

Amphibious Assault Training: A Continuing Mystery

By: Ted Lyman

Early Days as a Seabee

I arrived at Port Hueneme a month after mustering into the Navy at Treasure Island, San Francisco, with my transition from civilian life to the military not nearly complete. It was mid-October 1966. Checking into the headquarters of the 31st Naval Construction Regiment saw my first assignment--a bunk in the transient barracks, nothing more, just "take a rack." I dropped my seabag on the lower of the bunk beds and headed out for a look around the base. It looked a lot like Treasure Island, with rows of barracks buildings, a mess hall, a snack bar and movie theater and what I was probably really looking for--the Enlisted Men's club. After driving down the California coast for the better part of the day, I was tired and thirsty. A cold beer was on my mind. I don't remember if the club was open or not at that moment but I do remember thinking that this might be a good place to know about. Over the next two months, I found myself in that club most every night after chow (unless on watch) laughing and getting to know my new friend Dennis Gunther (to end up in MCB 9) who had the rack above mine. Both of us were USNR, Navy reserves and we were showing up for our mandatory two years of active duty. We were both 21 and a couple of beers at the end of the day seemed very adult, not at all that these were in any way our first beers.

As for work assignments, as E-2s we were assigned all manner of cleaning tasks. I remember getting to know those massive, swirling floor waxing machines, the ones that could kill you if you lost control. We polished floors that you could see your face in, before our efforts. For days we did what we were told to do but we could see that this was going to get old, fast. Somehow, an opportunity to participate in a base training exercise came to our attention and we both signed up, only vaguely remembering the cautions often told, when in the Navy "never volunteer for anything."

Amphibious "Assault"

As it turned out, we had signed up for a sea voyage, a cruise south to San Diego on a USN LST (Landing Ship Tank.) We were told to show up at a place on the base that I didn't even know existed, the docks to the far west end out on the Pacific Ocean. Just the fact of that ocean going on endlessly to the horizon

seemed exciting, if somewhat dangerous in and of itself. We were told that we would be gone for several days and that the ship was to sail that night.

We showed up at the ship after a late mid-day chow, sea bags in hand and



"similar to the ship in this story"

showed our orders. There were all kinds of things going on as equipment and men were loading onto, and into bowels of the ship. When standing right next to the hull, it looked enormous and a bit menacing with guns here and there on deck. The next stop was our berthing assignment in what was said to be the "troop compartment," which consisted of stacks of metal racks with a piece of canvas laced into a pipe frame. I'm pretty sure that I remember 18" being the distance between those racks. I don't remember much

about the voyage that night, only that we were kept inside and generally "trained" on what to do when we got to our unknown destination in the morning. The plan was to basically wait in the bow and charge out when the huge doors opened, firing the rifles that would be provided first thing in the morning. "What should we be aiming at?" "You will know when you hit the beach," was the answer.

My only memory of the next morning was that we were roused very early, well before day break. There we were maybe 20-25 men in this tiny mess area, all dressed in clean greens and field jackets and all pretty much just looking at each other. To say that we were unprepared for this exercise would be a serious understatement. At a command, we were herded toward the bow of the ship, walking past pieces of Seabee equipment now fired up and getting ready to disembark. When the doors opened and a ramp lowered, we stood with our rifles ready to run into the surf like in the movies but instead we had landed against a temporary causeway contraption that had apparently been pushed ahead of the ship to the shore. This thing served as a dock that we were at the end of. I have no idea where it came from; I suppose it is possible that it was tied to the hull when we sailed.

I remember being pretty confused with the early hour, all the noise and commotion and not knowing where we were. A quick look around when we ran onto that rickety, rusty dock showed to my left a beautiful, sandy beach. And I swear, no more than a mile away a huge, ornate hotel. It turns out it was San Diego's iconic del Coronado Hotel, still fancy today. There were early rising vacationers



"del Coronado Hotel, today"

wandering on the beach. Directly ahead, just yards beyond the beach were lots of trees and heavy growth. And concealed in those trees were the “enemy.” We figured they were the enemy because they started firing at us and we started firing our blanks back at them, all the while trying to dig into the beach. It was a pathetically simulated firefight; I mean I’m pretty sure we were firing aimlessly while preparing fighting positions in soft sand with our hands. I know that we had volunteered for this sea cruise but I’m pretty sure that those guys, the “enemy,” were rousted out the nearby Navy brig to play this game with us.

This more or less well-planned war game went on for a while, we, the “security company” dug in and blasting away with rifles and machine guns at the other guys who no doubt wished they were still in jail. The EOs got the equipment rolling down that floating metal dock and did what they were assigned to do--details of the rest of this training resists my efforts at memory. Safe to say, all ended well and I suppose those guys got to go back to their comfy cells.

A Year Later: Another Amphibious Attack and a Continuing Mystery

Now, this was a real deal training exercise because I still have a 50 year old, filigreed certificate that says I am a trained in “embarkation assault” or some such. All of this is mostly unimportant but for what happened about a year later. MCB 11 had been in Dong Ha for many months and our guys were deployed out on the various detachments. I got orders to come in from Khe Sahn to see Lt. Cahill at Bravo Company headquarters. I’m not sure if he gave me the orders or Jim Bagnell, the company clerk, but they were *some orders*. I was to depart immediately for Marine Camp Hansen, Okinawa for “additional training.” Khe Sahn (where I was part of the detachment) was not a nice place having taken the life of Senior Chief Barnes a couple of months earlier, and Dong Ha—well—we all know what that was like with our KIAs and other casualties. I made my way post haste to Da Nang and onto a C-141 cargo plane headed to Okinawa. Continuing my good luck, for some reason I got to sit in the jump seat between the pilot and co-pilot for the several hour-long flight.

I swear that I had no idea what this “additional training” was really all about. After checking into Camp Hansen, a general purpose Marine training center of some kind, and showing them my orders they found my assignment. I was to be trained on how to properly load a force of Seabees onto LST’s, making for *combat assault readiness*. The training was to start the next day. I checked into my barracks, met a dozen or so Marines who had arrived with me and who were also

being trained for assault readiness (I was to be the only non-Marine in this program.) After getting settled, a bunch of us headed for the gate wondering what was waiting for us outside. Not surprisingly, it turns out that all Marine bases have a large cluster of bars, etc., just outside the gates. Several of us discussed our good fortune and agreed that coming from the dusty DMZ and with limited access to showers, we all needed a genuine oriental bath.

I won't go into all that and related details, but it is enough to say that this assignment was truly my good fortune. Three weeks or so after leaving the danger of Dong Ha, I graduated near the top of the class (as I remember it) but with new skills that were a bit bizarre. I had learned to calculate "weight and balance," the footprint shapes of typical Seabee equipment and the correct order in which to place bulldozers and the like in an LST identical to the one that I had "hit the beach" in a year earlier. I still remember a key loading detail, bulldozers load last so they hit the beach first, "blade up," then trucks, jeeps, etc.—a specific order of landing. I surely didn't think I would ever need these skills, and by the time I got out of the Navy about a year later, I indeed did not need to load any part of MCB 11 into an amphibious landing ship on the DMZ in Vietnam—no doubt a good thing.

For the next 40 or so years this matter didn't really cross my mind. But more recently, I have been thinking about my experiences in Vietnam and have been doing more reading. One topic I've wondered about is why I was sent for this training at Camp Hansen. The only reason I can think of is that I held that certificate, signed by a very junior grade Marine officer saying that I was trained in Port Hueneme to assault what included the Coronado Hotel in San Diego. The other question I've had over the years remains more perplexing. Why was the Navy training *anybody* for a combat assault on a beach, departing from the DMZ?

This is what I've learned: War planners were always making contingency plans and our war no doubt had many. To prepare for "more action" north of the DMZ, the Navy had submarines dropping off special operators up and down the coast of North Vietnam, some just north of Cua Viet at the mouth of "our river" at Dong Ha. They were presumably checking out landing sites should President Johnson and General Westmoreland decide to land troops and push southward into the DMZ which was loaded with enemy troops when we were there. All this was apparently just a contingency plan, but one that is eerily similar to the historic Inchon landing behind enemy lines in Korea 15 or so years earlier. As a plan, it

was probably not too far-fetched but for the redoubled war protests back home had it been attempted.

Can we assume that a battalion of Seabees might have been part of this plan? As far as I know, where Marine combat forces go Seabees usually go. And, we know that General Westmoreland was publically saying to Congress and anyone else who was listening in the summer of 1967 “we’ve got the enemy on the run.” The general’s command team was apparently feeling pretty good about their successes to date, that is up to the time of the “Tet surprise” a few months later. The good general was relieved of his command shortly thereafter. Given the timing is it possible that MCB 11 could have been caught up in such a landing? We will never know of course, but I know now that I knew then how to get our stuff onto an LST so that the ship didn’t tip over or that when hitting the beach, the jeeps didn’t come off before the dozers.

Submitted by:

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My Time in the Navy and Life Since

I was on MCB 11’s Dong Ha deployment, mostly in Khe Sahn and on through the delayed “rear guard” from which I returned home a couple of days before Christmas, 1967; I was in Delta, Bravo and Headquarters companies during this time. I was also on the Quang Tri deployment spending more than half of my time at our supply base in Da Nang arranging shipments north. I mustered out of the Navy in late August, 1968, returning home to Berkeley, CA to be married (still) on September 7, 1968. I retired a few years ago after a 40+ year career as an international development economist. We still live in the area and have two kids and four grandchildren.

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