

O-3 Loses a Patrol - Ambush on Hill 689, 27 June, 1967

Meantime, Oscar Company was conducting patrols and civic action work while fortifying their positions against the inevitable conflict.

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At 0830 on 27 June, 1967, CAP O-3 was ordered by the Marine command at Khe Sanh to send a patrol to investigate suspected launch sites (spotted earlier by an aerial observer) of an NVA rocket and mortar attack on the Khe Sanh base which had occurred just after midnight of the night before. A 1 / 13 and elements of 3 / 26 (including the Battalion Aid Station) had been hit hard in the attack, incurring a number of casualties. Although key A 1 / 13 personnel were injured and killed, they managed to mount an effective counter-battery fire and silenced the enemy fire.

The O-3 patrol included CPL Dennis Alfred O'Connor, CPL James Merrill Shepard, Jr., LCPL Francisco Alberto Mazariegos, LCPL Earl Grissom, and "Doc" Bell (the unit Corpsman), all of Oscar-3, and LCPL Charles Aaron Lynch of Oscar-1, who was visiting friends at O-3, as well as men of the local Bru tribe of Popular Force militia, and ultimately involved losses from India and Lima Companies, 3 / 26, who were sent in support of the Oscar Company patrol.

The following is a first-hand account from Earl B. Grissom, the only survivor I have been able to locate, written on 1/13/09. This account was sent to me as an E-mail and I have added some notes from telephone conversations with Earl and other sources which vary slightly from this account, though overall they agree regarding the main facts.

Hill 689

by Earl B. Grissom

I can't remember if it was late night of June 26th or early morning of June 27th when Khe Sanh started getting hammered by mortars followed by rockets. It was a bad rocket and mortar attack. I'm not sure how many rounds of each, but the attack went on for awhile.

(Ed. Note: It was just after midnight on the morning of the 27th.)

Early that morning, June 27th, we were informed that we were going on a patrol to look for the mortar sites from the attack the night before. I can

remember looking at the overlay. I noticed that one of the checkpoints was the top of a hill numbered 689 that at that time was being hammered by Phantoms. I found it strange that this patrol was going that far to a hill that was getting hit by an air strike - just to find some mortar sites. I remember me and Dennis (Dennis O'Connor) said as much and were told to shut up.

(Ed. Note: In fairness, their NCOIC, SGT (later WO4) Lawrence Bosworth, told me in a phone conversation that he had already protested the assignment on the same grounds, but had been ordered by higher command to run it, so he was compelled to order the patrol against his better judgment. Unlike the Special Forces SOG, Marines generally had no say in accepting or refusing assignments.)

Things went along pretty good. We got to the top of a hill (I think the number was 521 or 561). Anyway, that is not important. It was about the third checkpoint and that's when we found the mortar sites. The pits were freshly dug, aiming stakes still in place. Some 82 mm rounds laying around. We knew that the NVA weren't far away. They were still air striking 689 and we started realizing we were in some deep shit.

We started off towards 689 when a spotter plane saw our patrol. I'll never forget his call sign. It was CAT KILLER 2-6. Anyway, he flew low and dropped a canister out with his radio frequency and his exact words were....."what in the hell are you doing?" We explained and he called off the Phantoms and we started up 689.

O'Connor was walking point, followed by I think Maz (Francisco Mazariegos), then I think me, and behind me were Shep (James Shepard) and Doc (HN Bell, O-3's medic). I just know that us five were the first ones to top the hill. We came up on a spider trap and looking in we saw an ammo dump with mortar rounds. Cases of AK47 rounds, RPG rounds, or B-40, whatever you like to call them. Just a lot of shit and that's when we knew we were definitely in trouble.

O'Connor had seen another spider trap and said he was going to go over and check it out. I guess Maz had seen something else and took off. I turned around to say something to Shep and I saw O'Connor look down into a hole and a machine gun opened up on him and it seemed like the whole hill erupted.

(Ed. Note: In a telephone conversation in January 2009, Grissom informed me that O'Connor had started to point his rifle at something, when the MG opened

up. He said O'Connor was "stitched up" by the MG, and was probably dead when he hit the ground.)

I turned around and dove into a bomb crater. I crawled up to the top of the crater and was doing what I could with my blooper (M-79) and I saw Maz fighting his way back towards me taking out one gook just before he got to the crater. A few minutes later he caught an AK-47 round in the temple and he was dead before he hit the ground.

*(Ed. Note: In a telephone conversation in January 2009, Grissom informed me that he was often firing almost straight up, because the enemy was so close. He said the rounds were striking so near him and Mazariegos that he feared they might be hit by them. He also informed me that Mazariegos had jumped into the crater laughing and saying; "I got two of the mother-f****rs! I got two of them!" He also commented that Mazariegos had displayed great courage in his fighting retreat to the crater, his face to the enemy and delivering accurate fire on them, resulting in at least one enemy casualty.*

Grissom also said that he had warned Mazariegos against looking over the top, but Mazariegos had responded by pointing out that if they didn't, the enemy could sneak up on them. It was on his second look that he was shot. After Mazariegos had been hit, the Navy Corpsman came over under fire to try to render aid, despite Grissom telling him that Mazariegos was dead. He also stated that CPL Shepard [below] was lying beside the crater rather than in it. The corpsman rendered first aid to Shepard, and assisted Grissom in hauling him down the hill.)

I turned to Shep and said... "we've gotta get outta here" and he said... "We can't - I've been hit!" I reached down and grabbed Maz's 16 and his magazines and got out of the crater. I couldn't see where Shep got hit. There was no blood. Then I saw where the round had gone in right next to his neck in the soft area by the collar bone. At this time he was still alive so we tried dragging him down the hill. Doc was trying to keep him awake and alive by talking to him, however, Shep was at this point no longer responding, other than an occasional groan. After a hundred yards or so he died. We had to leave his body, because the fire was still so heavy.

Two other Marines had survived from the back half of the patrol and to save my life I can't remember their names. Anyway, we got back to our C.P. and we had to go over to the main C.P. at Khe Sanh and give all the brass the run down about what happened and gave them the coordinates of the ammo bunker, etc.

I'm sure that there is more to this than what I have written. As time goes on I'm sure more will be revealed to me but what I have written down here is a true and accurate statement from a survivor of the ambush on Hill 689 at Khe Sanh – So Help Me God.

Semper Fi,

Earl Grissom

(Ed. Note: In a telephone interview with Grissom in January 2009, he said that when the survivors got off the hill, he heard that Lynch and another man he knew only as "Red" had been KIA also. However, I have so far found no record of any other Oscar KIAs.

The survivors were unable to reach the KIA and wounded, except for one WIA who died en route to the camp. After the artillery fire, two men attempted to sweep the hill for friendly WIA and KIA, but were driven back. The remnants of the patrol were forced to retreat, leaving two Marines and one Bru PF on the hill, status MIA. The survivors fell back to their compound, where elements of the other CAPs were mustering a relief column.

The relief column was dispatched, but they were unable to gain the hill, being driven off by heavy fire and hampered by the refusal of the Bru RFs [native militia] to ascend the hill. (The Bru usually knew when things were going to be very bad - their senses were much finer tuned than those of most of the Americans.)

Later, according to Grissom, a CPT Hall from Hotel Co. CAP came to Khe Sanh and spoke to the survivors. He asked the patrol why they left the radio frequency with Oscar, and was of the opinion that the disaster was due to leaving the frequency. They explained about the spotter, but were ignored by CPT Hall, who apparently sought to lay the entire blame for the disaster at the door of the men who had been ordered to perform it against their better judgement - a not untypical response from command.

In my professional opinion, no amount of radio contact could have offset what was essentially a suicide mission - a small, lightly armed patrol, with no supporting arms sent against a numerically superior, heavily-armed and well-entrenched enemy force that was not dislodged until two full rifle companies with full radio contact and supporting arms were sent up the hill - still losing many KIA and WIA in the process.)

Account of SGT Raymond Gray

At this point, CAP 1 & 2, who had been on separate patrols, had finished their patrols and were on their way home. They had come together and linked up approximately 1600. The Marines, hearing of their comrades' peril, immediately took off at a run, ignoring the danger of another ambush in their haste to relieve their friends.

The late SGT Ray Gray told me in a telephone conversation shortly before he died; "Tempers flared from the heat and tension and worry about our friends' fate. We got to the CAP 3 village (Ta Con?) on the access road to KS. We gathered the Bru to go up the hill, and HQ called and said not to go up, because they were going to shoot up the hill with air and arty. From what I remember, it took them about 5 days to clear the hill."

(Ed. Note: Acc. to LOL "Tony" Anthony and the other members of I & L companies of 3/26 who were involved, they had actually cleared the hill by the 27th.)

Ray then went on R & R to Hawaii, catching the last flight out of KS for about a week. He came back afterwards and resumed doing what he had been - patrolling, ambushing, LPs, civic action, etc. He had one more tight encounter.

"We got hit about last part of August, right before I left. Suddenly, every flare in our line went off, and the wire was full of gooks. I had the machine gun (a Browning .30 AC), and opened up. Everyone fired their "mad moment" and finally the enemy withdrew. They didn't leave a single body! The rush from a firefight is almost sexual."

(Ray passed away in March 2005 from illnesses probably related to his exposure to Agent Orange, but was unable to get recognition from the VA for this condition.

India and Lima 3/26 Assault on Hill 689



3/26 Marines attack NVA on Hill 689 ridges - June 27, 1967

Photo of the assault on Hill 689 by 3/26

(Photo by and used courtesy of Ray Palmer of D 1/26)

Meantime, India 3/26, commanded by CPT M. E. Coulter, was returning to KSCB from a patrol, when it was ordered instead to Hill 689 to assist the CAP patrol. It was later joined by Lima 3/26, elements of which had been air-lifted in by chopper. Despite being well-equipped and manned line infantry companies with supporting arms capabilities, they incurred heavy casualties KIA and WIA from the well-entrenched enemy forces (later estimated at two reinforced NVA companies). These losses included two officers and a SNCO KIA at the hill fight, and other casualties at the unit HQ at KSCB from incoming mortar fire.

At the end of the fighting, CAP O-3 had suffered 4 KIA, and 3/26 had lost 14. In addition, one of the WIA, LCPL Charles M. Gattis died of wounds on July 5th, raising the toll to 19.

According to the 3/26 Command Chronology, the enemy had sustained an estimated 91 KIAs. (I do not have figures for their WIA or POWs, though some are listed in the accounts below.)

There are also first-hand reports of the action and related events in LCDR Ray W. Stubbe's "*Battalion of Kings*" (2nd ed. pp. 85-88).

Below are first-hand accounts of the action by participants of the assault forces from India and Lima 3/26.

(NOTE: In the following accounts, the term Platoon Leader and Platoon Commander are used interchangeably. This reflects both a change in the official terminology at the time and two styles of leadership. Due to the high casualty rates among young officers assigned to platoons, their title was changed from "Platoon Leader" to "Platoon Commander." This seemingly insignificant change reflected the concept that if the young officers "led from the front" in the ancient warrior tradition, which was the manner in which Marine officers had long been accustomed to, they were more subject to putting themselves in harm's way, being killed or wounded, thus fracturing the command structure, and jeopardizing the success of the mission. The idea was that the officer would "command" the troops as opposed to "leading" them. However, some officers had the "lead from the front" mind-set and personality, and found it difficult to assume the role of "commander.")

Account of LCOL "Tony" Anthony (then serving as 2nd Platoon Leader, 13/26)

(Author's Note: The following account is of my involvement with Hill Battle 689, located in the Khe Sanh area of Vietnam, on June 27, 1967. Everything is from memory as I have no written correspondence on which to rely for names etc. All rosters etc. were lost at some point in one of my many moves while making a career of the Marine Corps and at this point in my life, at 72, memory is not what it used to be.)

My name is LtCol. C.T. ("Tony") Anthony, USMC (Ret) and on June 27, 1967 I was a 2nd Lt. assigned as Platoon Leader for the 2nd Platoon, India, 3/26. I joined "I" 3/26 sometime in May while the Battalion was operating in the Phu

Bai TAOR. The CO of the Company at that time was Capt. Mallard. I was assigned as Platoon Leader for the 2nd Platoon relieving 1st LT. Bob Stimson who I believe became the Company XO. Prior to joining 3/26, I had been a SSgt. Platoon Sergeant and Platoon Leader with Delta 1/26 from December 66 and after being commissioned on April 17, 1967 worked with the 15th Counter Intelligence Team in Dong Ha for approximately 30 days before joining 3/26.

For India Company, 3rd Battalion 26th Marines, events leading up to that battle began on the evening of June 26, 1967. The Company had been in the field and returned to the Base Camp and had been assigned a defensive sector for Khe Sanh Combat Base. This was standard operating procedure in that when not in the field, units would be assigned a sector of the Combat Base to defend. That evening of the 26th, the 1st platoon was assigned to send out a squad size security ambush. The squad moved to their ambush site and later that evening, the Combat Base received some incoming rockets and our artillery returned fire to suspected NVA rocket sites. At some point, we learned that the squad from 1st Platoon had taken incoming fire and had casualties to include one very seriously wounded and needed an emergency medevac to try and save his life. A helicopter attempted to make the medevac but was shot down. We later learned that the seriously wounded Marine died. At first light, our Commanding Officer, Captain Coulter, informed me that the other two squads from 1st platoon and my platoon would be going out to the ambush site and from there would continue to look for sites from which the NVA rockets had been fired. He and his Command Group would be with us. 2ndLt. Dale Allen was Platoon Leader for the 1st Platoon and had recently had a cyst removed from his upper back. He was on light duty and was not supposed to go back in the field until the wound had healed as infections were always a serious problem but he insisted on going with the platoon. He wanted to be with his Marines.

We departed the Base and while en route to the ambush site, I was told that our mission had changed and that we would be going to Hill 689 where Marines from the CAC Company in Khe Sanh Village had run into trouble and were taking heavy casualties. We changed our route of march and moved toward Hill 689.



India 3/26 en route to Hill 689

(Photo courtesy of Steve Greene of India 3/26)

Once we reached the base of the hill we encountered heavy elephant grass with its razor sharp edges which made it very difficult to move and that combined with it being very hot, made movement very difficult. We were in a column and in order to move through the grass the point man had to use a machete to cut through the razor like grass. My platoon was in the point, so because of the heat and heavy grass, we had to change the point man with great frequency.

We continued up the hill through jungle like terrain and although we couldn't see it, we could hear a plane circling above the Hill and the AO was giving Capt. Coulter updates on enemy activity on the hill as we moved up the objective.

Sometime after noon, we finally reached a point near the top of the hill where we were halted. No artillery or air support could be used as no one was sure of the status of the CAC Marines on the hill.

Still under cover of the jungle canopy, Capt. Coulter called Dale and I back to where he was located in the column. He issued us a quick frag order and assigned the right hand portion of the hill to my platoon and the left side of the hill to the 1st Platoon. There was a saddle separating the two parts of the Hill.

He further indicated that he had received reports of numerous NVA troops on the hill.



CPT Coulter briefing LT Anthony, SSGT Burton and others.

(NOTE: photo may have been taken some time after the assault.)

(Photo courtesy of Steve Greene of India 3/26)

I went back to my platoon and called the squad leaders together and issued them a frag order. Because this was the first time during my time in Vietnam in which we were going to be able to assault an objective using normal Marine tactics, I had the Marines drop their packs and fix bayonets with instructions to assault as they had been taught, walk up the hill firing from the hip even if not receiving any fire and when near the crest, continue firing and double time over the crest and set in a hasty defense. Looking back at that day now, I think that the dropping of the packs and allowing the 2nd platoon Marines to assault as they had been taught in ITR were both very helpful in our eventual success in accomplishing our assigned mission.

We moved out of our covered positions and using the V formation with two squads on line and one bringing up the rear we started advancing up the hill. At the same time Dale moved his platoon to our left and started moving up the hill on that side.

As 2nd Platoon moved up the hill we didn't initially receive any resistance but nearer the top, spider holes started opening and soon we were taking heavy fire and Marines began getting wounded. The Marines of 2nd Platoon never stopped but responded with heavy return fire and continued their advance until they had taken our portion of the objective.

During the assault, lots of stuff was happening with several being wounded and one later became a KIA. I recall an instance where a spider hole opened and a grenade was thrown out wounding my radio operator and slightly wounding me. I directed the nearest Marine to throw a grenade into the hole which eliminated that threat. At that time I had LCpl Peavey become my radio operator. All these actions were taking place as we tried to secure our portion of the hill. To say it was confusing would be putting it mildly!

The wounded Marine who later died was, I believe, LCpl Alejandro R. Godinez. He wasn't killed immediately but died while being treated. He had been shot in the leg and the bullet had hit the artery and the bleeding couldn't be stopped. I saw the Corpsman treating him and tried to encourage him but he appeared to pass out as I talked to him.

While consolidating our position and attempting to redistribute ammo, get casualty reports etc., I learned over the radio that the 1st platoon had run into serious trouble and was pinned down with several casualties and unable to advance to secure their portion of the Hill. I then got one of my machine gun teams to move to the left flank of our position where they could support the 1st platoon by fire. This was done but 1st platoon still remained pinned down.

About that same time, I learned that Lima Company was coming in by choppers and would be landing to our front and would be advancing from the other direction to secure 1st platoon's portion of the Hill. As soon as they landed, they too started taking heavy fire. During all of this time, there was a lot of confusion and firing going on but the Marines of 2nd platoon performed superbly under the leadership of outstanding NCOs.

Lima Company eventually took the other portion of Hill 689 but suffered several casualties to include the Company Commander being killed and one of the platoon leaders being seriously wounded. 1st platoon took heavy casualties including the death of my friend, Dale Allen. Dale had not been in country very long and this was probably his first real fire fight. Of course, that probably could have been said about many Marines who were there that day. Once Lima Company had secured their portion of the objective, medevacs were made with the most serious going out first and for some of us who had suffered slighter wounds, flown back to the Aid Station at the Combat Base, treated and then returned to the Hill.



Top of Hill 689 after the Fight

(Photo courtesy of Steve Greene of India 3/26)

Upon my return to the Hill I noted that more units from the Battalion to include the Battalion Command Group had arrived on the Hill. That evening, Mike Company, as I recall, moved through our lines and assumed defensive positions. Also that evening, a General from 3rd Marine Division, I believe it was the Assistant Division Commander, flew out to the Hill and complimented the Marines on an outstanding job. Of course, because of the many casualties, not many of us were thinking about it as being an outstanding job. All we could think about was those who had been killed or wounded and wondered who of the wounded who had been lifted out would make it. That was one of the strange anomalies of that War in that most times you didn't have time to dwell on the casualties as they were medevaced out so quickly, you didn't know who lived or who died. We always wanted to believe that most of them had survived.

But in retrospect, yes it had been an outstanding job on the part of the Marines who fought that day, many of whom fought their last battle. They

fought as Marines have always fought with mission accomplishment in mind and for each other as brother Marines. They have the right to be proud of what they did that day.



Chopper Carrying Bn. Command Group

(Photo courtesy of Steve Greene of India 3/26)



CPT Coulter briefs 3 / 26 Bn. Command Group on Hill 689 after the assault.

(Photo courtesy of Steve Greene of India 3/26)

The next day, as I remember, we mopped up the area and found several NVA bodies but also found one living wounded who was brought back to me. He smelled horribly and was high on self medicated pain meds and had to be carried. When he saw me, he spit in my face. We then turned him over to the Company who in turn turned him over to the Battalion S-2. We then stayed in the field operating until returning to the Combat Base around the 4th of July. After June 27, no significant contact was made that I can recall.



Wounded NVA

(Photo courtesy of Steve Greene of India 3/26)



Clean-up after fighting on 689

(Photo courtesy of Steve Greene of India 3/26)

No awards were issued to Marines from India Company that I know of for actions that day but many Marines performed over and above that which would normally be expected under those conditions. I heard later that of the recommendations for awards which had been submitted, they were rejected on the basis that these Marines were just doing what was expected of a grunt Marine. Maybe they were right but I saw Marines decorated for far less than what I saw Marines do that day. As was said about the fighting on Iwo Jima, "Uncommon Valor was a Common Virtue". That too was true of those Marines who fought on Hill 689, June 27, 1967.

Account of Frank McCarthy, Platoon Commander of 3rd platoon, Lima Company 3/26, wounded on Hill 689

On the night of 26 June, Lima Company was in the field on a search and destroy operation; I believe, south of Rt. 9. By the morning of the 27th we had been in the field for more than a week and were looking forward to our return to the base for a hot meal and showers. On the morning of 27 June we were to rendezvous with a truck convoy on Rt. 9 for transportation back to the Khe Sanh combat base. During the early morning hours of the 27th the base had been pounded by a persistent NVA mortar attack.

Immediately upon our arrival back at Khe Sanh we received orders to have the troops report to the LZ and officers and staff NCO's to report to the Battalion S3 to receive a briefing and operation order. During the briefing, we were informed that a Combined Action Unit had been ambushed on hill 689 and that four Marines were MIA. The CAP unit believed they knew where the mortars came from that hit the base that morning. Also, India Company, who was in the immediate area to the north of 689, was attempting to reach the crest of the hill but was taking very heavy fire from the NVA unit dug in on the crest. We were told that India Company was taking heavy casualties. The OP order had Lima Company land by helicopter on the opposite side of 689 and assault from the south in order to relieve the pressure on India Company. Artillery and/or air strikes were out of the question due to the fact that we did not know the location of the four missing Marines.

My platoon was assigned as the assault platoon. Upon arrival it was determined, due to the steepness of the hillside, that there was no suitable landing area. We were forced to jump from the helicopters while they hovered above the elephant grass growing on the slopes of 689. Not knowing how deep the elephant grass was made the jump a problem. We were only several

feet above the top of the grass but did not know if the grass was four feet high or one foot high...needless to say the landing drove a few knees into a few stomachs. While in the air I made a mental note of the terrain...Also, we had been on that very same hill just a week or so earlier. There was a high point to the left as one faced the ridge...I wanted to use it to set up a base of fire with one squad plus machine guns and assault with the remaining two squads. I was, instead, ordered by the CO to make a frontal assault immediately with all three squads. It took few minutes to cross a gully and maneuver the platoon into position to assault. While doing that I changed the frequency on my radio and called the India Company Commander. I asked if he had a 3.5 rocket launcher handy...He answered "affirmative." I asked him to fire a white phosphorous round at the NVA strong point. In just a few seconds when the round went off I asked if it was a good hit. The answer again was in the affirmative. I requested that India Company cease fire and immediately began the assault.

It seemed, at the time, that the actual assault took only a few minutes. As we reached the top of the ridge and made our way to the far side, the silence became deafening. I immediately began to establish a defensive perimeter. As we crossed the ridge we found two of the missing Marines on the crest...they were both KIA.

I began to follow a wire up the ridge...soon I was face to face with a Chinese Claymore mine. I turned and traced the wire the other way. It soon disappeared into a spider hole. I fired two rounds from my 12 gauge into the hole and pulled the cover off only to find a dead NVA soldier with the trigger to the claymore in his hands. Within a short time the Company Command group arrived on the hill. Soon after a Marine fired a pistol into a hole in the ground believing that the green at the bottom was a NVA uniform. The hole exploded with a roar...the Marine who fired the shots was very seriously wounded. I believe the Claymore was supposed to be the signal, however, when the hole exploded it was mistaken to be the signal and the NVA came out of their spider holes and began firing which soon, due to the close proximity, in many cases, turned into hand-to-hand combat. Within seconds I was informed that my Company Commander (Captain Bynum) was wounded. I began to make my way to Captain Bynum but was wounded myself within the first fifty meters. Again, within just a short span, the top of the hill fell silent again. A search of the area soon found the remaining two MIA Marines. Again, they were both KIA. In fact, the NVA who shot me in the back from his spider hole, and was soon thereafter killed, had two M-16s in his hole with him. I believe they must have belonged to the CAP Marines. It was dark before we were

finally evacuated to Khe Sanh. Captain Bynum died soon after arrival there...I was evacuated to Danang and then to the Hospital Ship USS Sanctuary where I remained for more than two months.

Also...The missing KIA mentioned was Lima Company's artillery forward observer. The two Marines...PFC Brent and Williams were members of my platoon killed during the assault and subsequent hand to hand combat. Finally, I do not believe that the photograph representing Captain Bynum is, in fact, Captain Bynum. I could be wrong...but it does not look anything like what I remember Captain Bynum looking like.

I hope this sheds some light on the assault of hill 689.

*Semper Fi
Frank McCarthy
Maj. USMC Ret.*

(Ed. Note: CPT Bynum's picture was verified by at least one of his men. It is possible that MAJ McCarthy's memory of him is as he was in Vietnam, whereas the picture shown on the In Memoriam page looks like one taken at OCS . I submit that we all changed considerably after a short time in country, dropping a lot of weight, becoming tanned, and acquiring the look of what we had become - combat Marines.)