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A photo section follows page 124.
Glossary

AAR  after-action report; the summary of a firefight or incident
AFVN  Armed Forces (Radio) Vietnam Network
AK–47  Kalashnikov assault rifle, the standard weapon for NVA forces
AmTrac  Amphibious Tractor; the vehicle normally used for transporting troops
AOR  Area of Responsibility; the tactical area for a battalion, regiment, or division, with specifically defined boundaries
ARVN  Army of the Republic of South Vietnam
AWOL  absent without leave
BCD  bad-conduct discharge
blue line  Radio term for any river (i.e., blue on a map)
Bob-Tail  A tractor–vehicle without a trailer load
“boot”  Navy–Marine Corps term for a recruit
brig time  the time, or sentence, that a Marine or sailor has to spend in military prison
bulkhead  A wall on a ship
CAP (unit)  Combined-action platoon mixing U.S. Marines with local forces
C–4  Plastic explosive in one-pound bars, often used for cooking
Charlie Charlie  Phonetic alphabet for a convoy commander
Charlie Papa  Phonetic alphabet for a command post
chopper  Any helicopter
CIB  Combat Infantryman’s Badge (U.S. Army)
CID  Criminal Investigation Division, a branch of the division legal office
Claymore mine  A command-detected mine, throwing out ball bearings in an arc
CMC  Commandant, Marine Corps; the highest-ranking officer in USMC
COD  close-order drill
company-grade  The lower tier of officers—Second and First Lieutenants and Captain
CP  command post—the headquarters to coordinate unit operations
C–rations  Canned food designed for field consumption
CWO  Chief Warrant Officer, former enlisted, equivalent to a major
Danang (gen.)  Headquarters of First Marine Division
DCC  Division Convoy Control—the radio station controlling convoys
de-de mau  Vietnamese for leaving, running out
Glossary

Defend  Radio call sign for First Marine Division Convoy Control
DMZ  Demilitarized Zone—the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam
Doofus  An inept trooper
DOR  OCS term to “drop on request”
ERB  Enlisted Record Book—the personnel file of an enlisted Marine
FAC  Forward Air Controller—the communicator to air support
field-grade  Midlevel officers—Major, Lieutenant Colonel, and Colonel
FLC  Force Logistics Command—the main supply center at Red Beach in Vietnam
foc’sle  “forecastle,” the very forward compartment on a vessel
fragging  The intentional killing of an officer by a fragmentation hand grenade thrown by his own troops

gain  Also known as a frag—an addendum changing the original order
grid coordinates  Vertical and horizontal lines used to show map positions
grinder  A drill field
hai-ah ku  Asian slang for ASAP
hooch  A covered living space, usually with four walls and a corrugated roof
KIA  killed in action
Lima-Lima  Phonetic alphabet for a landline phone
line haul  A small convoy run
LURPs  Long Range Patrol Rations, forerunner of MREs
M-16  Standard infantry rifle for U.S. forces
M-543  Standard “wrecker”—a tow truck for Rough Rider convoys
MEB  Marine Expeditionary Brigade, a Marine air-ground task force
Med Cap  Medical Civic Action Program, the primary vehicle for providing medical aid to villages and hamlets
medevac  medical evacuation, by helicopter, of a wounded person
MP  Military Police
MPC  Military Payment Certificate, used in lieu of greenbacks
MRC–109  A radio mounted in an M–151 jeep used for convoy control
mule  A small motorized platform mainly used for transporting equipment, ammo, and supplies
mustang  An officer who is former enlisted, up from the ranks
NCO  noncommissioned officer
NSA  Naval Support Activity—a fully staffed Naval Hospital
NVA  North Vietnamese Army (the People’s Army of North Vietnam or PAVN)
OC  Officer Candidate
OCS  Officer Candidate School
OOD  Officer of the Day, the unit duty officer usually on a twenty-four-hour tour
OP  Observation Post; usually set on a hill giving a wide, commanding view

OQR  Officer Qualification Record, an officer’s personnel file similar to the Army 201 file

pace truck  The first vehicle in a convoy with armor underplating and a .50 caliber ring mount

PAVN  The People’s Army of North Vietnam, see also NVA

piaster  A unit of currency in South Vietnam

PLC  Platoon Leaders Class; an alternative to OCS, usually in two increments

PRC–25  Personnel Radio Communication; the standard backpack radio used in combat

Psy Ops  Psychological Operations; maintained the People to People program

Quang Tri (gen.)  Headquarters, Third Marine Division, northern sector (near to the DMZ)

R&R  Rest and Recuperation (or, commonly, “Relaxation”); in the Marines, a six-day leave in a peaceful vacation spot

RF  Regional Forces; a militia force that protected a province-size area

rock and roll  An M–16 selector placed on full automatic

ROTC  Reserve Officer Training Corps—the officer program found on many college campuses

Rough Rider  A resupply convoy with infantry security, usually going through a hot area

rubber lady  A portable air mattress

sapper  An enemy soldier usually on a suicide mission

RVN  Republic of South Vietnam

S–1  Staff Personnel office, from regiment down

S–2  Staff Intelligence office, from regiment down

S–3  Staff Operations office, from regiment down

S–4  Staff Logistics office, from regiment down

S–5  Staff Psychological Operations Office, from regiment down

sit rep  A situation report; commonly called for when a unit is under fire

six-by  The standard M–54 Marine Corps truck

soft cover  A cloth military hat with a bill in front, worn with fatigues or military uniform

Spooky  A C–47 cargo plane equipped with Gatling (rotary) machine-gun capability

TBS  The Basic School—the follow-on education after OCS to study military subjects

Third MAF  Third Marine Amphibious Force, Marine Headquarters, Vietnam

trail package  The rear section of a convoy, typically including the security truck, radio jeep, and wrecker (tow truck)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VC</td>
<td>Viet Cong, or National Liberation Front; the guerrilla arm of North Vietnamese forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ville</td>
<td>A Vietnamese village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wagon train</td>
<td>Slang for a Rough Rider convoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XO</td>
<td>Military term for executive officer, the “number two”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-Ray jeep</td>
<td>The ramrod vehicle in a Rough Rider convoy with a ring-mounted M-60 machine gun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

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Foreword

What follows is a personal account leading to two historic years in the twentieth century seen through the eyes of my wife, Patty, and me. We were half a world apart, enduring a wartime separation—Vietnam and Chicago—when the majority of these events occurred.

It should also be stated that this is a memoir, not a documentary. This initially began as my UCLA thesis screenplay, *Stagecoach Bravo*, in 1978. After several rewrites the screenplay was submitted to the Samuel Goldwyn Competition, open to all students in the University of California system. It won first place that year, 1979. Subsequently, it was optioned but never produced. I often used it as a writing sample.

In addition to *Stagecoach Bravo* the sources for this work are my files, a feature for *The Daily Bruin*, two op-ed pieces for the *Los Angeles Times*, personal letters, photos, statements, maps, and documents from the 11th Motor Transport Battalion, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, First Marine Division, Task Force Yankee, and Headquarters Marine Corps. This documentation aided me in the chronology and the events that occurred in the Vietnam sequence of this book. An additional source was the USMC website www.recordsofwar.com.usmc/vietnam, U.S. Marine Corps History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection, in addition to letters and interviews with friends.

During the central timeframe of this memoir, 1968–1969, a series of historical events occurred. As a writer once observed, “It isn’t what happened, it’s how it happened.” It began in the early 1960s and climaxed at the end of the decade with the resolution to follow.

For two people, half a world apart, this is where it began and how it happened.

For legal reasons certain character names have been changed. Also many of the pivotal scenes in this work are re-created to the best of memory. Not being verbatim, the emphasis is on the essence, especially in regard to the actual spoken words of myself, Captain J. T. Eiler, Major Aldus Ashworth, and others.
Upon being commissioned a United States Marine Corps second lieutenant on December 15, 1966, I knew that I was going to fight a formidable enemy. What I didn’t know was that I was going to have to fight others at the same time. And I would need an anchor.

In April 1945 U.S. forces suffered 80,000 casualties in the Battle of Okinawa. By 1968 Camp Hansen, on Okinawa, had become a processing station for U.S. Marines coming from and going to Vietnam. For those of us who were under orders to Vietnam in 1968 the destination phrase on Okinawa was “Down South.”

The watershed year 1968 began peacefully enough for my wife, Patty, and me. We were at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where I was completing the Marine Corps Motor Transport Orientation Course at nearby Montford Point. During World War II, when the services were segregated, Montford Point was known as the “black boot camp.” It was now the training ground for convoy commanders. With a weekly six-pack of beer or bottle of bourbon as bribe we were able to rent a vacation cabana on Onslow Beach in between the Atlantic shore and the Inland Waterway.

By the end of January one personal incident occurred in between three historical events. On January 21 the seventy-seven–day siege of Khe Sanh began. Two days later the USS Pueblo, a Navy intelligence gathering ship with a crew of eighty-three, was captured by North Korean patrol boats in the Sea of Japan for allegedly violating territorial limits. Three days after that my class, at Montford Point, graduated from Motor Transport School. Five days after that the Tet Offensive erupted in Vietnam, a planned wave of attacks striking more than a hundred towns and cities. Only one month into the year and the world seemed to be reeling. I cannot recall any year that began with so much tumult. Patty would be a witness to the coming events in Chicago while I endured them in
Vietnam. Naturally, at that beginning, neither of us was aware that we were not only witnessing history; we were taking part in it.

While I was going through the Marine Corps processing at Camp Hansen, Patty remained at our rented apartment in Oceanside, California, next to Camp Pendleton. Previously I was warned, in the Marine Corps tradition, that wives had no place in staging battalion training prior to shipping out to a combat zone. It was a demanding four-week cycle and included many nighttime field exercises. I was assigned as the commander of a staging company with a staff of several well qualified noncommissioned officers (NCOs), some of whom were doing their second tour. Patty and I always knew our time on the front end of Vietnam would be limited. And we needed to treasure every moment. We accepted the fact that within the coming year she could be a widow, an issue discussed endlessly among family and friends. Following that reasoning, Patty accompanied me west to Camp Pendleton for the staging battalion phase. We were fortunate enough to find a nice rental on the beach in Oceanside. It was here where we watched Walter Cronkite’s historical televised editorial, a reaction to the twenty-five-day siege of the Citadel in Hue City during the Tet Offensive. We didn’t know it at the time, but Cronkite’s address that night, February 27, 1968, would not only ripple across the nation but also shake the inside of the Oval Office, ending Lyndon Johnson’s administration.

I still recall Cronkite looking straight into the camera:

"To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. . . . To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic yet unsatisfactory conclusion. . . . It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could."

Sleep came hard that night. I had to be up at 5 A.M., known in Marine Corps jargon as “O-Dark-Thirty.” Cronkite’s speech echoed in my ears while I thought, *What am I going into?* When sleep finally came I drifted into a recurring nightmare where four Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas, AK-47s held at high port, chased me through the Jackson Park Golf Course in my Chicago neighborhood. All I had was a .45-caliber semiautomatic sidearm. And no matter where I ran or hid they knew where I was and kept coming like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Pestilence, War, Famine, and Death.

The next thing I knew Patty was shaking me. I don’t remember moaning or
yelling, just her shaking me. My T-shirt was drenched. This recurring nightmare began while we were at Quantico: “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in reverse.”

After a quick breakfast we got out on Interstate 5 and drove north to the Las Pulgas offramp, going into the base. When we arrived at my company headquarters it was still dark. I knew I had to keep up a façade during the intense training day in front of me. All through that day I was dragging my ass because of less than three hours of sleep, with Walter Cronkite’s image mixed with the guerrilla quartet. Somehow I made it through.

With training completed our departure date was March 3, Patty’s twenty-fourth birthday. We were scheduled to leave at night from the Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro. Patty would meet me at the air station and we would say our goodbyes.

Wrong!

When Patty dropped me off at Camp Pendleton that day I attended to final administration procedures, making phone calls and signing documents. As the day got longer we got a sudden alert that our flight out of El Toro had been canceled. No reason was given. What would happen was that within two hours buses would arrive to take my staging company to Los Angeles International Airport, where we would depart for Honolulu and then Okinawa. After getting confirmation, I had to make the difficult phone call to my wife that our state-side time was over. I was going out in ninety minutes. Goodbye, I love you. The last thing she said to me was, “Be safe.”

When we pulled in at the backside of the Los Angeles International Airport the buses came to a stop next to a hangar. We quickly got out and formed into four platoons as the buses moved off to a Continental Airlines jetliner about 150 yards away to unload the baggage. My gunnery sergeant set the lines and called for a “left face!” He turned and nodded to me. I gave the command “forward march!” And the company began marching toward the jetliner. From the back rank someone started singing in a soft voice.

“From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli. . . .” The “Marine Corps Hymn” that night spread from the back ranks to the front as we continued marching to the jetliner. By the time we arrived at the ladder the entire company was singing, “We are proud to claim the title, United States Marine.”

Patty’s words echoed in my ears: “Be safe.” Our good times and the training were behind us. She was still in Southern California and I was being processed to enter a combat zone.

The Okinawa processing took four to five days. The first thing that had to be done was to sign over a Class A uniform, which was tagged and held in a
Chapter 1

warehouse. If I was killed my body would be shipped to a Graves Registration station. What was left of me would be placed into the uniform. Then I would be shipped home.

Records and documents also had to be checked, along with signing insurance forms and submitting to a physical examination. Part of the physical included being injected with gamma globulin, a prophylactic for tropical diseases and blood thinner.

After the physical I went to an early meal at the officers mess. The movie that night was *Tender Is the Night* with Jennifer Jones, Jason Robards Jr., and Joan Fontaine. I lasted about forty minutes, sitting through this sophomoric adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel of expatriates traipsing around Europe. I got up and went to the officers club. I entered the club, walking down the hallway. At the end of the hallway was a corkboard with various announcements. To the far end of the corkboard was the latest Vietnam casualty list from *Navy Times*. The headline stated “SEA SERVICE DEATHS.” The names were in alphabetical order—last name, first name—and the Vietnam province where they were killed.

I recognized three of the names from my Basic School class at Quantico. Another name was that of a tactics instructor at Officer Candidate School (OCS). For several moments I was frozen in place staring at the names. Then I turned, walked out of the club, and went back to my room at the bachelor officers quarters. I stretched out on the bed, staring at the ceiling, recalling my recurring nightmare and now the names of fellow classmates . . . even one of my tactics instructors. *This was it*, I thought. Most likely, within three to four months, my name would be on the corkboard and Patty would be wearing widow’s weeds at a military funeral. For some reason I thought of a scene in the 20th Century Fox World War II classic *Twelve O’clock High*. In the film Gregory Peck, as Brigadier General Frank Savage, has taken command of a “hard luck bomber group,” the 918th, flying dangerous B–17 cross-channel missions in the dark days of the war. At a briefing Peck tells the bomber crews, “Consider yourselves already dead; it will be easier to fly those missions.”

For three hours I lay on my cot staring at the stucco ceiling in those quarters at Camp Hansen. My life was essentially over because of a curious sense of adventure.

Over and over again a question kept rolling around in my head: *How did I ever get to this point?*