions were placed on future assignments. Ken was then assigned to an administrative unit at Marine Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C. pending issuance of duty orders.²³ At least he knew the answer to some of the questions about his future.

Looking back at Ken's short period in command of MAG-16 is instructive. First, it is a stark reminder of the omnipresent and unpredictable risks of being in combat. In October 1942, Ken was shot down on his first encounter with the enemy over the Solomon Sea. Twenty-four years and one month later he arrived in South Vietnam, where he expected to command MAG-16 for at least a year. The deadly ambush on what turned out to be his last combat mission occurred just one month into his deployment to Vietnam, a stark reminder of the risks and uncertainty that are visited on all service members who serve in combat.

Beyond that, it is clear that Ken brought the same level of enthusiasm to the command of MAG-16 as he had in his prior jobs. He had found the action that he yearned for after being the chief of staff at the 4th MEB, but never expected the dire consequences. In particular, he never anticipated that his 14 November 1966 flight with Capt. Leon Chadwick would be his last combat mission as a military pilot. There would be no more opportunities to lead a division of aircraft into battle, and no more diving attacks on enemy aircraft or ground positions. After his medical condition stabilized and his survival was assured, Ken came to accept that.

Another noteworthy matter is the degree of pain and suffering that Ken Reusser endured from his extensive burns and skin grafts. One cannot translate another person's pain into words, but it was often severe. And even after his medical discharge from Bethesda and return to full duty, Ken's medical challenges were not over. The mental and emotional effects of that last battle presented another challenge, and one that was often not fully recognized.

After he was evacuated, Ken never stopped thinking about the many individuals whose acts of valor kept him alive on the battlefield. He deeply appreciated the doctors, nurses, corpsmen and technicians who restored his burned body, and enabled a better life than he could ever have expected.²⁴ In many cases, they were fleeting faces without names. And there were many nights when Ken tried to sleep, but found his mind returning to Da Nang, Marble Mountain Air Facility, and the flight of Charlie Victor One. Ken never got to know Capt. Leon Chadwick, Sgt. Dan Bennett or Cpl. Rodolfo Gonzales, but he had confidence in all of them – they were all outstanding Marines.

On those nocturnal flashbacks at Bethesda, Ken remembered the flight that took the crew of Charlie Victor One southwest of Marble Mountain. His command and control helicopter was some nine miles south-southwest of Xamang, in Quang Nam Province, when the ambush erupted. Ken remembered the radio calls from Stake as the CH-46 lifted the disabled helicopter – and the next transmission when he learned that they were taking hits from enemy fire. Ken remembered the radio call when Stake's crew advised that they had jettisoned their external load as they tried to escape the ambush. But were they okay?

More details of the ambush would follow. There were recollections of Charlie Victor One diving down low to attack the concealed Viet Cong gunners, taking enemy fire as they fired their rockets and machine guns at the concealed targets

below. Ken remembered the moment that enemy rounds penetrated the helicopter and struck Capt. Chadwick in the head, killing him instantly. Chadwick was seated next to Ken in the UH-1E cockpit when he was hit, so close and yet so far away. Ken instinctively wanted to save Chadwick – he couldn't let the man next to him die – but a horrible microsecond later realized that that he could not.

Then Ken's mind flashed back to the crash site at the bottom of the hill, the struggle to escape from the fire just behind the cockpit, and the wreckage of his burning UH-1E helicopter. Next came the terrible moments when he was on fire outside the aircraft, followed by the desperate attempt to save the two brave Marines inside. He had to get them out!

It took a long time for Ken Reusser to realize that Sgt. Bennett and Cpl. Gonzales had already died; their pain had ended. But in those nocturnal journeys the terrible events of 14 November 1966 kept coming back, stuck in a feedback loop that he couldn't turn off. Ken physically recovered from the severe burns eight months after his evacuation from the hostile fire not far from Hill 55. After that, the passage of time contributed to the healing process. Yet even decades later that feedback loop sometimes came back on unexpectedly, and Ken would again relive the horrors of that fateful day in Quang Nam Province, South Vietnam.

