

Last Convoy to Khe Sahn: MCB 11 "Expeditor's" Story

By: Ted Lyman

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Ted Lyman, age 22

A month or so after we arrived in Dong Ha in April 1967, I found myself being taken off my main job wiring up the hooches and other buildings that were to replace the tents we were first living in. My Bravo Company fire team was being sent many miles west to Khe Sahn, a few miles from the intersection of the North Vietnam and Laotian borders. The job was to rebuild that base's runway. Why as a CE (electrician) was I being sent to work on a project mostly having to do with aluminum matting? Maybe, I thought, because I started my time in MCB 11 as an unrated in Delta Company, the home of steel workers. Whatever the reason, I was soon off to a base a small fraction the size of Dong Ha, high in the mountains and with a reputation for being dangerous.

On arrival, Chief Barnes came over to my small group (myself, Mike Leatherman



David Ray and Ted Lyman

and David Ray, pictured) and basically told us that Mike would be going to the Army's Green Beret base a few miles beyond Khe Sahn at Lang Vei to wire bunkers and David was to stay and work on lights on the runway. Instead of electrical work, I was going to be



Mike Leatherman showing off his "kill"

the "expeditor" for the entire Khe Sahn detachment. He explained that as expeditor I would report directly to him and be responsible for getting mail and materials to the detachment on an "as needed" basis. Chief Barnes more than just suggested that the success of our mission would be dependent in many ways on having the material we needed when we needed it.

I was given a set of orders to keep on my person at all times. The orders read that I was free to travel by any means that I could arrange anywhere in Vietnam's I Corps (basically from well-south of Da Nang north to the DMZ,) serving as MCB 11's expeditor in the area. At that moment I'm sure that I didn't fully realize what was entailed in being a battalion "expeditor" but I was soon to learn.

Barnes' first assignment for me was to head back down to Dong Ha and arrange for several bottles of oxygen and acetylene to be retrieved from our supply center and brought back to Khe Sahn. To get back to Dong Ha, I was told to simply go out on the apron of the runway and "talk your way onto an airplane or helicopter headed back down to Dong Ha—and while you are there, arrange to bring back a pallet or so of beer and another of soda—we want to open a club." That was pretty much it from the Chief, "just do it!"

I was always pretty good at talking my way forward in life so I boldly did what I was told and soon found my way back down out of the mountains on a very small USAF Caribou cargo plane. Basically showing my orders as my chit, I got myself to our motor pool, somehow got a duce and half truck and went about getting the welding bottles, mail for the men, as well as the beer and soda. The first surprise came when I went back to the Dong Ha air field and tried to get the 4-6, now palletized explosive bottles onto an airplane. No loadmaster would help me, worried that the stuff was improper cargo. So I found a chopper getting ready to take off and I yelled at the crewman at the door what I needed to do. "No way," was the quick answer. Thinking fast, I said "I've got a few cases of beer and soda for you." That did the trick and also showed me how cumshaw (and later outright thievery) worked in the military.

The Khe Sahn base was routinely troubled by incoming mortar and rocket fire. On June 6th, incoming fire killed Chief Barnes while we were running for cover. Another Seabee was killed in the same fire, a man from MCB 4's well-digging outfit. I'm not sure, but I believe that other Marines were killed and injured in the same incident. That night was the worse of my life. I will never forget the trauma of violent death and injury in my immediate vicinity.

The pattern continued of me getting orders to go get this and that material and then basically going off on my own to find the stuff and get it, and new mail, up to our guys in Khe Sahn. I flew on four different kinds of helicopter, two kinds of fixed wing cargo planes and on various landing craft boats and then larger ships making my way out the Cua Viet river to our ramp and then onward to our huge supply base at Da Nang. My only direct, combat-related action wasn't from my M-16 or my .45 but instead my routinely told to "randomly, but regularly" toss grenades over the side of the river cargo boats as they slowed for small fishing boats while going up and down the Cua Viet River. It turns out that the NVA had learned the value of magnetic mines attached to boats by underwater swimmers. They successfully mined and sunk in this way a small cargo ship at Cua Viet in the



"Rockpile ridge approximately halfway between Dong Ha and Khe Sahn, August, 1967"

period I was riding those boats, killing a number of the crew. I wonder to this day how scared those Vietnamese fishermen must have been to see me throwing grenades. I also found myself hitching rides on choppers whose primary mission was resupply of nearby hill-top observation posts. As a passenger I was expected to help off load ammo, C-rats and the like while the chopper hovered just a few feet off the ground, ready to leave in a hurry if fired upon. Pretty exciting, except that I didn't routinely wear a flak jacket or helmet on these jaunts because I was so mobile all the time and as, we all know, those helmets and flak jackets were really hard to manage if we were moving around a lot. Young, and stupid! Lt. Cahill awarded me MCB 11 Seabee of the Month in July. Although the award came with a week-long R&R I never got to use it.

In mid-August 1967 I found myself on a convoy from Dong Ha to Khe Sahn, riding shotgun on a couple of bags of mail for our guys and a pallet of beer and soda to resupply our squad-tent club (the beer would never had made it to the club without someone with a gun riding along with it.)

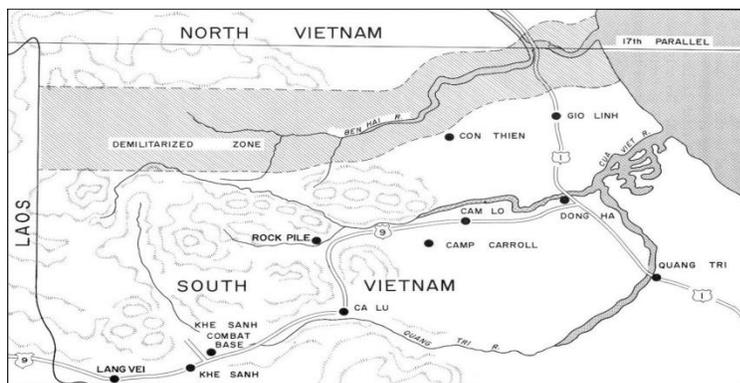
On this trip, the convoy was moving smoothly past the “Rockpile” west of Dong Ha (pictured,) a place dreaded by the Marines who lost many men there a few months before and was headed up the dirt track of Highway 9 into the steeper mountains of Khe Sahn.



"Destroyed bridge, at time of shooting, Highway 9, approximately 5 miles SW of Khe Sahn, August, 1967"

A few trucks ahead of mine was a security unit riding in an open truck with a quad-50 system mounted on a rotating platform, I think common on all convoys of the time. Suddenly as we moved downward to a blasted out bridge (pictured,) this thing started firing, and firing some more at something to the south. The fire went on for some time. Earlier, I was told that there had been a serious ambush a couple of weeks

before and the gunners were jumpy. At this time, all drivers were told to pile out and take cover (see map--this happened at point where Hwy 9 crosses river 5 miles SE of Khe Sahn Comat Base, at photo above.) We just waited for whatever was to happen. As it turns out, there was no return fire—none. Those guys on that quad-50 had surely seen something with their sustained fire but whatever it was, it went underground quickly and silently.



I read later that on August 14, 1967 convoys to resupply Khe Sahn were ended because of the threat of enemy ambush. All such transportation from that point up through Tet's “siege of Khe Sahn” was to be

by air. My reading later was that in preparation for the wide-ranging Tet attacks, the NVA had infiltrated many thousands of soldiers down the Ho Chi Minh trail just a few miles to the west of Khe Sahn and into hiding in the mountains just

south of the base. This would have been roughly in the area where this incident occurred.

Because of the timing and the relatively few convoys going up into those mountains, I believe that I could have easily been on that last convoy to Khe Sahn and that what those gunners in front of my truck saw were some movement of those NVA troops gathering underground in silence. It seems likely that it was those troops and others who a few months later held Khe Sahn under siege for more than two months at the cost of more than 250 Americans.

Poorly located from the start because of the high ground that basically surrounded the site and its proximity to the Ho Chi Minh trail, the Khe Sahn Combat Base was abandoned a few months later. Our just rebuilt runway was torn up, all the bunkers destroyed and the place left to the weeds. Military historians say this was the only time Americans abandoned a major base due to enemy pressure. There are pictures on the Internet today of that bare dirt runway with a government tourist center and a few vintage U.S. aircraft as the attraction. What a waste...

Submitted by:

Ted Lyman

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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, from mid-May through the delayed "rear guard" before returning home days before Christmas, 1967; I was also on the Quang Tri deployment, but spent 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.

I believe to this day that Chief Barnes' simple order, "just do it" stuck with me imbedded as some kind of internal command throughout my career life after the Navy.

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