

A Soldier Talks

Button It Up and Move Out - Pete Ritch



The following story appeared in the US Marine Corps Vietnam Tankers Association (UMMCVTA) magazine, The Sponson Box and has been approved to be posted on the Three Soldiers Detail South website. The article was written by Pete Ritch, a Vietnam Veteran and a resident of Franklin County, FL. Pete served with Bravo Company, Third Tank Battalion, in Vietnam, 1968-1969. The following story is also part of the USMCVTA History Project.

While looking through photographs of my tour in Vietnam, in preparation for our USMCVTA Reunion in Charleston, I was surprised by the number of shots that included tanks with damaged track. It got me to thinking about instances during my tour in Vietnam, where we either hit a land mine or slipped track and had to button it up and move out.

In mid- January 1969, TANKS B-32, B-33 and B-35 were providing road sweep security and day light patrols in support of Fox Company, Second Battalion, Third Marine Regiment, south of Rt. 9, in Quang Tri Province between Dong Ha and Camp Carol. The rainy season was just ending, and the dirt roads and trails were pretty slick. While on patrol with a Marine Infantry Platoon, we began taking small arms fire from a tree line across an open field from our position. B-32, B-33 and B-35 rushed the tree line and opened fire. When the firing ceased, we found five NVA, KIA. The infantry platoon commander was ordered to bring the bodies back to a small village, just outside our base camp. We loaded the bodies on the fender of B-33.

As we worked our way back to the village on a steep and slick foot path, B-33 "slipped track" on the right side of the tank. The crew repaired the track and we buttoned it up and moved out. Repairing the track was easy. Repairing the track with the bodies on the fender and blood running down the hull of the tank was not so easy.

In February 1969, while supporting a land clearing operation just east of Con Thien, B-33, B-35 and two APC's loaded with grunts from Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Third Marine Division were ambushed by a NVA platoon using machine guns and small arms. In the lead tank, B-33, I accelerated through the ambush, spun the tank around and opened fire. It wasn't until we had quelled the ambush that we discovered that we slipped a track. With several Marines wounded, we decided to "limp" back to a safer locale to repair the track and medivac the dead and wounded. As soon as we were clear, the ambush site was hit with artillery fire from a nearby fire support base. We buttoned up the slipped track and returned to our base camp. A search of the ambush site found nine NVA KIA's.

Hitting land mines became part of my Vietnam experience while supporting the Second ARVN Regiment in April 1969. In a 75-minute span, B-33, B-35 and the Bravo Company Tank Retriever each hit a land mine. We were returning to Gio Linh, just south of the DMZ when B-35 hit a mine. We radioed the Army Major in charge of this joint Army, Marine and ARVN

operation and requested that the ARVN infantry set up a security perimeter around our the damaged tank. In spite of his affirmative response, the ARVN infantry column kept moving past us toward Gio Linh. With B-33 and B-32 providing the only security, the crew of B-35 set a world record for repairing track. We moved out and could see the ARVN ahead of us moving toward Gio Linh.

In less than half a click, B-33 hit a mine and again we requested ARVN perimeter security while we repaired the damage. Again, the ARVN security was nowhere to be found. It was nearing dusk and I radioed for our company Tank Retriever to come to our assistance, in case we could not repair the damage and drive out on our own. The B-33 crew worked on the track with B-32 and B-35 providing the only perimeter security. The Retriever was headed toward us. Just as we finished the repairs on B-33, the Retriever, less than 200 yards from our position, hit a mine and was ambushed.

I dispatched B-35 to assist the Retriever. We buttoned up B-33 and with B-32 and proceeded to the Tank Retriever and B-35, just as darkness settled in. The three tanks and the retriever spent the night buttoned up (all hatches closed and locked), with no perimeter security, ready to shoot at anything that moved. We had flare ships up all night keeping us in "daylight" and making an enemy attack less likely. At first light, a Marine infantry platoon, who had humped all night to reach us, set up perimeter security and we repaired the Retriever. The Retriever Commander, SSGT. Harold Reinsche was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions. By noon, all four vehicles were buttoned up and moved out.

In May 1969, while supporting an infantry platoon from Third Marine's, at Ocean View, on the southern border of the DMZ, near the South China Sea, B-31 was crossing the dunes and detonated a land mine. Several grunts riding on the tank were injured and one required a tourniquet (my web belt) to stem the bleeding from his right leg. As we medivaced the injured, the tank crew repaired the track. Once again, we buttoned up and moved out.

Tank crews were well trained in the repair of our Iron Horses but their resourcefulness in repairing damaged tanks under the threat of attack was awesome. Driving the damaged vehicle out of any adverse situation is a matter of pride. And being towed is not an option. So, we buttoned them up and moved out.

“Old Tankers Never Die; They Just Loose Track”

