

The Proud Warrior

The Corridor



Lt. Col Al Slater
CO Alpha Company July 1967

It was 6 July, 1967. Alpha Company 1/9 was attached to 3/9. We were located in I Corps (RVN), south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), just north of the trace - (an east - west track cleared of foliage between the forward marine combat bases of Gio Lyn and Con Tien.

Four days earlier, Alpha had been in fierce combat as we fought our way east to help Bravo Co. 1/9 who was being overrun by a huge North Vietnamese Army (NVA) force. This was the first time we had seen the NVA in such numbers, in an offensive attack mode and supported by massive barrages of rockets, mortars and artillery. In the end, Bravo Co. survivors numbered 26 Marines and they were no longer an operational company.

3/9 was helolifted in and for the last four days they engaged the enemy while retrieving Bravo killed in action (KIA). The NVA withdrew north across the DMZ which was their safe haven where they rested, rearmed and recuperated so they could come back south and engage us again another day.

On this morning of 6 July the CO of 3/9, Major Woodring tasked Alpha Co. with taking a reconnaissance unit north to find out how and where the NVA units were coming across the DMZ with such speed, in such numbers and undetected. My response was "yes sir", but I added that with their reduced numbers and poor condition I didn't know how much fight I could get out of my depleted company. Furthermore, I estimated the probability of an enemy encounter was very good. My marines numbered approximately 100, about half of normal strength. We had been on long exhaustive field duty where 24 hour combat alertness and frequent combat was routine. In the last three months, half of the company became casualties and re-

placements were few and slow to arrive. They appeared ragged, physically and psychologically exhausted from too much combat time in the field. Uniforms were torn, filthy and incomplete and reeked from repeatedly dried sweat. They learned to carry the minimal essentials - water, chow, weapons, ammo, flak jackets and helmets - to cope with the constant long endurance patrols in the extreme heat and humidity.

Most of our marines were in their late teens or early twenties. It appeared that we had robbed them of their youth. There was no longer the laughter, chatter and humor. They had the distant twenty mile stare and easily would have lived up to the name "The Walking Dead". As the only company officer assisted by one Staff NCO and a few junior NCO's, our leadership was needing. Our junior enlisted Marines filled the leadership jobs.

Major Woodring, in appreciation of our status, assigned Charlie Co. to reinforce us in the mission. To my amazement, Charlie Co. appeared to be in the same depleted state as Alpha, no Company CO or officers and few NCO's, they were also at approximately half strength.

Sensing that we would engage the NVA on this mission, I asked Major Woodring that if we met the enemy and were not able to break contact what kind of help could we expect. He replied he would send us tanks. We both knew tanks, without supporting infantry in this terrain, could not operate and that he was basically saying we were on our own.

Our task force, numbering about 200 Marines, consisting of Alpha and Charlie Companies, a recon unit (super grunts) commanded by Capt. Harnett, and a few combat engineers. We briefed and organized all hands. There was concern knowing we were going into Indian country frequented by the NVA. I explained that this was a recon mission not a combat mission. Our goal was to go in, collect info and get back ASAP and to avoid engagement. There was some grumbling to include, "oh fuck, not again", but we saddled up and moved out quickly.

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Our column, with point and flanking security, moved in a north westerly direction away from flat open and populated areas and toward the most probable concealed and remote NVA crossing and approach area. We traveled in as much rough terrain and heavy foliage as possible to avoid detection. After an uneventful approach, with no enemy sightings nor contact, we reached an ideal recon area just south of the DMZ. Additionally we found an excellent site for a patrol base. It offered good cover and concealment with pre-dug in perimeter positions. This flat open terrain provided good observation and fields of fire. The landscape was scarred with artillery and bomb craters. Normally we would shy away from a previously used (known) position but it was extremely defensible and our intent was to accomplish the recon job and get back quickly.

We verified our location with an artillery smoke round. Capt. Hartnett dispatched his recon teams while we set up a 360 degree perimeter with 12 o'clock identified by a large north tree. I walked the perimeter to insure we were improving positions and had interlocking fire. Multiple artillery concentrations were plotted entirely around us. We sent a situation report (sit rep) to 3/9 giving our location and status. The command post (CP) was located in a deep bomb crater centered in our patrol base.

I was feeling good about our position, but hoped that recon would satisfy their requirement so that we could get back to 3/9 ASAP, when a recon team radioed in and reported that multiple large NVA units were rapidly moving south across the DMZ river with one heading toward our position. I asked how many did they count and recon replied there were too many to count. We told recon "mission accomplished, get back here ASAP. We plan to move out before the NVA get here". We sent a sit rep to 3/9, and informed our perimeter Marines to saddle up and be prepared to move out on the double and also stay alert because the enemy were on the way.

A large rapidly moving column of enemy marched into our west, (9 o'clock), flank. They moved with speed (almost a trot) without caution and with weapons and equipment in a transport mode (on backpacks, chogi sticks and towed). We immediately unleashed a heavy volume of firepower on them, (M 16, M60 MG, M79 and artillery). They were momentarily stunned as they began scattering. We had never seen so many enemy in the open before. We knew we hurt them. At first, they couldn't even return our fire. We heard the eerie sound of a bugle, a sound we had never heard before. I was reminded that in Korea the sound of a bugle preceded Chinese communist human wave - Banzai attacks.

It was estimated that we were in a well traveled NVA corridor in which they routinely went to and from their southerly objectives never encountering resistance or detection. They sacrificed caution and security for speed. We had caught them at their worst.

Soon the enemy returned fire sending camouflaged infantry who probed our perimeter from all sides. It appeared they were trying to draw our fire to determine our location, size and identity. Our marines were told to conserve ammo, try not to disclose positions, fix bayonets and hold. Their response was truly noteworthy.

Recon teams that had not returned were told to find cover and concealment and hold. In return, they said to keep up the artillery fire for it was impacting on the enemy who were yelling, confused and panicked.

3/9 was notified of our situation but denied our request for support. Their response was that rear marine units were under fire from other enemy elements in this NVA offensive and we could not expect any reinforcement at this time. 3/9 did grant our request for a priority in artillery support.

A surface to air missile (SAM) fired from our north went over our heads. It looked like a telephone pole with afterburners. Later we were told it had hit and downed a jet coming to our assistance. The Russian SAM's were known to be part of the high tech air wars far to the north. To have one fired in support of their infantry combat in the south added significance to this NVA offensive.

The enemy went into the attack, massing and trying to penetrate our perimeter in multiple sectors. We shifted heavy artillery concentrations onto the attacking enemy, often walking the strikes to within 50 meters of our lines. The noise was deafening, concussions shook the ground, shrapnel felled trees and the air was clogged with dirt and smoke. We were protected below ground level in our fighting holes while the exposed enemy above ground received the full and devastating impact of the artillery rounds.

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Under heavy fire our lines held except for one segment that pulled back leaving a gap. The few enemy that penetrated were killed and the gap was quickly closed. We plotted an artillery concentration on our own position to be fired on order if we were overrun.

As darkness approached, the heavy attacks were reduced to fire fights. There were numerous incidents of incoming hand grenades many of which were thrown back. A nearby NVA mortar tube was silenced by an M79 grenade launcher. Artillery illumination rounds provided us with visibility throughout the hours of darkness.

In the dark early morning hours of 7 July, there was welcome silence. The sounds of combat had ceased. We were unable to get reinforcements, medical evacuation, resupply, nor air support. We were short of ammo, had casualties, were thirsty, and exhausted. It was evident that it would be difficult to sustain another day of continued combat and a high probability that if the enemy attacked again it would come just after first light.

The word was passed to saddle up, pick up our casualties and be prepared to move out on order. 3/9 was notified that we were coming in. The remaining recon teams outside our perimeter were told to return to 3/9. We placed our best combat strength and security (point and flank) toward the front of our returning column. Our plan was to avoid enemy contact. If we were fired upon, we had to try to go around them or through them but we could not afford another static engagement.

We moved out in semidarkness. As the rear element of our column vacated our old fighting position, it was saturated with a huge barrage (five to ten minutes) of NVA artillery. All rounds were on target and there had been no adjustment rounds.

The return patrol went without incident. Our remaining recon teams joined us as we entered 3/9 lines.

An after action report requires friendly casualties (wia, kia) and an enemy kia (body count) among other information. The ratio between these two was significant in determining combat success.

In our action we had two friendly kia's and approximately six wia's which was surprisingly light under the circumstances. Of course one friendly casualty was one too many to us. We knew we had hurt the enemy badly but I never allowed our Marines to leave the perimeter to do a NVA body count. Had we delayed departure to do so on the morning of 7 July, we no doubt would have suffered heavy casualties due to NVA artillery. Our marines reported seeing thousands of enemy fall but the possibility of exaggeration and lack of confirmation remained. I made an ultra conservative report to 3/9 of 200 enemy KIA.

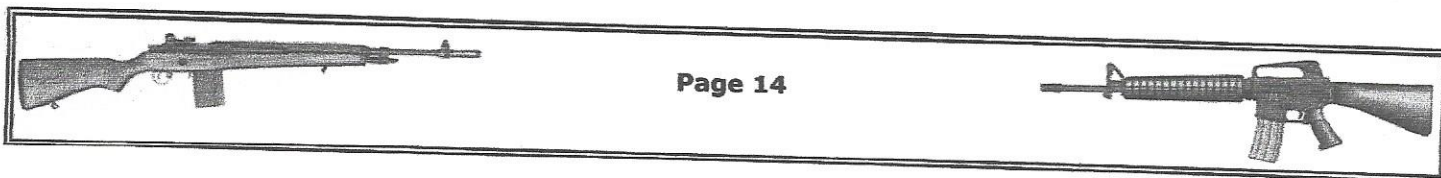
Ours was a rare and epic combat success in which we stopped, stymied and then defended against a large NVA attacking force, inflicting heavy casualties on them. No doubt, our greatest achievement was to detect a major multi-pronged NVA attack south across the DMZ, and the early alerting of forward marine units who engaged them. Having lost their element of surprise and suffered unexpected casualties, the NVA forces withdrew prematurely.

It was no small task that our small battered 200 man force was able to survive and return to friendly lines with minor casualties. There were moments when I thought our chances of survival were very slim. I know that had the NVA attacked en masse with their entire might we couldn't have held, it would have been hand to hand combat and a fight to the end. We were a fly in their ointment. I don't believe the enemy ever really knew our size, strength and disposition, and this perhaps was our greatest ally. It was truly wonderful that NVA artillery held their fire until first light on the morning of 7 July. They probably did so because they didn't want to reveal the positions of their guns by firing in the dark. Their ability to fire for effect on target without having adjustment rounds is impressive. It's estimated they knew our position for having been there before. They may have dug and occupied the fighting holes that we used. It is evident their artillery fire was unobserved since the position was no longer occupied, and an observer could have shifted the fire onto our departing column. Someone from up above was looking out for us. Could this artillery barrage have been followed by a NVA attack?

In our past combat encounters, so many things frequently went wrong. During the 6 & 7 July action, the possibility for disaster was constantly imminent, but everything went right and it all turned out wonderfully.

Artillery was the great equalizer. We received continuous, rapid and accurate artillery fire throughout our ordeal. It came from 105 mm, 155 mm and 175 mm howitzers firing from multi battery positions. We were told over 5,000 artillery rounds were fired in support of the operation. A heroic PFC with a radio on his back, in his own fighting hole, was our lone artil-

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lery forward observer (FO) team survivor. He plotted all concentrations and fired all artillery missions in our defense. Artillery was our only outside support and without it our survival would have been doubtful. Artillery saved our asses!

Recon, our super grunts, lived up to their name and reputation. They were a welcome and integral part of us who joined us as warriors. They were quick to discover and report the oncoming NVA. After our return to 3/9 Capt. Hartnett, with a smile, shook my hand and said "It was good to be part of the team and adventure, but I think we would never want to go out with you guys again". I thanked him for Recon's super job and said "No offense, but I don't think we would like to go on another recon mission with you again either".

In combat, there is a degree of savagery and madness that is alien to the normal peaceful world. There is an intense unity and closeness, the will, if necessary, to die for your fellow marines. The need to kill or be killed is foremost. Sometimes the hate, anger and need for revenge is a driving force. Alpha marines professed "no surrender and take no prisoners". Perhaps this semi madness is necessary for psychological survival. Some of our marines didn't endorse this view. This same madness prevailed with our enemy. When we opened fire on the NVA column killing many helpless, confused and defenseless enemy there was little or no compassion. We thought of it as a turkey shoot. We will always remember our losses during two Phu Bai encounters and during the Bravo Co. engagement on 2 July. The big job now is to readjust, put these feelings away and find peace and happiness in the real world.

The true engineers of our 6 & 7 July success were our warriors. They may have been tired, shabby and dirty, but given the threatening and intense combat situation there was no doubt as to their willingness and ability to fight like lions. They were Marines! Our Marines knew the situation, the odds, the challenge and the possibility that this could be a fight to the end. They came alive with heroism, enthusiasm, energy, discipline and combat veteran wisdom that I had never seen before. Under varied and continuous siege by superior forces, they held our lines and insured our survival.

This is a story that needed to be told. It was a rare and epic success that happened on the heels of one of the most costly Marine battles in Vietnam. This story is not meant for general publication. It is meant to honor those who were there and especially honor those who are no longer with us. Many of us have relived and carried bits of this venture in our hearts for over 45 years. Perhaps this can help bring peace and closure.

This recounting is an operational overview. It lacks the human touch. Perhaps the most important story is yet to be told. It is the personal remembrances (experiences, views emotions etc.) from each warrior who was there. When combined this individual input would produce a classic mosaic of a truly in depth epic. To reach down inside, pull up, and express these memories is psychologically healthy, especially since this was very positive combat experience.

I never had a chance to say thank you. The breakout and return to 3/9 without incident brought a sense of joy and accomplishment rarely felt in this combat environment. A few days afterwards, I reached my end of tour and I flew back to my bride in the real world. I am so very proud and honored to have served with my Marines and Corpsmen in this venture. You epitomized what Marines are all about. I will never forget you or this combat mission. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Al Slater

