

In the shadow of the DMZ the Marines were surprised,
outgunned, and outmanned.
That was the enemy's first mistake...

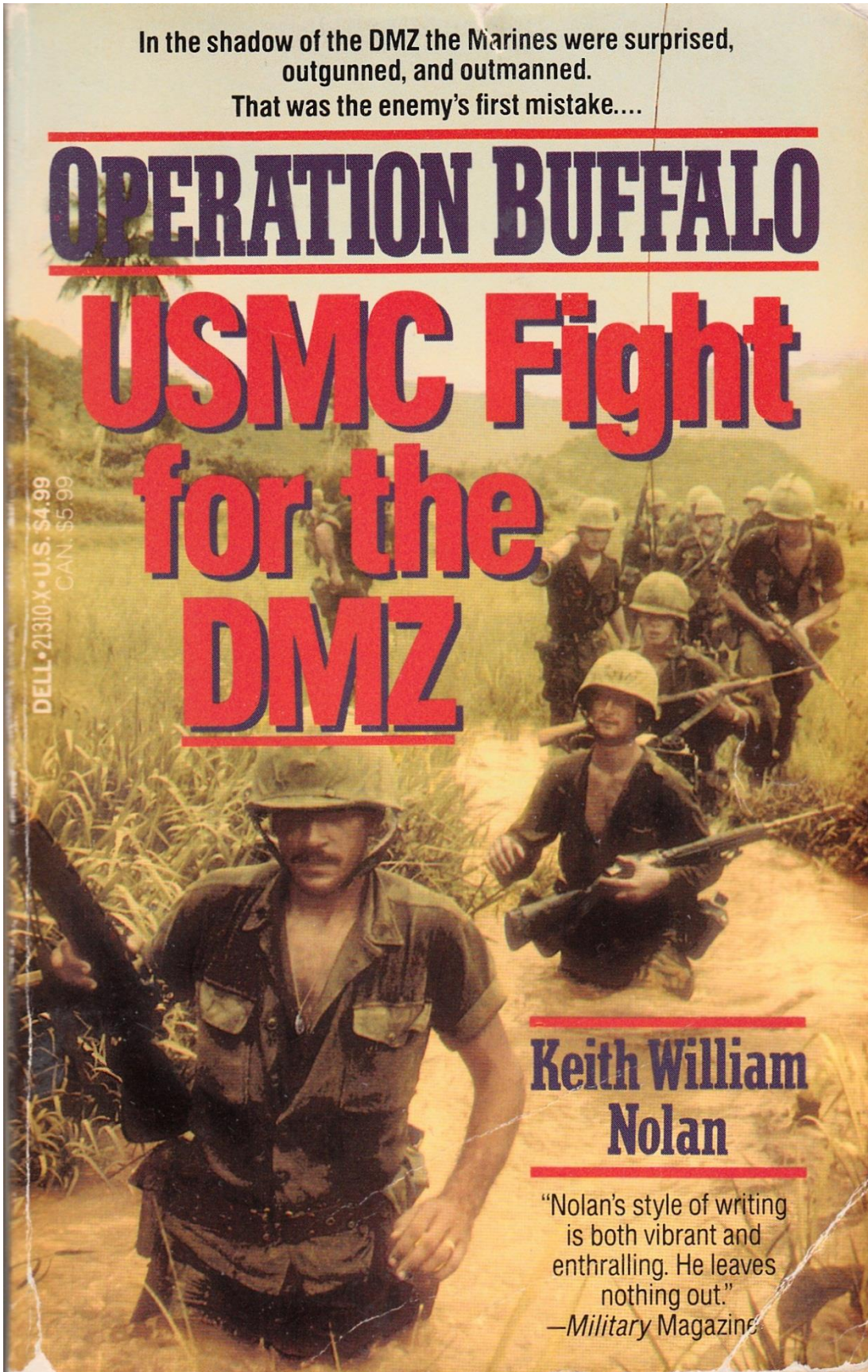
OPERATION BUFFALO

USMC Fight for the DMZ

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**Keith William
Nolan**

"Nolan's style of writing
is both vibrant and
enthralling. He leaves
nothing out."
—*Military Magazines*



5

Shadows



Shortly after deploying above the Strip on 1 July 1967, Bravo 1/9 spotted two NVA coming south toward them on Route 561 from an area of abandoned, rubble buildings designated "Market" on their topo maps and known to the Marines as the Marketplace.

It was the sweep's first enemy contact. Marines were quickly dispatched to eliminate them, but the NVA disappeared at the sight of them. Captain Coates pursued the issue by putting Staff Sergeant Burns's 1st Platoon and Staff Sergeant Reyes's 3d Platoon on line and sending them up Route 561 into the Marketplace. Meanwhile, two UH34 helicopters (obsolete machines known as Sea Horses or Ridgerunners) appeared from the southeast. They flew past Lieutenant King's 2d Platoon, maintaining the perimeter, to land some eight hundred meters to the west where Alpha Company was setting up. Burns's and Reyes's platoons advanced about three hundred meters north to the southern edge of the Marketplace where a

trail cut in from the west and ended, forming a rightward leaning T-shaped junction. They scouted the area for some fifteen minutes, then returned empty-handed at just about the time the two helicopters were swinging east after resupplying Alpha Company.

It was about 1800 now. A green smoke grenade was tossed into a clearing off Route 561 to mark Bravo Company as one of the '34s orbited at a thousand feet to watch for enemy movement while the second '34 roared in at treetop level. Everyone had donned helmets and flak jackets to watch the resupply from their holes—the NVA liked to mortar helo landing—as the chopper touched down lightly on its rubber wheels. The crew quickly tossed water cans and ration cases from their side door, and then the pilot brought the helicopter up, lowered its nose, raised its tail, and charged back across the treetops, remaining low to restrict the enemy's observation of them.

PFC Hendry and his buddy Reed sat back up on the edge of their hole, relieved that the first helicopter had come and gone without incident. *Punk-punk-punk*. The sound of NVA 82mm mortar rounds exiting its tube was distinct, and Hendry and Reed exchanged nervous glances before dropping back into their holes—all of Bravo Company were making like moles—to count the thirty or so seconds between exit and impact. *Punk-punk-punk-punk* . . . The waiting was the worst part about mortars to Hendry, and this time he was acutely aware that the tube was still belching out rounds even before the first one had arched in on them. *Christ, won't they ever stop!* The first explosion was 300 meters north of them, around that road junction, and within two minutes the NVA placed forty or fifty rounds in that area. The NVA were obviously firing without a forward observer, guesstimating the distance between their tube and where they had seen the helo alight, but no Marine took satisfaction in their foe's misjudged bombardment. The NVA were usually too damn good with their mortars, and even this raid was in a very effective pattern that surely would have caused casualties had it been on target.

The second helicopter touched down, unloaded, and took off within thirty seconds, and as the noise of its engine subsided, the thumping of the enemy mortar began again. Everyone was already down in their holes. *This time the goonies will be on target*, Hendry thought, as did his hole partner, Reed, who seemed to be on the verge of freaking out as they waited for the impact. But what can you do, Hendry mused—*a mortar round doesn't have eyes. If it lands in your hole, that's that. If it lands outside your hole, all you get is a good scare and maybe a few bells ringing in your head.*

The explosions began (it was the same concentrated pattern of forty or fifty rounds), closer but still more than a hundred meters off target. When this mortaring ceased, Captain Coates gave the word to saddle up and move out quickly. It was already dusk, and they still had to move to their night position and dig in. As each man passed the landing zone, he grabbed either a case of C rations or a five-gallon water can. PFC Hendry, for one, ended up with a case of C's under his left arm and his M16 swinging in his right as he followed the line up Route 561 straight toward the mortar impact area—*what the hell's the captain think he's doing?*

A 300-meter hump brought them near the Marketplace's first road junction into a flat, brushy area with good fields of fire, and here they deployed, letting the main road slice through the middle of their perimeter. The area was already dotted with old fighting holes, as well as the junked remains of an Ontos (a tracked vehicle mounted with six recoilless rifles), which sat as a reminder inside their lines. The evening rituals commenced. Burns, King, and Reyes got their platoon sectors from Coates, then they assigned each of their squads a portion, and the squad leaders got down to placing their men. In Corporal Haines's squad, Hendry, Reed, and a third man, L. Cpl. Cesar Eduardo Carvalho, were assigned a position near what looked to be a 155mm artillery crater. Dropping their gear, they got down to shoveling the shell crater into a three-man fighting hole. They were finishing up when Corporal Haines decided to move Hendry from this position to one with Demers. Hen-

dry picked up his flak jacket, only to discover it was covered with red ants (as was the rest of his gear) so carrying it instead of wearing it, he trudged over to Demers's position. Demers was sitting beside an old fighting hole, and Hendry threw his gear down and broke out his E-tool so the hole would accommodate his six-five frame. By the time Hendry was finished chopping at the sides and scooping the loose dirt out, they were joined by a man from rockets. This Marine (a lazy guy) wasn't too hot on digging a larger hole, so he said that if anything happened he'd use the artillery crater about fifteen meters away.

It was then that an NVA fired into Bravo Company's position. One shot, no casualties. The NVA was probably a scout sent to determine what damage (none) the mortaring had wreaked.

This is something different, thought Staff Sergeant Burns, who had never known the NVA to waste more than ten rounds to harass a Marine patrol; and as the Marines divided their watches, one man up, two asleep (each man sacked out until his turn came with his flak jacket for a pillow and his poncho liner pulled over him), even the usually skeptical PFC Henderson doubted whether anyone was screwing off (sleeping) on watch this night. They all knew something was up. The ambushes were the most alert. Lance Corporal Herbert's squad had the ambush from Bravo Two, and they set in along Route 561 south of the perimeter, between their lines and the Strip. During the night they could hear noises to their rear—south—like cans rattling; but Herbert, a young, smart squad leader, brushed it off as the scurrying of nocturnal animals in a pile of old, unburied C-ration cans. Cpl Michael D. Pitts's squad had the ambush from Bravo One, and they set in along Route 561 north of the perimeter, between their lines and the DMZ. During the night they could hear noises to their front—north—but Pitts could not brush them off. They were voices. Vietnamese voices. Pitts and squad were set in at the rightward-leaning T junction. The

NVA were up at the next crossroad, which was a leftward-leaning T junction because the trail ran into Route 561 from the east and ended there. The NVA did not venture south into Pitts's ambush.

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Clay Pigeons



The doctrine of the Marine Corps is that the only way to survive an ambush is to counterattack instantly, to close with the ambushers and overwhelm them. Cpl Leon E. Bell, radioman for the 3d Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, tried to orchestrate precisely such a response in the absence of Staff Sergeant Reyes, their platoon commander and first casualty. Up against what appeared to be a few NVA with SKS carbines in a trench, Bell had two of his squads lay down a base of fire while his third squad maneuvered off Route 561 to assault the snipers from the flank. His young voice cool and authoritative—he was just *super people*, thought Staff Sergeant Burns, who was monitoring the radio—Corporal Bell guided his squad leaders by radio. “Okay, baby, you gotta get up, you gotta go, you gotta get a base of fire down.”

With M79 grenadiers lobbing rounds toward the enemy trench from the road, the assault squad made its move

with Corporal Bell constantly pushing over the radio, "Keep your base of fire up . . . keep going, keep going. . . . Pin 'em down, pin 'em down. You gotta go. . . ."

They assaulted right into a *platoon's* worth of AK47 fire. Stunned, the assault squad leader radioed back that he was pinned down, but it was too late and Bell responded forcefully, "Well, it's times like this you get off your dead ass and go. You got no choice."

There was no place to go. The number of AK-firing NVA multiplied again—they just seemed to materialize inside spiderholes and bunkers in the elephant grass and hedgerows—and the entire 3d Platoon was soon engulfed. The NVA were utilizing those pre-dug ambush positions that invisibly dotted the Con Thien countryside. And as experience had taught them, they had held the bulk of their fire until their foe were within a few dozen meters, so that the soon-to-be-pinned-down Marines could not employ air or arty support without endangering themselves. From their concealed positions, the NVA trained their AK47s down prepared fields of fire, squeezing point-blank bursts into confused Marines seeking cover and brave Marines desperately rising up to find something to shoot back at. Noise and chaos and screams, and Corporal Bell no longer answered the radio.

Lance Corporal Herbert, the intelligent, articulate, and very able leader of the 2d Squad of Bravo Two, was right behind the monster erupting around Bravo Three. Herbert's platoon sergeant, Sgt William E. Hilliard, moved over to Herbert at this time with their 81mm mortar forward observer and radioman. Hilliard, a recently promoted but solid NCO, asked Herbert if he knew what was going on. No, Herbert said; his radio, which had been giving him trouble all morning—it would receive, but not transmit—had finally just shut down completely. They could hear 3d Platoon's war on the left flank but had no idea what was happening.

At the time, Lance Corporal Herbert had his point squad deployed on the right flank of 2d Platoon, facing Hill

70 to the southeast, with his six men in widely spaced positions along with a two-man machine-gun team. Because they were short of men, Herbert and his radioman had also assumed a position on the thin line. There was an explosion then on Hill 70, and Herbert saw that 1st Platoon, marching up the trail to reinforce them, was lobbing in rounds from their rearward position.

They were indeed. Fifteen minutes after Captain Coates, Bravo Six, had instructed Bravo One's Staff Sergeant Burns to send a squad and a machine-gun team to reinforce the contact, Lieutenant Delaney, Bravo Five, ordered the other two squads forward. They left the company's packs and the supplies just taken off the helicopters, picked up machine-gun ammunition (about a hundred rounds per man), and were moving up Route 561 when the point squad leader, Corporal McGrath, called to Staff Sergeant Burns that they had movement on their right flank on Hill 70. Burns told McGrath to take them under fire, so the corporal had a LAW put into action. Its 66mm rocket roared to an impact in the elephant grass of Hill 70.

The result was a chain reaction of firing. Lance Corporal Herbert, for one, kept his eyes open after the explosion on Hill 70, and then, he too saw the figures moving on the high ground. There were five of them, and although it was too far to see faces, Herbert held his fire because they looked unusually tall and were wearing (it appeared) helmets with branches or something sticking from them. They could have been Marines. But 1st Platoon was continuing to fire on them, so Herbert joined in with his M16 sighted on those five coming down through the elephant grass.

All five fell as he opened up. He couldn't tell if he'd hit them or if they'd ducked. Then two of them jumped back up, and he shot again and they fell again. Herbert waited; then he saw two more figures rushing down the grassy slope. He shot at them, and they, too, all went down.

At least temporarily. Some of the NVA bobbing over Hill 70 (using the same hand-and-arm signals and fire-and-maneuver tactics as the Marines) were wearing Marine flak

jackets and helmets,¹ which was designed to cause great confusion, especially if they closed with the Marines. Sergeant Huff had his two 60mm mortars on the trail behind 2d Platoon and Staff Sergeant Burns, coming up from behind, called for a fire mission on Hill 70. Sergeant Huff already had one tube pumping rounds at the trench line that 3d Platoon had been assaulting before commo was lost with them, so he had his other gun crew fire on the hill, which was actually out of sight to them because of the thick brush along the road. They put four rounds down the tube, but because of another frazzled radio, their radioman had to run up the trail to see if the riflemen were satisfied with their aim. He ran back to report that they were, so the mortar crew placed twenty more rounds on Hill 70.

The NVA kept coming amid the explosions in fireteam-sized rushes, and Lieutenant King, Bravo Two, decided to tighten up their perimeter along the road. Getting a hold of Sergeant Hilliard through the 81mm FO's radioman, he told him to pull Lance Corporal Herbert's point squad back with him.

"Let's go!" Hilliard turned, shouted, and started back.

Herbert yelled to his Marines, and they started running to the rear in a loose file, Herbert up with Hilliard and their corpsman. They made some thirty meters; then suddenly, Hilliard jumped toward a hole just as a Chicom grenade landed beside him. BOOM! Herbert was sent sprawling. Then he instantly crawled into a small hole that his radioman had already found. The corpsman ran to the hole too, bleeding from a small shrapnel wound to the head and shouting that Sergeant Hilliard had been killed instantly by the grenade. KIA. Automatic weapons began scything the grass from all directions. The NVA were already upon them, and as the squad returned fire, Herbert passed the word up and down the line to see if anyone was in contact with the other squads. No one was. Herbert's radio was

1. Or at least, noted an after-action report, headgear "made of strips of bamboo, paper, plastic and camouflage type material . . . obviously designed to look like the USMC helmet."

already kaput, and the 81mm FO's radioman had taken a big chunk of shrapnel in his. So they had no more comms with anyone. Herbert reckoned his position to be about twenty meters east of the road, but he didn't know if his platoon was dead, still in position, or if they'd pulled back and left them. He did not know how many NVA were in the area. He did not know anything.

There was another AK47 burst and, instantly, an inhuman scream, followed by shouts to Herbert that one of their guys was hit. Herbert sent his superficially wounded corpsman in that direction, but he was shot in the legs as he ran and sent sprawling.

The next shot was to his head. KIA.

There was a shout to Herbert that it was the point man Lopinto who had screamed. That was Herbert's best friend, and he shouted back to ask how bad he was hit. The return shout was that he was dead. KIA. Everyone was basically facing forward, except for a few who had turned around to return the fire coming from their rear. Herbert called again for the men on the right and left flanks to see if they could make contact with any other friendlies. Again, they could not, so the 81mm FO told his radioman to take off his useless radio, crawl back, and reestablish contact with the platoon. The man came running back very shortly, saying that no one was behind them but NVA. *Here we are*, Herbert thought. *NVA to our front, NVA to our rear, and the NVA we can't see who are all around us.*

Lance Corporal Herbert passed the word for the squad to pull back into a tighter perimeter so they could at least all see each other. He didn't need any NVA getting in the brush between his squad's two-man positions. He then told his radioman, who had unshouldered his twenty-five pounds of malfunctioning junk, to take the radio with him and pull back to the left as he, Herbert, went to the right around a tree in their path. The radioman got up and started crawling on all fours, dragging the radio behind him, while Herbert went on a belly crawl—and there was an AK47 crack and the radioman collapsed, killed instantly

by a square shot to the neck. KIA. *Slowly but surely*, Herbert realized, *they're pickin' us off*.

At the same time that Lieutenant King had directed Lance Corporal Herbert's point squad to fall back toward his roadside CP (at the leftward leaning T junction), he had also called forward Corporal Haines's squad, which was on rear security. From there, King wanted them to move forward into the fray developing around Herbert's squad, and leading the way, Haines sprinted some thirty meters up Route 561. Haines then knelt along one side of the road and waved his squad on by ones and twos to a bomb crater across the trail from him. The first two Marines made it to the crater, then crossed on to a deep ditch on Haines's side of the road. Haines motioned the third man, Reed, to come on, and for a fat man Reed moved out, canteens flapping at his hips, his run speeded along by the AK fire now beginning to crack at them.

Under fire, Reed made it to the crater, then over to the ditch, followed in turn by Harshman. The fifth man, Hendry, jumped to his feet and began the road run in a crouch, pausing for an instant (near the command group) when he passed Corporal Garza who had his M60 pointing north from the left side of the road. Hendry dropped his hundred-round belt of machine-gun ammunition there with a (forced) cool, "Here's a present for ya, T.J."

Garza just nodded, his face as uptight as Hendry's must also have been. Hendry completed his up-the-trail sprint with a leap toward the crater. He landed on the steep side of it, hit loose dirt, and rolled to the bottom, then clambered back up and tailed Harshman to the ditch across the road. One at a time like this, Haines got his squad in the ditch as NVA fire continued to snap by, mostly from a tree line across a fairly barren field to their left at about the eleven o'clock position. When the fire slackened a bit, Captain Coates (who was walking up and down Route 561 and occasionally firing his .45 into the brush) shouted at Haines to get his 2d Platoon squad on line with the first squad that had come up from 1st Platoon. To-

gether, they were to assault the enemy-held tree line at eleven o'clock. Haines slid over to Hendry to tell him he would be point for the squad—Hendry's guts knotted even tighter—and that he should first go for a dead tree thirty meters ahead. The rest of the squad assault line would follow.

Hendry, tensed, waiting, hoped that air support would precede their assault. It didn't. Nor was artillery being directed onto the enemy.

Captain Coates hollered at Haines to get his people moving, and Hendry ran to the dead tree in a terrified zigzag, then hit the deck the instant he reached it. To his left, he could see the 1st Platoon squad. They were pinned down. To his rear, he could see Reed cautiously crawling toward him, followed by the rest of the squad who all made it to the dead tree without casualty. The NVA had not spotted them as they poured their fire into the other squad.

When Haines got close enough to Hendry to be heard, he shouted at him to run the twenty-five meters more to a hedgerow across their front. Terrified again, Hendry was up and moving again, but this time the NVA saw him. And as he bellied down, rounds kicked up dirt all around, sending him head first over the lip of a nearby bomb crater. He exposed only enough of his head then to watch the flank while—somehow—the rest of the squad wormed their way through the fire and crawled into the safe haven of the crater. Their job, however, was not to hunker down but to assault, and Haines now told Hendry to crawl through the short elephant grass to tie in with the squad from 1st Platoon. This Hendry did, going prone beside a Marine from the other squad at about the time Captain Coates could be heard bellowing from the road, "FIRE FOR SUPERIORITY!"

The 1st Platoon Marine beside Hendry opened fire. But an NVA machine gun quickly returned the fire, and he caught a round in the jaw. An RPG flashed in, the explosion hitting several more in that squad, and any man who exposed his position in the brush by firing, instantly had that NVA machine gun blasting at him. The NVA were dug

in and could see everything. The Marines did not have a single target to square their sights on. Nothing in the NVA tree line could be seen moving. *Fire for superiority?* Hendry thought with anger and horror, *What in the hell is this! We need some shit here, man! We don't need to be flingin' rocks. We need stuff. Napalm, five-hundred-pound bombs. Then maybe we'd have something going on.*²

The Marines' fire petered out. A sergeant yelled back that the NVA fire was too heavy to advance any further, and Captain Coates gave the word to pull back. Too late. The two squads were pinned down.

Now the NVA tried to surround them. Hendry had eased back to where Haines was, to find out what he should do, when Hatison started yelling about NVA going around their right flank. Hendry looked up and there the little bastards were, streaking through the brush and on across the road to take up positions about a hundred meters north of their pinned-down situation.

They could hear Corporal Garza, back at the cross-road with Lieutenant King, placing M60 fire on the suddenly exposed NVA, but it was not enough. There were too many NVA, and they kept coming. With NVA now on both sides of the road and nothing but open field between them and the rest of the company on the road, Hendry, Hatison, and Harshman jumped into another crater. They opened fire on the NVA still dashing across the road. They fired on the NVA in the brush on their flanks too, but with elephant grass secured to their pith helmets and bush hats as well as on their packs and web gear, and around their arms and legs, the NVA were almost impossible to see.

Finally, Hendry made out three of them running into a particular patch of brush to the east, on the opposite side

2. Col John P. Lanigan (CO, 3d Marines, January–May 1967) commented during his post-command debrief, “We need additional supporting arms training for NCOs and our officers. We need to get them so familiar and used to calling supporting arms and using it that it just becomes automatic to them. If there's one weakness that we had over there, it was . . . a time lag between the time they got into contact and the time they were able to call in fire.”

of Route 561. It was about a hundred-meter shot, but M79-man Harshman dropped his first round directly into the brush. After the explosion, one shrapnel-peppered NVA hobbled out of the brush. Hatison shot him—and then, of course, an NVA's shot hit the crater edge beside Hatison's head. The assholes were everywhere.

After having his platoon sergeant, radioman, corpsman, and point man all killed in the first moments of the attack on 2d Platoon, Lance Corporal Herbert scrambled into a small bomb crater where three other Marines had also sought shelter. He had no idea what was going on except that two of his men, a grenadier and a fireteam leader, were off away from the crater and were yelling to him, "Can we come over, can we come over!"

Herbert responded in the negative. He knew there was an NVA near them because the last shot that had killed his radioman had apparently come from a dugout near the crater. They had to knock that NVA out before those two Marines could make it over, but the M79 man didn't understand this and, despite Herbert's shout, he got to all fours to make his move.

The NVA shot him in the face.

Herbert heard the shot but had no idea his grenadier had been hit until the man came scrambling into the crater on all fours, screaming, "*I'm hit, I'm hit!*"—and, just then, the NVA fired again, shooting the man in the side as he tumbled into the crater. Herbert thought the guy was dead, and the guy thought he was dead too. But upon examination it turned out that the last shot had deflected off his flak jacket, and although the face shot had gone through his cheek and shattered half his teeth, it had exited through his open mouth. The M79 man was in a lot of pain but could still function, and Herbert turned his attention to the fireteam leader who was still stuck out there and hollering to see if it was okay for him to come over.

"No! Wait!"

Herbert pulled the pin on a grenade, shouted at the team leader to come running as soon as the grenade went

off, then threw it toward the dugout where he thought the NVA was. The team leader made it to the crater safely, but an NVA behind some bushes heaved a Chicom grenade at them. It landed near the crater and they ducked down, sweating until they realized it was a dud. One of the Marines threw a grenade back. It too was a dud, but his second grenade roared. No more Chicoms. No more anything, actually, except an occasional AK47 burst. Herbert concluded that the NVA must have considered his craterful of survivors too meaningless to do more than keep pinned, as their main body pressed the attack on the rest of the platoon.

There were NVA climbing up in the trees to fire down on the pinned-down squad from 1st Platoon and the pinned-down squad from 2d Platoon, and PFC Henderson of the 1st was among those firing back at them. This was insane. A fury of M16, M60, and M79 fire would shatter tree branches and vegetation, and if they were lucky, a body might crash heavily back to earth—but more NVA kept coming, and one by one, Marines were being picked off. Then the NVA began mortaring them, and Henderson, squeezing flat, suddenly felt something heavy hit him and his radio was blown off his back, landing as twisted scrap to one side. Henderson hadn't gotten a scratch. Insane. He saw the brush move then, and he started laying down M16 fire until, almost immediately, he was shot in the back, the round punching through his flak jacket and into his shoulder and the blood instantly gushing from a severed artery.

Henderson rolled away to where he thought he was unseen on a little footpath, but he was just starting to put a bandage on the bullet hole when he was shot again. The bullet hit him high up on his leg like a paralyzing sledgehammer. *They got me spotted so I best be still.* Now the bushes were moving, and NVA were suddenly becoming visible. It was too much to take. Marines began running back toward the road, running for their lives, and Henderson, a bloody mess, was ignored. It was the final disillusionment, and he thought bitterly that all the indoctrination in

boot camp about Marines never leaving their wounded, never leaving their dead, was a bunch of *shit*. *Everybody's running!* All were running except one man, PFC Maurice K. Mock, from Henderson's squad, who saw Henderson and exclaimed, "*Oh my God!*" Mock knelt quickly beside Henderson and used his K-Bar knife to cut away Henderson's trouser leg so he could bandage the wound. But Mock never got the chance to stop the bleeding and heft Henderson onto his shoulders. Mock was shot in the back of his head, the exit of the round grotesquely blowing his face away and dropping his body atop Henderson. KIA.

Up ahead, in the eye of Bravo Two's storm, Corporal Haines got the attention of Hendry, Hatison, and Harshman. They crawled from their crater with rounds snapping all around them; then, they jumped up to follow Haines. They ran top speed to their left toward the Bravo One squad, but with AK47 bursts continuing to crack and ricochet all around them in the open, Hendry and Haines dived into the dirt behind a log. Hendry, looking around, could no longer see several of the men from his squad, including some who just moments before had started this run behind Haines.

Cpl Delma L. Reed was KIA.

L Cpl Cesar E. Carvallo was KIA.

L Cpl Stephen W. Harshman was KIA.

L Cpl Jeffrey S. Hatison was KIA.

Hendry had no idea. All he knew was that the NVA fire was increasing until he and Haines had no choice but to get up and start running again. Demers and a grunt from 1st Platoon joined them as they sprinted south past several dead Marines and several wounded Marines too. They did not stop for them. *Two men helping one wounded make three dead*, Hendry thought. They made it to a cement well and knelt beside it, only to have more rounds ricochet off it in showers of concrete, and again they were up and running, this time into a nearby north-south gully with large stalks of bamboo along the sides.

The 1st Platoon Marine was in the lead, followed by

Demers, and then Hendry. Thirty feet to their front, a bush suddenly leaped to its feet—it was another camouflaged enemy soldier—and emptied his AK47's thirty-round banana clip into them. The lead Marine was shot in the head—KIA—and Demers in the arm, as Hendry dropped and came back up with a grenade from his grenade pouch ready in his hand. The NVA had disappeared. Hendry tossed the grenade over a small knoll, hoping their ambusher had sought shelter there. Then he tied a dressing around Demers's arm as Haines came forward with eight or nine other survivors from the two mixed-up squads.

The rest of the company was to the east, somewhere on the other side of a fifteen-foot-high embankment. They all started scrambling up it. Hendry and two other Marines crested it first—and were horrified to see eighty meters of naked, coverless earth between their embankment and Route 561. Immediately after popping up, the Marine on Hendry's right was hit from behind, and he arched his back and flipped over onto it, screaming the whole time, "*Oh my God, no, no, oh my God!*"

Hendry ducked back down. Two Marines crawled past him, trying to make their break to the right, but another invisible NVA opened fire from the bamboo twenty meters away. KIA. KIA. The NVA had anticipated the direction of their retreat. Hendry looked back at a man getting up on his hands and knees to make a run for it. He was hit in the jaw and arm, then in the side. KIA. Corporal Haines called to Hendry to get back up the embankment.

"Get fucked! I'll go if you go!"

Barking back that if they lived he intended to have Hendry court-martialed, Haines did indeed make his own move, and Hendry jumped up to follow him straight across that eighty meters of open field. Rounds hit all around them. They crawled. Hendry felt terrible. He could hear wounded buddies screaming in pain, screaming for help from the other side of the embankment. He knew the NVA would kill them. He kept crawling until halfway across Haines stopped to catch his breath. Lying flat behind him, Hendry looked around from under his helmet brim and

noticed a dirt clod a foot or two to the front-right of his head. Another shot, the dirt clod disintegrated, and Hendry was spurred on, pushing himself forward while staying as flat as possible, cheek to the ground, every muscle straining to move. A round grazed his arm, leaving a streak of red, but he hardly felt it. It only drove him faster. Haines and Hendry were crawling, but a machine gunner suddenly flashed past them, running at an astonishing speed and jumping over the berm and down to safety on the road despite a hail of fire.

When Haines got to within ten feet of Route 561, he leaped to his feet and ran, making it, even as Hendry behind him kept crawling with bullets smacking into the dirt so close his ears were ringing. Finally, he too shot to his feet and jumped over the berm with enemy fire roaring past. He'd made it. Back down on the sunken road, Hendry passed Garza and his still-blazing M60 and scooted across the road to Lieutenant King. He was feeling good; he knew they were out of it now. He gave the lieutenant a little wave and asked where Haines had gone. King started to answer—and the instantly numbing, sledgehammer impact of a bullet caught Hendry full in the hip, knocking him down. He rolled off the exposed road into a shallow ditch on the northern edge of the east-to-west trail running into Route 561. He was feeling no pain (despite the through-and-through bullet wound) and was plenty happy. He joked to the Marines in the ditch with him, Hughes and Pigott, that he'd just gotten his second Forty-Eight-Hour Heart. He was going home. He'd made it through hell to get back to the lieutenant, and there was no way a medevac wouldn't be forthcoming. He was going to see his family again. Pigott hollered for a doc, but as the corpsman started for their ditch, he was shot in the back. KIA. The NVA were pressing their attack onto Route 561. Nowhere was safe.

PFC Weldon of Bravo Two, having lost contact with everyone in his squad (and unaware that his superb squad leader, Sergeant Clopton, was a KIA), was zigzagging

south through the brush west of Route 561. In something of a panic, hoping to find somebody else in olive drab, Weldon passed a twelve-foot-high pile of concrete junk, the remains of a demolished hootch. The rubble sprawled on into a nice, deep L-shaped trench occupied by two Marines. Weldon thankfully piled in with them: "What's goin' on? Where are you guys from?"

"We're from First Platoon."

No other Marines were visible to Weldon, but almost immediately, he spotted an NVA some fifty meters to their rear. The pith-helmeted, camouflaged NVA was moving in a bush-to-bush crouch, west to east, toward Route 561.

Weldon and his two new buddies opened fire, and the surprised NVA pivoted, firing back. And then he spun, hit, and fell out of sight. Another NVA appeared, rushing into the brush where his comrade had fallen, but he was forced to jump out of sight as the three M16s were turned on him. More NVA appeared, including some to the left of the rubble pile, whose virtually point-blank AK47 fire sent dirt kicking up along the edge of the trench as the Marines bobbed up to return fire. Weldon kept his M16 blasting rearward, while the other two concentrated on the NVA rushing into positions beyond the rubble pile to their front. An M16 jammed and, angry and panicked, the Marine screamed to see if either of the other two had a ramrod. Weldon did, and slipping it from its compartment in his rifle's stock, he handed it over to the defenseless Marine.

Weldon reshouldered his M16. He was firing again and the Marine on his left was in the process of clearing his weapon when—*clack-clack-clack-clack*—there was one big burst from the rubble pile, an AK47, and Weldon's feet flipped out from under him, and he was suddenly face to the sky. Half of his left biceps was gone (he was left-handed). But he was in shock, stunned; the pain wasn't registering yet. His feet were propped upon some rubble in the trench, higher than his head—an odd, uneven position—and he knew that the NVA would be rushing the trench. He knew he had to respond. His M16 had landed on some of the shattered concrete in the trench near his right hand,

and his fingers wrapped around the pistol grip as he realized there was an NVA standing atop the rubble pile, looking down on them with his AK47. He saw the man's pith helmet and fatigues—everything was happening in the eternity of a few seconds—and he saw that the NVA was laughing and shouting excitedly in Vietnamese. The NVA was not looking directly at his victims; and in a flash, Weldon, still on his back, lifted the M16 up one-handed, swung it in the right direction, and firing with the wrong hand, squeezed a burst into the NVA's head and chest. The man tumbled out of sight over the back end of the rubble pile.

Weldon realized then that the two Marines with him in the trench were not moving. He reached over to one—KIA—then the other—also KIA—both of them shot across their chests. He crawled from the trench and up the rubble pile to make sure no more NVA were there. He saw the dead one on the other side. Suddenly and utterly alone, he decided to head south again. Crawling through the brush and running across the open areas, Weldon could hear tons of firing, here, there, and everywhere, but he didn't know if any of it was meant specifically for him. And he was too sun beat and blood splattered to really care—up until the next dash across an open area when he felt a sudden sharp pain across his ass cheeks that hurled him off his feet. He landed facedown in the dirt, and wildly relieved to see his helmet and M16 lying right in front of him, within arm's reach, he scooped them back up and scrambled to his feet. He charged on into the bushes with a new wound, a bullet-torn crease across his butt.

Lieutenant Delaney's attempts to make sense of the cacophony to the north and west of his bamboo thicket were interrupted by a sniper shot thumping into one of his radiomen, the one on the other side of the road. KIA. The radio aerials that brought in the fire support were a favorite NVA target, and it seemed to Delaney that every Marine with a radio basically had a bull's-eye strapped to his back. He eventually lost all radio contact with Bravo Two and Bravo Three, had only intermittent contact with

Bravo Six, and as he told the 3d Marine Division Historical Section five days later, "Different people were on the phone at different times, it sounded like they were wounded, and each time they came on they didn't know what the situation was, all they could say is, 'Somebody get down here and help me. They're all around. They're running through us, throwing grenades.' "

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La Foto es de 1966, y no forma parte del libro