

The Real Story Of How The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines Earned the Nickname ("The Walking Dead")

by Randell Widner

There is a valley about 15 miles south of Da Nang, Republic of South Vietnam, which has ALWAYS been a strong hold of the Viet Min. Neither the Japanese nor the French could ever establish a garrison in that valley, many tried and died, but none could.

That was until some genius noticed the 1st Bn. 9th Marines were getting a little fat and sassy hanging around the airbase and Marble Mountain. And the "ladies" in Dog Patch, on the pipe-patrols got to know us by our first names. So they sent us to a little red hill in the middle of the valley, at the fork of the Song Nu Yi River. When we first arrived, there wasn't much there, but that didn't matter because unless you were in H&S Company you saw very little of it anyway.

Everything out side of our wire was undisputedly controlled by Victor Charlie ["VC", "Viet Cong", or "Charlie" as they were called], including the village at the bottom of the hill. Our mission was to Search and Destroy the enemy and all of his support. Charlie found out within weeks we were not the Japanese or the French and he couldn't hold his own in fighting us man for man. So he changed his tactics to harassing & sniper fire, mines & booby-traps, he would only take us on if he out numbered us 10 to 1, or he had a good escape route. Dodge City, Indian Country, Arizona Territory, Hand Grenade Alley are just a few of the names given to areas we fought the enemy. Marine Corps history of the Battalion states that we were in hundreds of company size operations in our first year in country.

At first 1/9 became infamous as the 'Zippo', battalion, because we had operational orders to burn and kill everything if a Vill was deserted when we entered. Villagers ran or hid when we swept through their Vill, so we burned most of them. Search and Destroy. Was HELL for everyone!

A lineman from 9th Engineers, running wire out to our hill was captured, tortured and mutilated. It seems from that day forward, all illusions of codes of conducts and humanity seemed to end. The sweeps to find Charlie became very vicious. And Charlie got better at making & placing his mines, which were horrific. Dozens of our men were cut in half, or were decapitated. It seemed like we lost a couple of our friends everyday. We were all insane with fear and hatred.

None of the events in our Valley escaped Hanoi. During a speech in early spring of 1966, Ho Chi Minh said the phrase "Di bo chet" (The Walking Dead) to describe the Marines in the Valley, He meant us, that we were already dead, just had not been buried yet. During the same event, General Vo Nguyen Giap promised President Ho and the Vietnamese people that he would liberate the valley as a birthday present for Ho.

It just happened that within weeks of the speech, on May 12th, Bravo Company stepped into a VC Boot camp. For 4 days we fought a VERY fierce series of battles that saw a lot of our brothers die, and it gutted the military options of General Giap. On Ho's birthday, the grunt companies Alpha, Bravo, Charlie & Delta re-enforced H&S Company and dug in around the hill for their attack, it was a non-event. Bravo, with the support of Alpha and Delta, had destroyed them at the village of Ho Thay. Hanoi Hanna had labeled us 'The Walking Dead', and played our song 'No-Where to Run, No-Where to Hide, which we were very proud of.

I remember Captain Hart's reaction when General Walt told him that Ho & Giap had promised to wipe us out. He said, "Lew, does this mean they'll be coming to us? And we won't have to keep looking for them little bastards?"

Now I was hit and never made it to Deckhouse V, Camp Carol, Con Thien, Khe Sanh or any of those other places. I spent most of my tour in Vietnam in the Valley, doing sweeps off a little red hill, HILL 55. But from everything I've been told, the guys that came after us didn't have to look far to find Charlie. You can thank a patrol of 14 Marines from Bravo Company that on May 12th 1966 paid a very high price for 1st Battalion 9th Marines to be proudly known as the "Di bo Chet", "The Walking Dead". Semper Fi!

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