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LEGACY OF VALOR: VIETNAM

This is the third in a series of Shipmate features commemorating the service and sacrifice of U.S. Naval Academy alumni who served in the Vietnam War. These stories will be featured in print, on a dedicated webpage, on social media and in videos.

More than 40 alumni shared their stories to help further the U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association & Foundation's Legacy of Valor series. For all who stood watch, we honor your service and will not forget.

TWO DIFFERENT WARS

DEPENDING ON THEIR LOCATION, MARINES FACED DISTINCT TACTICS AND CAPABILITIES FROM THEIR VIETNAMESE ENEMIES

Then-Second Lieutenant Charles C. Krulak '64, USMC (Ret.), quickly discovered he wasn't entering the war he expected when he arrived in Vietnam.

He'd heard about loosely organized Viet Cong fighters whose hit-and-run guerilla warfare tactics brought an unpredictability to clashes in the jungle and on rivers. Those adversaries had neither the firepower nor combat or leadership experience to confront the American military in traditional warfare.

Conversely, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was composed of battle-hardened soldiers and officers. This army beat the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The NVA were well equipped, well led and had comparable—if not superior—firepower to their American counterparts.

Krulak realized that his Marines, deployed just south of the Demilitarized Zone in 1965 and 1966, were not battling booby-trap specialists moving clandestinely to avoid face-to-face confrontations. The NVA employed PT76 tanks, artillery pieces, mortars and rockets.

"From the very beginning, I realized this was not what I thought it going to be like," said Krulak, who retired as a general in 1999. "It was hard fighting. Normally, (the NVA) chose the battlefield. No matter how much flexibility or how much mobility we had, the reality is normally the fight was where they wanted it to be and in numbers that normally had them equal to or greater to the numbers we had in the battle."

Krulak entered his first of two tours of duty in Vietnam thinking he knew the enemy—and its tactics. He was surprised by the disparity between what was happening near the DMZ and what American forces were experiencing against the Viet Cong further south.

"I knew a lot about Vietnam because my father (Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak '34, USMC (Ret.)) was commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific," said Krulak, who served as the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps. "I did an exercise at Camp Pendleton that he had set up that simulated Vietnam. I went to the counter-guerilla school in California. I was as prepared as any young second lieutenant early in the war to go into combat would be.

"They were two different wars. My war was against very good, hardcore North Vietnamese Army soldiers. This was far more like World War II or what you're seeing in Ukraine. They were absolutely motivated. There weren't any draftees in that outfit. They were in for the duration. We didn't have mine or booby trap problems. We had somebody who wanted to kill us and were really equipped to do so. I was prepared to go to Vietnam, but I was not prepared for the quality of our enemy."

Regardless of the battle theater in which they participated, Marines were frontline warriors in Vietnam. U.S. Naval Academy alumni were among the junior officers who commanded platoons and demonstrated the unwavering commitment to their people that exemplifies the Marine Corps ethos.

Alumni leaned on their training and lessons learned in Annapolis to lead under duress. Krulak said newly commissioned second lieutenants commanding platoons had to be cool under fire to coordinate with air and artillery support. Ensuring they had real-time information, it was integral for those officers be at the on the front line with their Marines.

"It didn't take long to realize that it was going to take all your ability—whether you were a second lieutenant or platoon commander or rifle company commander—you better know

Gen Charles C. Krulak '64, USMC (Ret.), the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps (left) talks with Marine Corps personnel assigned to the 1st Battery, 8th Marine Regiment about training they received at the Jungle Warfare Training Center on Okinawa, Japan, in 1999.

how to coordinate combined arms,” Krulak said. “You better know how to utilize air, artillery and naval gun fire. You better command from up front because that’s the only way you’re going to know what is really happening.”

“If I was a platoon commander, I was up with the first squad of that platoon because the need for situational awareness within a jungle terrain or very mountainous terrain was critical. If you’re too far back and your front platoon got hit, it was really difficult to get situational awareness trying to work your way up to where the fight was. Most of my contemporaries were leading from the front.”

‘I DIDN’T WANT TO LEAVE MY PEOPLE. WE WERE IN A FIGHT’

Enemy mortar fire began raining down on Krulak’s Marines south of the DMZ and west of Con Thien on 3 June 1969. Then-Captain Krulak was in his second tour of duty in Vietnam when he was ordered to establish a company patrol base.

He was serving as commanding officer of Company L, Third Battalion, Third Marines, Third Division and moving his men at night along a ridgeline. Krulak had his men dug in prior to dawn, expecting enemy contact.

When daylight came, Krulak sent his Marines on patrol. That’s when the incoming mortar fire began. Krulak said the North Vietnamese (NVM) had pinpointed his company’s location. He started to call in air and artillery support but had to coordinate with his counterpart in an adjoining regiment and across a boundary line separating the two to ensure his rounds didn’t go into their area of operation.

“It took time,” Krulak said. “We suffered some pretty significant casualties. I got wounded but was in a position where I could control air and control artillery as best I could, using basically fire support coordinators firing across a boundary to get fire to give my people time to move. I started shifting them back down this ridgeline where they’d be out of the line of fire. The helicopters came in to evacuate some of our dead and wounded during this lull.”

When the helicopter was being loaded, Krulak said his corpsman unsuccessfully attempted to convince him to get aboard.

“I said, ‘are you serious?’” Krulak said. “We’re in a hell of a fight here, I’m not getting on that helicopter. The bottom line is, I didn’t want to leave my people—we were in a fight.”

Krulak said he refused to leave for another eight hours until another commanding officer was sent to replace him.

“This wasn’t a time when you had an XO and all the platoon commanders were lieutenants, you were lucky to have one or two lieutenants in the entire company,” Krulak said. “It was not a time where you take yourself out of the field.”

Expecting a ground assault from the NVM, Krulak pulled his men back along the ridgeline and into a relatively safe position. Air support was called in to evacuate the Marines.

The corpsman said they were taking the wounded Krulak this time.

“I said, ‘I’ll go when the next CO comes in,’” he said. “My battalion commander was a smart guy, he figured out what I was doing. He’d stuck one of his captains on the helicopter and said, ‘I’m now the CO of Lima Company, get your ass out of here.’”

For his actions that day, Krulak was awarded a Silver Star.

‘SOMEBODY WAS GOING TO STEP ON A BOOBY TRAP’

Dan Mitchell ’65 experienced a different type of warfare in Vietnam. Assigned to Charlie company, Third Battalion, Ninth Marines at Da Nang, his unit relieved the first Marines ashore in Vietnam in February 1966.

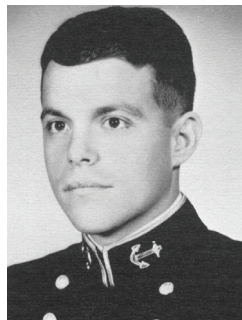
Following an initial period of patrolling around a Marine Corps airbase at Da Nang, Mitchell’s Marines were assigned to a small village where they lived among the Vietnamese. For nearly three months they provided security so the villagers could sleep safely, work their fields and not be harassed by the Viet Cong. Mitchell said he rented a house from a villager in exchange for C-rations.

Hospital corpsmen cared for children in the village. In his book, “A Filthy Way to Die,” Ed Linz ’65 compiled stories from his classmates detailing their Vietnam experiences. In his passage, Mitchell notes the village faced no attacks while the Marines were on watch and he felt the strategy was successful but couldn’t be replicated and sustained throughout the country.

Mitchell said the Viet Cong attempted to inflict harm without directly engaging American forces.

“They were more involved in guerrilla warfare and would shoot at us from hidden locations whenever we went out on patrol,” Mitchell wrote. “They also set booby traps with mines and artillery shells to try to take us out as we were walking outside the villages.”

“Someone in our unit got hurt just about every day. I went to Vietnam with nine second lieutenants. Three of us came back alive.”



Then-MIDN Dan Mitchell '65

In early summer 1966, Mitchell and his platoon were patrolling along rice paddies. The Marines were in the homeward bound leg and Mitchell was in the middle of his platoon. Noticing his men were slowing down, Mitchell moved forward to get a grasp on the situation.

As he got to the front, a sergeant went through a gate and set off a hidden 81 mm mortar round which blew off his leg. Mitchell was hit from head to toe with shrapnel.

Mitchell said several ill-fated choices led to the tragic event. He said his Marines were ordered to run the same patrol as the previous evening. Mitchell said taking the road route was also a bad idea. He also lamented his positioning during the patrol because the sergeant proceeded through a pinch point and that's a natural location for Viet Cong booby traps.

"I was pretty pissed off we were out there at all," said Mitchell during a February 2025 interview. "It was the result of an entirely unnecessary process. We lost a lot of people that we didn't need to lose. ... We were just doing what we did, marching through rice paddies. You knew every time you went out somebody was going to step on a booby trap.

"We shouldn't have been on the road. We should have been running the rice paddy dikes. That's really slow and there are other exposures but you didn't go through chokepoints ... When you're the commanding officer, the debate is, are you up front, the back or the middle? You choose your poison."

Another challenge for the Marines was a dearth of officers. Mitchell said a Marine company was supposed to have six officers but his only two for 200 enlisted men. The casualty rates were high. The Marines adapted.

"It was a brutal period for the Marines," Mitchell said. "Someone in our unit got hurt just about every day. I went to Vietnam with nine second lieutenants. Three of us came back alive.

"We had really good enlisted guys and staff NCOs. The Marine Corps is better than any other service in pushing down responsibility and people rising to the occasion. We just functioned; we didn't have much choice. You treated staff and platoon sergeants as a commissioned officers and it just rolled into place. Those guys were really good."

After recovering from his injuries, Mitchell returned to his platoon in August 1966. His platoon was stationed near Hill 55, which was about 10 miles southwest of Da Nang. His Marines had frequent encounters with the North Vietnamese with most lasting about 30 minutes.

In late 1966, Mitchell's battalion spent several months patrolling along the DMZ. It was a time of dwindling Marine headcounts and greater responsibility for young officers.

"We would get shot at all the time," Mitchell's book passage reads. "The NVA would drop fire on us, then withdraw. We were losing four to five guys a week—they were not all killed, most were wounded. My rifle platoon was supposed to have 40 to 50 Marines, but by this time we probably never had more than 30 guys.

"One time when our classmate Sim Pace and I were still second lieutenants, our battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jim Day, assigned us to be company commanders because he



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

didn't have any first lieutenants or captains to take the job. We had the youngest company commanders in the Marines."

Gen Michael W. Hagee '68, USMC (Ret.), the 33rd Commandant of the Marine Corps, answers questions from the Marines of Marine Attack Squadron 513 in 2006.

ALL EYES ON YOU

It didn't take Mitchell long to understand the realities of battlefield leadership. He was commanding a Marine rifle platoon in 1966 when his unit came under fire for the first time.

Mitchell heard World War II tales of Higgins boats landing and as the ramp lowered, everyone looked at their unit leader and said, "what do we do now, lieutenant?" Mitchell was skeptical.

"But the first real patrol I went on in Vietnam, we got shot at, and we were in a cemetery," Mitchell said. "Everybody disappeared behind the tombstones. Every eye of the platoon is looking at me saying, 'what do we do now lieutenant?'"

Mitchell credits his predeployment training at The Basic School and his time at the Naval Academy for sharpening his decision-making skills. The Naval Academy is unmatched for developing the skills to make quick decisions based on available data, he said.

That skill is invaluable in the heat of battle, Mitchell said.

"If you're on the ground as an infantry officer and you're not quick, you're probably dead," he said. "The emphasis (at the Naval Academy) was on that kind of intellectual capacity."



GENERAL KRULAK'S SILVER STAR CITATION READS IN PART:

Although seriously wounded himself, Captain Krulak unhesitatingly left his covered position and, thinking only of the welfare of his men, fearlessly maneuvered across the fire-swept terrain to ensure that his Marines were in effective defensive

locations and capable of repelling an expected ground attack ... Both the platoon commander and a platoon sergeant of one of his platoons had been seriously wounded. After repeatedly exposing himself to the relentless fire to supervise the evacuation of the casualties, he then personally led the platoon back to the main body of his company across 3,000 meters of rugged mountain terrain to another patrol base and, although weak from loss of blood and the pain of his injuries, steadfastly refused medical evacuation until the arrival of another officer on the following morning.

General Michael W. Hagee '68, USMC (Ret.), experienced a nearly identical leadership epiphany during his first enemy fire experience. Hagee went to postgraduate school after commissioning and was promoted to first lieutenant at The Basic School.

He turned down an opportunity to serve as a company executive officer. He wanted a platoon and was sent to Vietnam to replace a platoon commander who had been killed.

As commanding officer Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in 1970, Hagee was leading a unit providing safe passage for Vietnamese villagers on a road between two villages. As the platoon walked the road, Hagee heard the Marines mumbling about the greenness of their new leader.

"This is our unlucky day," Hagee remembered the Marines saying. "We've got this (new) lieutenant and he doesn't know anything. He's going to get us all killed. I learned later a lot of what they said was right."

The platoon had gone about 30 minutes down the road when it started receiving heavy fire from beyond a tree line.

"I look around to make sure everyone is down and I'm the only guy still standing," said Hagee during an October 2024 interview at the National Museum of the Pacific War. Hagee served as the museum's CEO for 16 years in his hometown of Fredericksburg, TX. "I got down and looked up, every single Marine was looking at me. No more, 'dumb lieutenant.' No more 'stupid lieutenant.' It was, 'lieutenant, what do we do now?'"

"Fortunately, I followed Admiral Nimitz's (credo): learn everything you can, do the best you can in every job and don't worry about those things you can't change. The last one didn't apply, but the first one sure did. I listened up in Basic School. I took it seriously.

"Did I learn some things by experience? Yes. Did I know what to do? I knew what to do and it worked out just fine."

Hagee retired on 1 January 2007 as a four-star general. He served as the 33rd Commandant of the Marine Corps.

TATTOOED ON YOUR SOUL

During his 35-year Marine Corps career, Krulak said a lesson ingrained in him at the Naval Academy served as his leadership North Star. He said midshipmen are reminded of their duty every time they pass the U.S. Naval Academy Chapel. Emblazoned above the chapel's doors is 'Non Sibi Sed Patriae.' That testament to selflessness "Not Self, But Country," centered Krulak and dictated his actions while leading Marines.

"If you're going to lead men and women, if you don't have that tattooed on your soul, you're probably not going to hit all cylinders," Krulak said. "The second you start doing something that isn't based on Non Sibi, you're going to be in trouble."

That commitment became apparent leading Marines in combat.

"If I ever walked away from this idea of selflessness, I would be in real trouble," he said. "You learn the importance of being a man or woman of character based on the foundation of Non Sibi ... I carried that on through two tours of Vietnam and on throughout my career."

It's a legacy that spans the nearly 250-year history of the Marine Corps. Krulak encouraged current and future generations of midshipmen to uphold the values of the Marine Corps when they claim their spot in the unbroken link of dedicated service.

"The (Marines) who served in Vietnam are the same ones who served in Belleau Wood, same ones who served at Iwo Jima, same ones who walked out of the Chosin Reservoir, same ones who fought in Desert Storm and Afghanistan and Iraq," Krulak said. "They may have a different uniform. They may look a little different. They may have been draftees or all volunteers but once they go through boot camp, they're transformed, and the transformation is forever. Once a Marine, always a Marine." 🇺🇸

Editor's Note: As part of the U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association & Foundation's Legacy of Valor: Vietnam War series, Shipmate staff interviewed and solicited stories from alumni. We gathered stories from more than 40 alumni and are sharing them in the pages of Shipmate in 2025 and online, by scanning this QR code.



NOT FORGOTTEN

ALUMNI VIETNAM EXPERIENCES

CAPTAIN MICHAEL BICKEL '61, USN (RET.)



Captain Bickel was a surface warfare officer who served in seven campaigns in Vietnam on three ships starting with minesweeper PLUCK (1965-66), which was in port in Subic Bay, Philippines, at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. He commanded LST-825 HICKMAN COUNTY, which operated on the Mekong, Bassac and Saigon rivers.

Shipmate: What threats did you face while underway?

Bikel: I took steps to let the bad guys know that we were always ready. When we would go up to Saigon from Vung Tau, to pick up cargo, we had to take a pilot. So, I would put the ship on general quarters.

We'd man all the weapons, guys in their flak jackets and helmets. I'd ask the civilian pilot if they had any friends out there that were gonna attack an LST. They wouldn't want to take on the 825 because we were ready for him. When we were out in the rivers, sometimes we'd be anchored waiting for the tide to change. I'd give these young seamen an AR15 and a few concussion grenades and tell them, "you're on watch tonight. Anything that's floating toward the ship that you want to shoot at, you shoot. Occasionally, throw some of your concussion grenades over the side." This was the scheme to let the bad guys know that that we were ready. It wasn't just a big old ship waiting for them to come do something.

That strategy paid off in May 1969. The ship was tied up at a pier in Vung Tau, a major seaport at the mouth of the Saigon River. That's where merchant ships would come in and deliver cargo. It was a central logistics port.

We were tied up at the pier. Somebody came in and woke me up at night and said, "Captain, Captain, we got swimmers

out here." I went out, and sure enough, you could see two heads swimming in the water. A 17-year-old seaman was the topside watch and he spotted them. These two swimmers went over to a section of beach and started running. I told the kid with a rifle, "shoot him." He shot and missed. The army picked them up later.

Counterparts in the South Vietnamese military got these two North Vietnamese talking. They planted mines in some of the navigation areas. They had been down in the delta for four months and planning this operation.

The Australian frogmen got the people to tell them where they put the mines. The Aussies went out and they activated the mines and took them off and truly saved the port of Vung Tau.

Shipmate: Did you have any engagements with enemy aircraft?

Bickel: I was assigned to the destroyer LLOYD THOMAS. We were off the coast of Vietnam right at the DMZ. We had a plane that was up, directing the fire from our destroyer. I was in the combat information center, running the gunnery.



CAPT Michael Bickel '61, USN (Ret.), commanded LST-825 HICKMAN COUNTY during his service in Vietnam.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAPT MICHAEL BICKEL '61, USN (RET.)

All of a sudden, somebody hollers, ‘counter battery, counter battery,’ and I go. Then, we’re hit. I went sailing up to the bridge and there were two people standing up. Everybody else was lying down, but the captain was standing up and so was the helm, and the captain says, “Go down to chief’s quarters. We’ve been hit.”

I went sailing down to the chief petty officers’ quarters. It was in the bow of the ship. I walked in there and you could look out the port side where the numbers are painted and see a hole about the size of a Volkswagen.

But it was above the water line. The North Vietnamese had big artillery guns hidden in caves in the mountains. They must have just rolled their guns out, started shooting. There was a chief petty officer sitting at a table. He was the chief gunners mate. He was slow firing, just firing rounds as the spotter called for 5 knots. So, he took a coffee break and he was sitting at the table facing that bulkhead and it went off, which created a big hole.

All the shrapnel went down between his legs, into the lower state, and he just got up and wiped his hands and said, “well, guess it wasn’t my day.”

We hauled out, of course, as soon as the shells started falling around it. We put a shipfitter over the side with a big plate of steel and covered the hole.

CAPTAIN RICHARD “DICK” LIFE ’62, USN (RET.)



Captain Life served three tours of duty in Vietnam. He was a lieutenant aboard PERCH when it made history. He said between the end of World War II and the first Gulf War, PERCH was the only submarine to take an enemy under fire, take prisoners and pull out refugees.

Shipmate: What stands out among your experiences in Vietnam?

Life: My first tour of three was in submarines. They were looking for lieutenants to go to the brown water navy. I called the detailer after I got my dolphins, and said I’d like to go. He said, “you’re going to stay in submarines. However, we have one submarine that is homeported in the Philippines and is taking frogmen—underwater demolition guys—south of the DMZ around villages and the coastline. The submarines go in, the frogs go ashore and collect intelligence.”

(Life said PERCH was the last submarine to have deck guns including .40 mm forward and aft guns and stanchions for twelve .50 caliber guns)

One night, we got orders to go to a beach where there was a huge firefight with the infantry—75 members in the company. They were ordered to come up to the beach. With their two American advisors, they came in the dark. We surfaced, decks awash and manned all of our guns to cover them.

They were going to have to spend the night. I was the weapons officer. I just happened to be the officer of the deck on the midwatch—midnight to 4 a.m. About 2 a.m., we put one of our frogmen ashore with the infantry. I got word the CO of that company knew the Viet Cong were gathering in a church nearby and they were heavily armed.

They were assembling and the CO was concerned that the Viet Cong would be coming down and his men weren’t dug in. They would have been sitting ducks. He asked if we could disperse them.

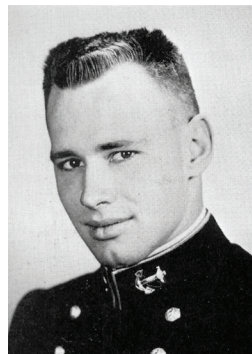
The captain came up and I explained all of this to him. He asked, “how do you want to do this? You’re the weapons officer.” I had never seen a VC village before. This was my first trip. I said I want to start up here by the friendly forces and every three degrees, I want to lay in two rounds, but I don’t want to come more than five degrees close to the church.

He said, “make it happen.” We did. Halfway down, we got a secondary explosion, and it was so big it had to be ammo. We stopped and in three minutes, the call came out that the VC had emptied the church. They were no longer a threat, however, they asked if we would continue to cover them? I said, yes we will. We spent the rest of the night there.

When daytime came, we sent the frogs in inflatable rafts to go pick up these 75 South Vietnamese. We got them out and put them forward. None went into the submarine. The CO of the Vietnamese spoke a little English. He said there were 12 civilians, two families—four adults and eight children—they spent the night with us. He said, they’ve been collaborating and if you do not bring them, they will be killed. We sent two more boats back to pick them up.

We were saddened to hear of Captain Life’s passing on 20 March 2025 at the age of 85.

COMMANDER JAMES LASSWELL ’63, USN (RET.)



Captain Lasswell deployed twice to the western Pacific aboard the destroyer HOEL between October 1963 and September 1965. He also served in FRANK KNOX (January–August 1967) and two deployments aboard SAFEGUARD (November 1972–January 1975).

Shipmate: What was your experience during Operation Sea Dragon?

Lasswell: This was uncontrolled shore bombardment of designated targets in North Vietnam (NVN). This was far more exciting than shore bombardment in the south because in the north, they had guns that could shoot at longer ranges than our 5”/38s. Our guns (aboard HOEL) had a range of 18,000 yards and the NVN shore batteries had a range of about 30,000 yards.

On the way out, we quickly ran out of range. We counted ... 109 shots at them. We approached the coast of NVN in column

formation and when within range of the target the column turned right to have our five ships all bearing on the coast. When ordered to commence fire, I ordered my three mounts to begin firing rapid salvo fire—basically every time the six barrels were loaded six rounds of about 58 pounds (or about 348 pounds) of projectiles flew toward the beach and the target.

After our firing run, Commodore Ward Cummings '47, USN, expressed disappointment as he didn't think we shot enough and we achieved no secondary explosions. I was very happy with our performance but to make him happy on the second run I ordered rapid continuous fire (RCF) with every fifth round as white phosphorus. RCF means when any barrel is loaded it fires. There were a lot more explosions and the white phosphorus showed a lot of bright explosions. He was really happy.

On the second run, the NVN began counter battery, and we could see and hear the explosions close aboard to our ship. As we turned away perpendicular to the beach, only Mount 53 could bear on the target and we could only return fire until we were 9 miles from the target while the NVN could shoot at us for 6 more miles.

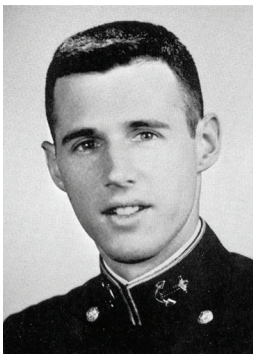
Just as we reached maximum range, we felt a gigantic shudder of the ship and Mount 53 reported taking a hit. As we were out of firing range, I shut down our shooting and ran immediately to the mount. As it turned out, the mount did not take a hit, but somehow we lost fluid from the recoil cylinder and the last round fired did not have the recoil cylinder fluid to soften the recoil and basically disabled the mount.

The NVN shot more than 130 rounds at us. I still have an audio tape from this engagement.

Shipmate: Did you encounter any unexpected dangers?

Lasswell: We had a nice mess hall at Intermediate Support Base Vinh Long and an excellent bar. Booze was really cheap and we were able to hire a woman to tend bar. One night, we were sitting around the bar when a South Vietnamese sailor entered with an M16 firing at the roof. I happened to be in my favorite seat at the corner of the bar and was face-to-face with him. I was able to take the M16 from him without anyone getting shot and my troops subdued him.

COMMANDER PETER QUINTON '63, USN (RET.)



Between June 1963 and December 1970, Commander Quinton served on multiple naval vessels, including the destroyer BLACK, hospital ship REPOSE and destroyer COLLETT. His service included personnel officer, navigator, chief engineer and damage control officer.

Shipmate: Can you describe your experiences during your service in Vietnam?

Quinton: I had some memorable experiences, including diving to cut away a bamboo pole that had wrapped around BLACK's screw. I was comfortable in the



CDR Peter Quinton '63, USN (Ret.), left, uses a sextant taking a sunline, aboard REPOSE off the coast of South Vietnam in 1966.

water, having been a swimmer in high school, so I volunteered for the task. We were also involved in Market Time patrol, inspecting vessels for contraband, and I served as an officer in the main battery director during gunfire missions, particularly in I Corps, supporting Marine operations.

Later, on REPOSE, I served as personnel officer and navigator. We deployed for a year off the 1st Corps area of Vietnam, spending 83 consecutive days at sea due to heavy USMC operations. I vividly remember witnessing what appeared to be a meteor or space debris hitting the sea about three miles from our ship during a transit from Subic Bay to Da Nang.

Shipmate: Were there any particularly challenging moments?

Quinton: Absolutely. Serving on COLLETT from 1968 to 1970 was demanding. As chief engineer and damage control officer, I was responsible for the ship's 600-pound steam plant. We conducted harassment and interdiction gunfire missions, often under challenging conditions, including supporting operations in free-fire zones like Elephant Valley. We also spent time on the Formosa Straits patrol, protecting islands near the Chinese mainland.

There were tense moments during refueling operations, including two collisions while alongside oil tankers. One incident involved after steering issues that caused us to collide with a tanker. Despite these challenges, I'm proud that under my watch, our engineering team never caused a missed assignment due to mechanical failures. ⚓

Editor's Note: As part of the Legacy of Valor series, Shipmate will highlight alumni who were awarded the Navy Cross for their service in Vietnam in this and upcoming issues.

NAVY CROSS

COLONEL JOHN RIPLEY '62, USMC (RET.)



On 2 April 1972, then-Captain Ripley, who was a senior advisor to the Third Vietnamese Marine Battalion, repeatedly put himself in harm's way to place explosives on the Dong Ha bridge over the Cua Viet River in South Vietnam's Quang Tri province. With thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers en route, destroying the bridge was critical for protecting his outnumbered forces and the South Vietnamese province.

A diorama of Ripley at the Bridge is on display in Memorial Hall. His Navy Cross citation reads, in part:

Upon receipt of a report that a rapidly moving, mechanized, North Vietnamese army force, estimated at reinforced divisional strength, was attacking south along Route No. 1, the Third Vietnamese Marine Infantry Battalion was positioned to defend a key village and the surrounding area. It became imperative that a vital river bridge be destroyed if the overall security of the northern provinces of Military Region One was to be maintained.

Advancing to the bridge to personally supervise this most dangerous but vitally important assignment, Captain Ripley located a large amount of explosives, which had been prepositioned there earlier, access to which was blocked by a chain-link fence. In order to reposition the approximately 500 pounds of explosives, Captain

Ripley was obliged to reach up and hand-walk along the beams while his body dangled beneath the bridge.

On five separate occasions, in the face of constant enemy fire, he moved to points along the bridge and, with the aid of another advisor who pushed the explosives to him, securely emplaced them. He then detonated the charges and destroyed the bridge, thereby stopping the enemy assault. By his heroic actions and extraordinary courage, Captain Ripley undoubtedly was instrumental in saving an untold number of lives. His inspiring efforts reflected great credit upon himself, the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.



PHOTO COURTESY OF USNA

The actions of then-Capt John Ripley '62, USMC (Ret.), on 2 April 1972 are depicted in a diorama in Bancroft Hall outside Memorial Hall. Ripley hand-walked the Dong Ha Bridge five times to emplace and detonate explosives to destroy the bridge.

COMMANDER JAMES WALKER '62, USN (RET.)



Commander Walker, a nongraduating member of the Class of 1962, flew with the Seawolves. He received a Navy Cross for the actions he took on 14 September 1968. His citation reads, in part:

As the fire team leader of a light helicopter fire team which was called in to support United States naval forces that were under heavy attack on the

Mekong River, Lieutenant Walker, upon arrival at the scene of the enemy ambush, immediately commenced his attacks against the entrenched hostile emplacements on both sides of the river.

After diverting the intense enemy fire from the badly damaged ships to himself and his fire team, he continued to press his attacks and was able to suppress much of the Viet Cong fire. With his ammunition expended, Lieutenant Walker was preparing to leave the scene of action to rearm when he was informed of the need of an immediate medical evacuation of a critically wounded crewman aboard a severely damaged lighter.

Realizing that no medical evacuation aircraft could approach the crippled ship due to the heavy fire, Lieutenant Walker courageously volunteered to attempt the evacuation, in the face of the withering hail of bullets, and with full knowledge that the ship had no landing capabilities for his aircraft. He hovered his aircraft over the bow of the moving ship and successfully completed the evacuation of the injured man under the most hazardous conditions.

He then flew the casualty to awaiting medical attention at Vinh Long Airfield and quickly rearmed, returning to the scene of contact to press his attacks on the enemy positions. Forced to rearm once again at Vinh Long, Lieutenant Walker returned to the ambush scene and succeeded in breaking the fiercely resisting insurgents and suppressing their fire. Through his tenacious and courageous attacks, he turned a well-planned enemy ambush on United States naval forces into a disastrous enemy rout.

COMMANDER JOHN ROLAND '66, USN (RET.)



Then-Lieutenant Junior Grade Roland was awarded a Navy Cross for his actions while serving as officer in charge of Patrol Craft Fast Thirty Five, Coastal Squadron One, Task Force One Hundred Fifteen on 28 January 1969 in the Kien Hoa Province. His citation reads, in part:

Accompanied by PCF-100, Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Roland conducted a daring

daylight probe into a narrow canal off the Ham Luong River, deep into enemy-held territory. After completing a devastatingly effective gunfire mission, both boats were caught in a deadly crossfire from a numerically superior Viet Cong force entrenched in both banks of the canal.

PCF-100 sustained two serious B-41 rocket hits, which wounded the officer in charge and one crew member, and knocked them over the side. The helmsman of PCF-100, blinded by heavy smoke, was unaware of this situation and proceeded out of the canal. Upon observing the situation, and realizing the grave danger of the two stricken men, Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Roland unhesitatingly placed his boat between the two men and the bank in an effort to protect them from further injury.

Due to the severity, volume and accuracy of the enemy fire, he found it necessary to make several passes before stopping and pulling his two wounded comrades aboard PCF-35. Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Roland's rescue efforts were undaunted by the fact that his boat had received a direct hit from a rocket-propelled grenade round; he directed the operation to a successful climax despite the intense enemy opposition. Through his inspiring personal leadership, his composure under extremely heavy fire, and his disregard for his own personal safety, he was instrumental in saving the lives of his two stricken comrades. 🚢



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF LCDR DWIGHT HUGHES '67, USN (RET.)

TOTING THE DUFFLE BAG:

SENSOR OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM

By Lieutenant Commander Dwight Hughes '67, USN (Ret.)

Above: LCDR Dwight Hughes '67, USN (Ret.), left front, with his electronic ground surveillance team and a Republic of Korea captain (far right) who was along as an observer at a village near Hoi An, Vietnam.

In January 1970, I became officer in charge of electronic ground surveillance (Duffle Bag) Team 1 in Hoi An, the capital of Quang Nam province, 18 miles south of Da Nang and 4 miles from the mouth of the Cua Dai river. The team's job was to scout potential ground sensor sites, then plant and monitor sensor strings and coordinate responses, usually ambushes and artillery strikes, mostly at night.

The initial concept was to bug the banks to protect river forces—swifts, patrol boat river (PBRs) and armed junks—from ambush, but we expanded

throughout the coastal river basin. My predecessor left three active sensor strings.

We had as many as 13 out along trail, bunker and hooch complexes in free-fire zones and on village approaches. The program is scarcely documented although there is a good chapter in "The Brown Water War At 50."

I had no training, no turnover, no manuals, no instruction, but was taught on the job in the field by the leading petty officer, Quartermaster 2nd Class Petty Officer Smith ("Smitty") and I winged it from there. He was relieved that summer by Radioman

Petty Officer 2nd Class Fred Nutter, who served two tours with the river boats and received a Bronze Star with Combat "V." The team included three or four seamen and Petty Officer Third Class, usually boatswain mates, quartermasters or radiomen.

I'd go up in a U.S. Army helo or Bird Dog scout plane to recon sites. If we took small arms fire through the wing, the Bird Dog pilot liked to bank sharply around and down, drop his window, stick his M16 or M79 grenade launcher out the window and shoot back. Didn't do my stomach any good. I'd also call up one of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) artillery fire bases and prespot fire on a site for future response.

The team went out two or three times a week to plant and maintain sensor strings. A couple of swift boats or PBRs—initially U.S. Navy, but increasingly RVN Navy—or armed junks from Coastal Advisory Group 14 (CG-14) provided transportation while a security force of Regional Force/Popular Force (RF/PF) troops with a U.S. Army advisor or a contingent of the RVN Navy screened our movements. The RF/PFs were not highly professional and of suspect loyalty. We kept them at a distance from our working area.

The primary sensors were Patrol Seismic Intrusion Detectors (PSIDs), which detected footfalls and looked like a large shoe box with a short wire antenna. We planted them three or four in a line, 10 or so yards apart alongside a trail by cutting out a square of sod, digging a hole, planting the box and replacing the sod with antenna sticking up in the grass. A magnetic sensor was hidden in the bush at one end of the string and sometimes a voice-activated sensor near a hooch.

We monitored remote receivers at the Hoi An U.S. Army compound. A number would pop up on the display identifying each triggered sensor. Seismic sensors triggering in sequence indicated how many individuals were walking down the trail and in which direction. The magnetic sensor revealed probable weapons.

The acoustic sensor might give us voices, but never provided useful intelligence other than their presence. Most activity was at night. We called up the standby artillery unit to fire



The electronic ground surveillance team, also known as Duffle Bag, planted sensors in Vietnam that would provide information on enemy movements to help protect U.S. forces from ambush attacks.

on a contact or coordinated with field units on ambushes. The artillery often responded too slowly to catch targets in the sensor field even if prespotted.

We also installed infrared sensors on beach approaches to CG-14, but they did not work well. The IR beam transmitter and receiver had to be precisely lined up despite wind and weather, which was difficult to accomplish while camouflaging them in bushes. USN EOD teams sometimes accompanied us to level hooches, blow bunkers and deactivate booby traps. They would dig a deep hole in the bunker top and plant charges to collapse the roof.

We were out one day scouting potential sites. I was walking behind one of my guys near a bunker when he suddenly stopped. I bumped into him as he backed up very slowly. He had felt the ground give under his forward foot. The EOD team found a pit under the leaf litter with a 105 mm round and a trip wire across the top. We came within an inch.

We also worked on the perimeter of remote villages occupied by U.S. Marine Combined Action Program (CAP) squads. I'll never forget walking into one of these rustic hamlets and seeing a probably teenaged, scrawny, blond, blue-eyed lad sitting shirtless and sunburned on a stool,



Swift boats were agile enough to navigate Vietnam rivers and the electronic ground surveillance team used them during missions to plant and maintain surveillance sensors.



The electronic ground surveillance team would plant and maintain sensor strings to monitor enemy activity. They would use patrol boat river (PBR) or swift boats to make their way along rivers in Vietnam.

cleaning his weapon among the huts and the locals. His squad lived in the village with other squads and the company commander at nearby villages.

The Marines manned village outposts at night or set up ambushes while we would call in contacts if received. Meanwhile, the RF/PF company sallied forth periodically to sweep through an area. The Viet Cong saw them coming, pulled out and came back afterward.

Little opposition was encountered on our missions although the boats would sometimes light off the 50 calibers at suspicious movement along the banks or we'd take a few rounds from a distant tree line. We carried M16s and M79s with few occasions to use them, being loaded down with heavy gear packs.

Another day we were out working when small arms were heard in the distance. The RVN Navy lieutenant in charge of the security detail started rounding up his men and heading in that direction. I wanted to finish our work and get the guys out. He told me we could stay there if I wished.

That not being an option, we packed up and set off through chest-deep marshes loaded down with gear. The action was over before we arrived as one of their swift boats came by dragging bodies alongside.

While walking trails in Vietnam, members of the electronic ground surveillance team had to be on the lookout for booby traps.

I acquired a few remotely detonated claymore mines from the Marines. We planted them with sensors in a trail, bunker and garden complex in enemy-held territory, and then pulled back a couple clicks with our remote readouts. At dusk, the sensors triggered so we detonated the claymores, went back in, and observed several KIAs. This was our most effective operation.

On 18 October 1970, we were in another bunker complex with RF/PF troops and their advisor as security. RD2 Nutter was walking down a trail when he tripped a booby trap. I was blown over and caught a couple of shrapnel pieces. Another of my men also was concussed but not otherwise injured.

The VC opened up from a tree line across the fields. The advisor set the perimeter and returned fire while calling for help. It took the medevac helo several tries to get in until the incoming was suppressed. They finally got us out and on our way to Da Nang. Fred Nutter died in the helo. He's on the Wall now.

I was on my way home to almost full recovery, although I still carry bits of metal. The rivers reportedly carried Agent Orange down from the mountains, which the VA presumes was a factor in the cancer I contracted 20 years later.

Duffle Bag was strange work for a ship driver. I like to think our efforts helped provide relative peace and security for the good people of that lush land and perhaps saved some lives. Would that it had continued. A few years ago, I viewed a travel documentary on Hoi An and was delighted to see the town apparently thriving. Luxury tourist hotels now dominate those magnificent white beaches and bloody marshes. I would like to return but it's probably not in the cards. ⚓

LT Hughes was awarded the Bronze Star for Meritorious Service and Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V" for Duffle Bag operations.

¹ Norman Friedman, "Igloo White and Duffel Bag: A New Kind Of War In Vietnam" in Thomas J. Cutler, Edward J. Marolda, eds, "The Brown Water War At 50: A Retrospective on The Coastal and Riverine Conflict in Vietnam" (Naval Institute Press, 2023).

