

“It Just Didn’t Stop”
Recollections of September 3rd
By Bob Cahill

On taking command of MCB 11 in late July, Commander Hartell wasted no



1967 William Hartell
accepting command of MCB 11.

time in getting to know the battalion and the projects we were working on in the Northern I Corps. Almost immediately and working with LCDR Totten the battalion Executive Officer, a number of changes were made to company commands. LCDR Totten quickly moved me from Bravo Company Commander to head up Delta Company. Greg Howell was shifted from Security Company Commander to take my place in Bravo Company. This was a good move I thought. Bravo was clearly getting a good deal as Greg was one of the most splendid individuals I had ever met (Greg and I were tent

mates living in the Bravo Company area as Bravo was closest to the Security Company area that he headed.) Dan MacDonald came in from heading up the Cua Viet detachment and made the Security Company Commander. These changes and no doubt others gave the new CO the leadership team he sought.

I previously wrote about the materiel shortages we faced in those earlier days in Dong Ha. Some of us officers had decided that we would go without critical items like flak jackets until the men had theirs. We had the same feelings about accommodations. Dan, Greg and I promised we would not move into a SEA Hut (commonly called “hootches”) until the entire Company was under roof. Finally, all of Bravo Company was housed and we started our personal hootch construction project. You will recall the presence of the fierce sub-terrainium Formosan Termites that troubled all earth-disturbing projects-- all of our SEA huts and many other buildings were built on artillery canisters buried in the dirt and our project had its share of termite issues. It was a Sunday after noon when we started and soon several Seabees from Bravo joined in; Jim Bagnell and others were happily helping us build our new home. Next thing we knew the

Operations Officer LCDR Don Lutz is working on the project a well. Greg and I stepped back (Dan was on duty) and commented that we were like denizens in a certain Mark Twain novel-- getting a fence whitewashed by Huckleberry Finn who "just wanted to help." Overall, it was a great time, the hut was built, and all was well! Can Do!

A week later we got an insight into our new COs' impish behavior. Dan MacDonald was being promoted to LTJG. Commander Hartell had us line a fighting trench right outside the mess hall with an impervious liner and fill it with water. First, Dan was formally promoted in the Captain's office. Then he was told that the Captain would drive him to the Mess Hall (Dan told me years later he felt like a big shot) where unknown to the new LTJG the water hole was awaiting. As the Captain's jeep approached Greg and I tore Dan from the jeep and threw him in the pit. Dan fought well, but in he went. What a spectacular Wetting Down it was. Years later, Dan became Senate Majority Leader for the State of Washington and had a picture of this event in his office. Greg and I are prominently featured in that picture.

A short time later, Commander Hartell asked Greg and me to accompany him to Khe Sahn as both Delta and Bravo Company had units out there, so we went over to MAG-39 for a ride to that "lovely" outpost nestled below notorious Hill 881 (made prominent in the "hill battles" of Tet.) Now, because we had a full Commander with us we went into the base's Pilot's Ready Room not just made to wait on the ground like Ted Lyman did almost daily as he made sure our detachment was supplied (Ted won Seabee of the Month for those efforts.) All of a sudden there is a huge



**Trench line along south side
of Hill 881**

commotion in the ready room. A Marine chopper has radioed in that there is red smoke outside the perimeter and they were going to attack. Coordinates were shouted out and I quickly realized that they were for the area where we had a patrol operating. I informed Captain Hartell and he called off the Marine attack on the spot. Good thing because our patrol had tripped a mine and managed to send up the wrong color flare when asking for assistance. The Captain called off our Khe Sahn visit as he went to check on our wounded.

Very few potential visitors to MCB 11 took up LCDR Totten's invitation to join us for a fun filled night at Dong Ha. There is a copy of the invitation in

**IS THE ROUTINE OF SAIGON
OR DA NANG GETTING YOU
DOWN?**



NMCB ELEVEN ANNOUNCES THE OPENING OF
"MONSOON SEASON"

VISIT BEAUTIFUL CAMP BARNES
A TOUR GUARANTEED TO FIT EVERY DESIRE

- A) ONE DAY BRIEF TOUR OF THE COMBAT BASE
- B) OVERNIGHT TOUR FEATURING
 - 1) An evening in a mortar hole
 - 2) A fireworks displayOR
- C) THE GRAND WEEKEND TOUR FEATURING
 - 1) A Cruise to Cua Viet
 - 2) A night in Gio Linh
 - 3) A helicopter ride to Khe Sanh

TO ACCOMMODATE OUR MANY VISITORS
WE URGE THAT YOU BOOK EARLY
Special Rates for Servicemen

BEST DATE-ANY VC/NVA HOLIDAY
Helmet And Flak Jacket Required
Chaplain And Full Medical Facilities Available

SEE THE DMZ---VISIT WITH ONE GUN CHARLIE
For

A Unique Experience,
The Thrill Of A Lifetime,
GO NORTH THIS SEASON
Visit Scenic Camp Barnes

the Cruise Book from 1967. However, every once in a while we would have a dignitary who wanted to see the work we were doing on the DMZ. Of prominent interest were the wood observation towers Delta was building along the DMZ's "trace." I don't know who this particular visitor was but he had a gold oak leaf which certainly outranked me. Commander Hartell, the LCDR,

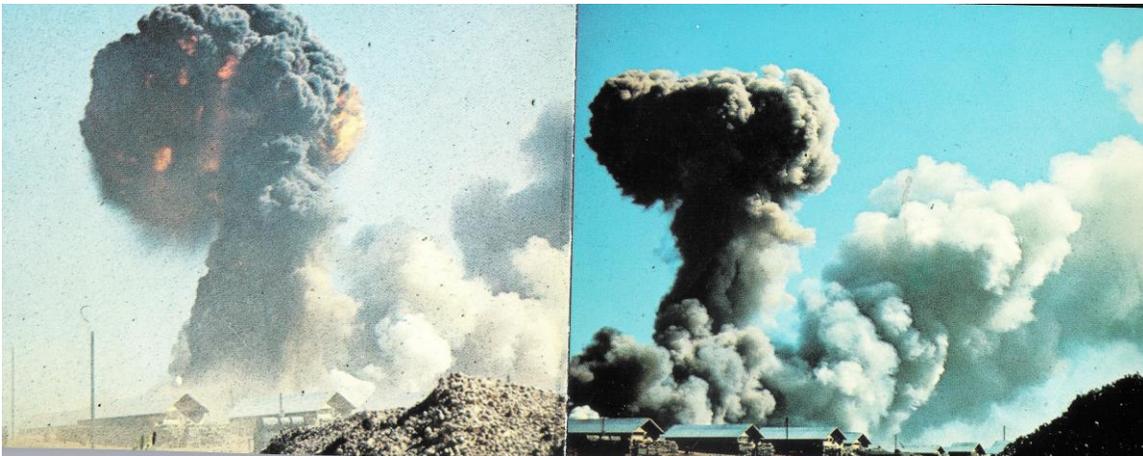
my driver, and I headed out for Gio Linh. While we were showing our guest around we got between a battle involving a CHICOM and Marine tank(s). We jumped into a hole in front of the compound and got as low as possible. Several rounds from both sides flew over our head. All of a sudden it became very quiet. I said to all "let's get our butts (you know I may have used a different term with some expletives deleted) out of here." We all took off running for the jeep. I mean RUNNING. Just as we were pulling away in the jeep a round landed right in the hole we had been in. Earthshaking! The visitor was very impressed by Delta's work and was extremely elated to be alive and be able to report on it.

Now, all of the above was going on in my world. Others no doubt had equally unimaginable events going on in their sector of the war but I relate

these to you as a prelude to 3 September 1967. There are over 10,000 reports on the Internet of the comings and goings of this date so emblazed in my mind.

3 September 1967 was to be the country's first Election Day. I recall seeing villagers decked out in their finery and carrying colorful umbrellas as they proudly walked to the polls. For us, Mass had just been said in the Mess Hall and it appeared as though it was going to be routine Sunday (Sundays were great! The respite of no work after lunch was always looked forward to.)

All of a sudden the sky was filled with incoming artillery many of which found the ASP (ammo dump) which was immediately adjacent to our lines. I have always thought of Ammunition Supply Point (ASP) and the wicked Egyptian reptile in the same way; asp is more than a mere coincident.



The Cruise Book pictures certainly do the horror of the day justice. We were in for it. The ground moved, shrapnel filled the air, I was sure we would get over run by the NVA. We stayed on red alert all day. It just didn't stop. We had a least one Officers Call and no food. Finally, toward 1800 hours, Lt. Jim Miller, the Supply Officer, managed to get us C Rations. Ham with limas never tasted so good. Then it happened in the Delta Company area. Rounds came in and Petty Officers Savage and Davis were blown out of their holes. I got 3 or 4 guys together and we ran to their assistance. Now, the write up for the medal I received states "although wounded LTJG Cahill went to the aid of his men." Truth be told, I was wounded while leaning in to pick them out of their hole. A round came in and blew me at least 15 yards down the

line. I jumped up to return to the Davis and Savage. One of the men tackled me and screamed "Sir you've been hit". I felt nothing and he pulled a bandage out of my first aid kit and wrapped me up. Then the pain set in.

At our medial bunker, it was determined that the three of us needed to be evacuated. (A special call out to our doc, Robert Grossman, who was immeasurable to me in his work that day.) It was also determined that Medivac choppers could not get to our location. We were put into an ambulance (aka meat wagon) and bounced down the old French Road to an evac station. Now, all I had on was a flak jacket, no shirt, no insignia. A corpsman screams for a group of us waiting to go out to get a dead Marine out of the Medivac chopper. With my one good hand I helped lift the Marine out and put him on the ground. Then another corpsman screams to put him back on the chopper as he was alive. Next, you know it, the first corpsman is livid and tells us to get the Marine out as he is KIA. Again, the language was much saltier than not. We put the Marine down in some elephant grass. Petty Officers Savage and Davis were loaded in and I was told to get in. I held Petty officer Davis with my right arm and we were flown off to the USS Tripoli as all hospital ships in the South China Sea were full. The Tripoli is a LPH, a small aircraft carrier for helicopters.

On board the Tripoli, triage is done and we are loaded on an elevator from the flight deck down to the OR. On the way down someone yells at me to drop my trousers as there was a huge blood stain in my crotch area and they are worried I had been wounded there also. It turned out to be blood from Davis.

Savage was operated on first, then PO Davis. I was third but this after a Chaplain with most of one of his hands missing came by with an unforgettable pep talk telling me that he gone through life with a badly mangled hand and if things didn't go well in the OR I would still have a life. You have to understand that my first thought in seeing my hand hanging basically in two bits was "I guess I could be a mail man." After my operation I was lying in bed when a Corpsman came over to me and said "your man Davis is not doing well. His blood pressure is dropping and pulse is weak." I asked what was done to him in the OR and told they had operated on his chest. I asked "did anyone check his back, as I am sure my bloody trousers contain blood from his back." Immediately, Davis is rushed back into the OR for more, perhaps life saving medical attention. The next morning I

went over to his bed and all he did was thank me for saving his life. A lot of people saved lives that day.

When I got back to my bed to find that the Commanding Officer of the ship had stewards bring me breakfast: eggs over easy, bacon, and toast on china and with sterling from the ward room. Are you kidding me? I thanked the Skipper and told him from now on I would eat with the men in the chow area. It just was not right to have all the wounded staring at me. I did take him up on the invitation to have dinner with he and the other ship's officers. It must have been quite the scene as I entered that hallow area—they in their uniforms of the day and me in a PJ top, bloody trousers, arm all wrapped up in bandages and boots with no laces. The floating Navy lived differently than we did.

I haven't seen Petty Officer's Davis or Savage since that time. They were evacuated from the LPH after being operated on. I was brought into DaNang and eventually sent to Chelsea Naval Hospital near my home in Massachusetts to recuperate. A few months later I rejoined the battalion. What a day, what an experience and what a story, perhaps similar in some way to anyone on the Dong Ha Combat Base on September 3, 1967.

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 Seuffer'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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