

April 24, 2000

To the Marines of Alpha 1/9,

I regret not being physically with you today, although I'm with you in mind, and spirit. With the doc's hospitality and all the good memories and friendship a flow, you must be having the best of times. I'm hoping to see you all in the July -Atlantic City 1/9 reunion where Alpha Co. will have some meeting time dedicated to us.

When I first arrived as your CO in March '67 there wasn't much trust, confidence, and love lost between us. You had just finished combating the NVA in Phu An (first time), and I relieved Capt. Festa who was injured by concussion from a mortar round. I believed many of you looked at me as an arrogant, aggressive, upstart CO who was going to get everyone killed. Initially, the name you entitled me with "Captain Contact" was given and received with contempt. I was shocked with the state in which I found Alfa Co. We had very few officers and staff NCOs (this shortfall of senior leadership got worse with future combat and time). I saw a general state of resistance/stubbornness to change, exhaustion, and a laxness (sloppiness in tactics and activities) that really scared me, because I didn't understand it, and realized it could result in unnecessary KIAs. I began with the intention of aggressively patrolling to locate the NVA, make "Contact", and then back off and kick the shit out of them with artillery and other supporting arms. This didn't always work out. Some of our marines responded with "we don't want to find them and make contact because that always results in friendly KIA & WIA- With time and combat, plus advice and observations from my trusted and appreciated confidant Cpl. R. G. Powers I began to understand where you were coming from, and I gained respect for who you were and what you were doing. Soon I didn't really want to make contact either, and I wanted to keep everyone alive while accomplishing our mission. I believed the best defense was a tough- aggressive offense, so I was very demanding, pushing you hard, doing things such as constantly relocating our patrol bases (especially after a helo visit) so the NVA couldn't find us at night. I knew you needed an R&R break, ideally out of country as a unit, because the constant combat and individual replacement without unit training was taking its toll. Occasionally, defensive perimeter duty at places like Camp Carroll/ConTien/Cua Viet etc. provided a little relief but we still had to provide offensive activities. I looked forward to a return to our rear at Dong Ha for showers, to remove the stink, get a change of uniform, beer and soda, general replenishment, and a nights sleep without being on the alert for an NVA contact. I quickly saw the dangers in Dong Ha in that an overstay diminished our physical fitness combat effectiveness, and our marines were too quickly contaminated by the ways of the rear echelon scum bags, (their attitudes, racial/drug problems, etc.). These rear echelon supporters (ratio of about ten of them to each combat marine in Nam) reaped all the benefits (including too many commendations) with no real threat, and they never really knew what combat was all about. The scary thing that I began to realize was that we as a combat unit were becoming a self reliant- inter dependent entity of its own and the crap that was going on around us (in the rear and back in the U.S.) made it look like our outside world was coming apart.

Our many activities South of the DMZ, to include aggressive patrolling, engagements,

building the trace, defending static positions, emergency reactions, etc., met our overall mission as a screening force to locate/intercept and engage NVA units trying to move South across the DMZ. The big problem was the NVA were as tough, well trained, dedicated and formidable enemy as was imaginable, and we usually engaged them when they were well dug in, in Bn. and larger size. They had firepower, equipment & supporting arms that were as good as ours.

In April '67 we led 1/9 to the Street Without Joy during a night approach. The 2nd night we hiked through a mine field to reach, save, and recover the dead and wounded of Charlie Co. after they were decimated by a VC/NVA force. It's probable that without our involvement C Co would have been totally wiped out (100 % KIA), because the NVA were shooting C Co WIA in the head during our approach, and they left on our arrival.

I don't think any of us will ever forget our combat with the heavily armed, well entrenched and camouflaged large NVA force just outside of Phu An in May'67 where we lost too many KIA/WIA. After Alpha Co. backed off, the remainder of 1/9 went in and found the few remaining alive NVA had pulled out, leaving behind a large number of weapons and KIA that they couldn't carry. The 1/9 CO, Maj. Fullham congratulated A Co for a job well done for kicking NVA butts and forcing them out. This is especially noteworthy considering the Murphy Principal was at its best. Everything that could possibly go wrong went wrong. 1/9 told us to cease fire while we receiving casualties because they thought we were firing on friendlies (we never stopped firing), they wouldn't authorize artillery/supporting arms because they thought we were too close to friendlies, a tank backed over our casualties who were using it for cover-because of comm difficulties, etc.

On 2 July,'67 we turned and fought our way into the face of an entrenched NVA Reg. or Div., dragging our wounded with us, to save B Co. who was being decimated. Again we suffered heavy casualties. The senior B Co. survivor, GySgt Lee Bums, later stated that on our arrival the NVA shifted their entire offense from B Co onto A Co, thus allowing the few remaining Bravo survivors to make it out alive.

On 6 July, our understrengthened and physically/mentally exhausted Co. was reinforced with C. Co. and some engineers, and tasked with taking a recon unit North of friendly lines and South of the DMZ (Indian country) to find out where the NVA were coming across. After establishing a good defensive perimeter at the Market Place, a NVA Reg., or Div. moving South marched into us. They surrounded us, probed and assembled for attack only to be stopped by a strong perimeter defense and PFC. Sanky, our Arapaho brother, who fired over 3000 artillery rds. walking them to within 50 m of our lines. We inflicted heavy casualties on them, while suffering very few casualties of our own, and we alerted friendlies to the south. Ultimately, they lost their element of surprise, they broke off a major attack and returned to North Vietnam. Among other things, their strength, size and sophistication was shown in very accurate & heavy artillery fire, and the firing of a SAM (surface to air missile) that went right over our position at a low altitude and shot down an aircraft that was in our support.

I've asked myself how we were able to do so well and why didn't we suffer the almost complete annihilation (to the point they ceased to be an effective fighting force) that sister companies did. Furthermore, we never backed down from a fight no matter how heavy the casualties, and we always accomplished our mission forcing the NVA to break contact first. Our scenarios were always the most difficult, we were more often engaged than others, our turnover due to heavy casualties was always high, they took away our trustworthy M-14s and replaced them with rifles we couldn't trust to fire. We always received the shity left overs (the butt end of the supply line) what was left after everyone in the rear picked over it, and we were fighting a much larger- tougher enemy then most units in Nam ever saw. You worked longer and harder without a break than even our WWII counterparts who had long periods of R&R, replenishment, restaffing and training after a Pacific island was taken. The elements (heat, humidity, terrain etc.) were tough, and I always pushed you very hard, demanding your all. Could it be that we were just lucky? I think not! the answer lies in you, the individual marines and corpsman of A Co.

You repeatedly put your lives, hearts and souls into the job, You took the hell, death, and atrocities in stride, tucking them away, never looking back, and reaching for/plowing forward with new energy to HI enemy, accomplish the mission and die or survive in the process as marines before us have always done. You continually looked death in the face, living on the edge with adrenaline highs, deep lows, frustration exhaustion, and the extreme emotions of fear, hate, rage, disgust and even traces of joy. You never gave up. You did the impossible. No one else could have done better. You are responsible for our survival and success. I knew that if I had given the order to fix bayonets, and even fire an artillery concentration on our own position, as I had planned on 6 July in anticipation of being overrun, there is no doubt that if necessary each of us would have fought to the death. In appearance we were a scraggily, dirty, smelly, and an uncouth bunch of marines, but A Co. was a mean, tough, tight and most effective fighting force.

I'm honored for having been your CO in combat. Had we been a peacetime company, I probably would have been court- martialled with the rest of you. Each of you should be proud of yourselves for your accomplishments. You should have no regrets. I'm proud of you, I respect you, and I will be forever grateful for what you did. I now enjoy "Captain Contact" as an endeared and cherished combat title bestowed on me by my marines.

At R. G's and the Doc's insistence, I've enclosed photos of a mounted AK-47. This was captured at Phu An in May '67. I was at a hedgerow back of one of our tanks and our marines that were in a heavy firefight. I saw the muzzle blast of a lone, well concealed NVA's rifle as he sprayed our marines with fire. Some of our marines that were hit were pulled behind the tank for protection only to have the tank accidentally back over them. This is a horror that I'll never forget. I couldn't get anyone else to see this NVA asshole, so when I saw that he was temporarily distracted I climbed up and emptied my 45 in his face and chest. I then grabbed his AK-47 and got back ASAP. Don't ask me how I accidentally got it back to CONUS without getting arrested, that's a story in itself. The engraving on this plaque reads "In respect for and in memory of those gallant marines of A 1/9, March through June, 1967".

Again, I hope to see you all in Atlantic City. Lets try to have a good Alpha Co. show of force. I've also enclosed some reunion attendance info. All of the promotions and commendations the Marine Corps could have bestowed on me would be valueless compared to your friendship. Thank you for your generosity in accepting me as one of your own. Doc, whenever Alpha company marines are addressed, you are one of us, as close and special as any A Co. Marine could ever be. You can even say " fuck the Marine Corps" as much as you like, as you readily do. We would never accept that from someone other than our own.

Semper Fidelis

[signature]

Albert C. Slater
Alpha 6
"Captain Contact"