

Change of Command By: Bob Cahill



Dong Ha Combat Base was in an area that became widely known as “Leatherneck Square.” To the north, Gio Linh and Con Thien formed corners while to the south it was Camp Carroll and Dong Ha that formed the other points of the “square.” In this area of roughly 50 square miles more than 9,000 Navy and Marine Corps personnel were listed as casualties in the period March 1967 to February 1969—some reports say the heaviest concentration of casualties of the Vietnam War. Many members of the battalion had already been in Da Nang for the 1966 deployment and although that area saw its combat, nothing from that deployment could prepare the battalion for what was experienced at Dong Ha.



We had gone to war in 1967 with CDR Bill Wilson as our Commanding Officer, not known to be an especially warm and fuzzy individual. I believe that the Executive Officer, LCDR John Totten, was given to us by the Gods of War to preserve our sanity. LCDR Totten was tough but very fair. He was a recruitment poster for Seabee Officers.



Dong Ha was at the very end of the supply chain and consequently we did without the combat gear then common to the Marines--a lack of flak jackets and jungle boots come to mind. Because we didn't have enough flak jackets to outfit Bravo Company, as Company Commander, I had promised I would not wear a Jacket until the entire company was equipped. During this period we actually obtained some needed equipment from Graves Registration.

One of the first projects we completed was the construction of the Battalion Command Center, a bunker 17 feet below ground level. The Commanding Officer spent every evening sleeping in that bunker. Of

course, the Officer Of the Day and Chief of Duty had to stand their watch in that bunker as well. I hated it!

One night while I had the duty the stuff hit the fan, Marine HQ sounded the siren and all hell broke loose. CDR Wilson came running out of his bunkroom deep in the bunker, properly wearing his flak jacket. He had not relieved me as OOD but immediately started barking orders. I had to remind him that I had the "con" and that if he would relieve me he could give orders. After turning command over to him, I started up the ladder out of the bunker. CDR Wilson said "Mr. Cahill where are you going?" I replied "to my post as Bravo Company Commander." He then said "where is your flak jacket?" I told him "Sir, I don't have one." For a moment I thought he was going to loan me his Jacket. Instead he said, "well, be careful out there." I said "aye, aye, Sir", and left the bunker. Now, it was a little distance to Bravo Company from the center of camp. Artillery and mortar fire was frequent but I got to my destination muttering the whole way "just be careful, just be careful," etc.

The tour went on with everyone looking forward to the Change of Command scheduled for 27 July 1967. Commander Wilson was to be relieved by Commander Keith Hartell. We all wondered what the new CO would be like, and all hoped for the best.

The night before the Change of Command we came under heavy artillery fire. Bravo Company's land line system took a direct hit and we lost communication with Headquarters. I sent a few guys out with a "donut" of wire to try and find the break. The shelling went on for quite some time and we finally received a radio message from Ensign Jim Bolling (now, the normal procedure in a defensive posture is to use the land line because radio transmissions can betray your position). Jim was screaming "Bravo Company, Bravo Company do you know we are under attack." I replied to my radioman "you bet your sweet ass we do." The radioman reported "Bravo Six says you bet your sweet ass we do". This was exactly the right thing for him to say as he has been taught to repeat word for word the message he is given. But there is a devil in the details; the bunker has speakers throughout its confines so all in the bunker can hear. Now, I think that I will really catch hell when I see Commander Wilson at the After

Action Meeting (“beans, bullets, and bandaged” are reported at those meetings.)

To further add to my anxiety Lt Eric Smith Alfa Company Commander grabs me on the way into the meeting (in the bunker) and says “Boy, Bob are you in for it”. As I walked in, Commander Hartell puffing on a cigar says “Cahill that radio transmission of yours was the God damndest thing I have ever heard.” I never received any comment from CDR Wilson. I knew at once I was going to like CDR Hartell!

Finally, the morning of the ceremony arrived. Bravo Company was selected (you knew it would be us) to be the one company to stand for the Change of Command proceeding. Any more men in one spot was just too dangerous. Most of Bravo Company was probably sure that I volunteered



us for this duty. I did not. The Company was chosen but this didn’t stop the questioning-- aka “complaining.” While waiting for the festivities to begin, in marches the Third Marine Corps Band complete with tubas, saxophones, trombones, and drums. I could not make this matter up. Where did they come from? How did the instruments get to the DMZ? It was surreal. To add to the mess, the enemy sent in a several rounds of excitement. I guess they could see the glint off the instruments.

Between rounds the Change of Command took place followed by a celebration of cake and punch. There was a lot of brass around, both Seabees and Marines, including Commodore Mike Marshall who went on to be Chief of Civil Engineer Corps and thus Head Seabee. It certainly was a day of days.

With CDR Hartell and LCDR Totten NMCB-11 was by far the best performing battalion in the Pacific Fleet. I have maintained that their management team was the finest I ever worked for.

Time in the Navy and Career Since

I went with the Battalion on our 1968 deployment to Quang Tri. While there I was selected to be Rear Admiral Paul Seufer's Aide. Turned out to be much better duty than Vietnam! I left the Navy and went to The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, receiving an MBA and meeting my wife (on the Seabees Birthday). There is no doubt that the best part of Wharton was meeting my wife. We have 4 children (all taught to march to "Seabees of the Navy") and 8 grandchildren. I fly the Seabee Flag every 5th of March. Although I am not "pro war" I cherish my time in RVN with MCB 11. I have had a modicum of success and a wonderful life

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