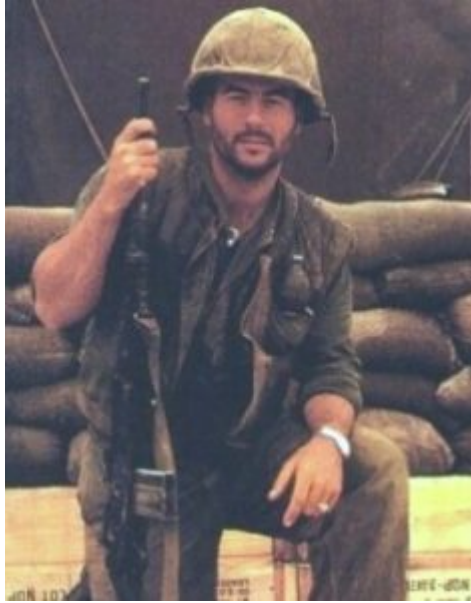


Timothy S. Lowry

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From *Valor* by Timothy S. Lowry

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Let's go back a few years before my initial assignment to Vietnam.

I was stationed in Okinawa with the 3rd Marine Division in '63 as the fire-support coordinator for the 9th Marine Infantry Regiment. As you recall, we mounted out on three or four different occasions that year to go to Vietnam to secure the hills around the Dan Nang airbase.

We never got there.

On one occasion I was in the Philippines, firing naval gunfire, and was called back in from the naval gunfire range to Subic. The ships were going to pick up my forward observers and naval gunfire spotters on the way to Vietnam. That never materialized.

I was aware of what was going on because I was in on the preparation. On two other occasions, we boarded aircraft, took off, and returned to secure Kadena Air Base on Okinawa. The missions changed from contingency movements to exercises when entry into Vietnam was called off.

I was stationed at Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor, when one of the officers at Marine Barracks, Barber's Point, a Captain Gardner said, "You know, it's kind of tough, having these young troops here in the Pacific guarding doors, classified information and buildings while there is a war going on."

After commenting about this situation to his fellow officers, Captain Gardner drafted a proposal, suggesting an alternative. He proposed sending company-grade officers and staff NCOs to combat in Vietnam for a two-month period, serve in their individual MOS (military specialty), and come back to the barracks in the Pacific to tell the troops what was going on over there. He felt that this would help motivate the troops by showing them that what they were doing in Hawaii was very important even though there was a conflict going on at the time in Southeast Asia.

The program was approved by General Victor Krulak, Commanding General Fleet Marine Force (Pacific), and Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor was assigned the first quota—an officer and a staff NCO. At that time there were, I believe, twenty-four officers in the barracks, and I was the only bachelor.

I had already augmented, indicating that I was planning to stick around the Marine Corps for a while. Consequently, I volunteered to go do what I had come into the Marine Corps to do. “If this is going to be my chosen way of life,” I reasoned, “then I’d better find out what it’s all about.” Of course, in addition to career considerations, there was a great deal of adventure, excitement, anticipation — launching off into the unknown. I went to my commanding officer and said, “You know, it’s going to be over the holiday season, Christmas and New Year’s, so I feel that I should be the one to volunteer. Why send a married man? He’ll get his opportunity in the months to come.” Boy, was that a ploy to get that assignment, but it worked.

My CO approved my request, and I and First Sergeant (John) Matson—a big man from security company—were the first to go to Vietnam on the program. I was assigned to Echo Battery, 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, the same battery that I commanded later during my ’68-’69 tour. The purpose of the program, in my particular instance, was to allow me the opportunity to serve as a forward observer, fire-direction officer, and XO, and then come back and relate my experiences to the troops. But it was more than that—Vietnam, I mean. There was another side that people back home didn’t hear about.

We were involved in the military side of the war, of course, but we also participated in the people-to-people aspect of the war. We did a lot of work with the people and the local orphanages, and we worked hard. These activities didn’t receive much press, but it was still something we all were proud of. After my (Medal of Honor) action, I also served with Lima Battery, Four-Twelve, for a couple of weeks to get a feel for the ’55s. There were major differences between the ’05s and the ’55s and it was vital to understand them with regard to the security aspects for movements, employment, and deployment of the towed, self-propelled guns.

When I got in-country, the first thing I noticed about Vietnam was the smell—latrines

burning at Da Nang; it was really something. We used fifty-five-gallon drums cut in half and they were burned off every day-a smell no Vietnam vet will ever forget. Another thing was that when I got there in December 1965, there had been a lot of rain and the red mud was knee-deep. This was before there were many roads in Da Nang, before the buildup.

When I arrived, I joined my unit south of Da Nang. We were located near the CP of 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines in a stationary position firing in support of Two-Nine when they went out on their daily patrols. I was assigned as the forward observer for Hotel Company and I joined them in their position on the battalion perimeter. We were on patrol on the Anderson Trail, where one of the first big ambushes took place-VC ambushed Marines-and we were recalled. If I remember, this happened on my second patrol with the unit.

We immediately terminated the patrol and were airlifted out to replace Fox Company from Two-Seven. They had been in a firefight and had several battlefield casualties, as well as a great number of immersion foot casualties. They had been participating in Operation Harvest Moon for several days. Hotel Company joined Two-Seven for the remainder of the operation.

Operation Harvest Moon

It was around noon on the 18th of December. The lead elements of the battalion march column had entered into Ky Phu and had proceeded through. H & S Company was just entering the village and we heard firing. Hotel Company was the real element, tail security. I was thirty or thirty-five yards behind Hotel company commander Captain Paul Gormley. His radioman was right behind him. We were coming around this little hill with rice paddies to the right and about two or three hundred meters between our lead element and the village of Ky Phu.

I still say the initial round that triggered the ambush on the rear element hit the company commander. I'm pretty sure it was a rocket, probably a B-40 rocket, and then all hell broke loose. It happened that quick. It was a matter of minutes. I had heard firing in the distance, up toward Ky Phu, and all of a sudden, we were right in the middle of it. The commander was walking along with the radio antenna sticking up and they picked it out. And, boy, they did it right; they took out the commander.

Of course, we all took cover and started returning fire. I remember the corpsman running by me-Wesley "Doc Wes" Berrard, a black corpsman from the Chicago area if I recall. He called back and said, "The company commander is seriously wounded." Then Doc Wes was shot. My scout sergeant ran forward to help the Doc and cover him with return fire. Then he was shot. At that point, I ran forward to the company commander and his radio operator. The young radio operator had been killed outright, and

Captain Gormley was mortally wounded. I picked him up, carried him back to safety, and he died in my arms.

I went back out and carried Doc Wes back. I returned to where Captain Gormley and the radio operator had been hit and took the radio off the dead operator, a PRC-25, and strapped it to myself. I called in artillery, but we were at the max range. Jerry Black was battery commander, and boy, he was giving it all he had! We also had Huey (helicopter) gunfire support. It wasn't a VC ambush; it was NVA.

I got close to some of the NVA and fired my .45 pistol a couple of times. I also had an M14 rifle and went through my ammunition rather rapidly, because you could see where the enemy fire was coming from across the rice paddy less than fifty meters away. As I used up my ammunition, I went from the firing mode into the listening, analyzing, and giving direction mode.

I got on the radio and told our battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Leon Utter, what had happened, the condition we were in, and that I had assumed command of the company. I don't think there was an XO, I don't remember, it's been so long, but I was not the senior guy. One of the platoon commanders had seniority and could have assumed command of the company, but I was there and I had things in motion.

I told Colonel Utter, "The platoon commanders have their hands full. I am aware of what is going on and I have assumed command." He told me, "Continue to march and make sure everyone knows you are the boss." I did. I think one of the things that were phenomenal about the battle is for the next three or four hours all company commanders, the battalion commander, and the helicopters were on the same radio frequency. By listening, you could tell what was going on.

When you figured that you were in a worse situation than the other guy, then you would butt in on the frequency.

I led a couple of counter-attacks against the enemy positions to our right flank and rear. There was incoming fire off to our right flank, and I went up on this little hill to get a better view. I could see where the fire was coming from and I pointed out targets for our Huey gunships to take under fire.

I knew that I would have better luck with the gunships than the artillery because the enemy was entrenched at the edge of the artillery's maximum range. In order for the artillery to bring fire to bear on them to get to the targets, the artillery would have had to fire directly over our heads; we were right on the gun-target line. At that range, the chance of error was significantly greater than closer in. The Hueys were there, so I used them.

I pointed out targets for the choppers and I remember firing an e.5 Willy Peter (white phosphorus) rocket as a marking round once. Hell, those Hueys were coming in right over our heads and I was standing up pointing at the damn targets and talking to the pilots.

I would give them a target heading, and when they could pick me out visually, pointing with my arm to the target, they would come in. By that time, though, they were getting shot at, too, so they could see where the fire was coming from. At the same time, I was directing one of my platoons in a successful counterattack against the NVA positions on our right flank.

We were getting pretty low on ammunition and we suffered a number of casualties. It was starting to get dark-it was also an overcast day if I recall-so we cleared an area of some trees to bring in the H-34 choppers to take out the wounded and dead.

The battalion commander said, "You've got to come out and join up with the remainder of the battalion, and you've got to come out by yourself." The rest of the battalion was having a hell of a battle in the village and could not come to our aid.

So I told everyone to lighten their load, to drop their packs in a pile, and any equipment that was not working, including radios and machineguns, and I had the engineers blow it up.

The Marines in the village set down a base of the fire and we commenced squad rushes across three hundred yards of open fire-swept ground. If someone fell, someone else picked him up, and we brought everybody out. It was really something to see. Teamwork at its best!

That was about four and a half hours of battle.

I did what I had been trained to do. I made decisions and people carried them out. That was the most amazing thing. Here I was a company commander, and most people didn't know who I was.

I was the officer who stepped forward and took command. Despite being relatively unknown, people did what I told them to do when I told them, and in the manner, I told them to do it. Some of them got hurt, some of them got killed, but they still carried out their orders. The result was a success.

When we rejoined the battalion, I met with the battalion commander and he assigned Hotel Company a sector of the perimeter to defend. I set my people out on the perimeter and sat down with the gunny to account for the dead and wounded and make arrangements for resupply.

They mortared us that night, pretty much throughout the night. The next morning, I remember crawling on my belly with General Jonas Platt, the task-force commander, and surveying the battlefield. Of course, they had removed most of the bodies by that time.

The rest of that day we maneuvered to Route 1. Two-Seven mounted up and went south to Chu Lai and we got on trucks and went north to Da Nang to rejoin Two-Nine.

When we started loading the trucks, we took small-arms fire from a nearby village. We had just come through one hell of a battle and these Marines were some pretty seasoned guys. After you come through what we had come through, you don't know what incoming rounds might turn into. We were grouped up to load the trucks and it was a dangerous time to get bunched up.

An Ontos (a small, tracked vehicle armed with six 106-mm recoilless rifles) had come down the road to meet us for road security, and I told the Ontos crew to turn around and fire on the hut from where we had received that incoming fire.

The Ontos fired, leveled the hut, and the fire ceased. Someone later criticized me for this, saying that I had over-reacted. Well, I had seen that one round could signal the start of a hell of a fight. Therefore, I made the decision to eliminate that hut as a threat. It was eliminated, and I stand by my decision.

Anyway, the Battle of Ky Phu and Harvest Moon was over, and they figured we overcame twelve-to-one odds. We got on the trucks and went north and stayed the night an FSLG (Force Service Logistics Group) between Da Nang and Chu Lai.

I was awakened by a colonel from Division HQ around midnight who took me to a tent and started asking questions about the battle. He said, "You're probably going to get a Sunday School Award out of this."

The next morning a new company commander came in and I turned Hotel Company over to him.

When I got back (to Da Nang) my feet were in pretty bad shape from immersion foot. I was taken over to the hospital and had the water blisters drained. Then I went over and got cleaned up-we hadn't showered or shaved for five or six days-and I went to bed.

I wasn't sent out on any more patrols and stayed in the battery area until I went over to Lima, Four-Twelve, to work with that battery.

One night the battery commander woke me up and said, "Boy, you've got to get up. General Walt (Commanding General, 3rd Marine Amphibious Force) wants to see

you.” That’s when he told me that General Walt had recommended me for the Medal of Honor.

I can remember waiting to see him and being scared. I thought, “I’m going to meet a three-star general.” I don’t think I had ever met a three-star general, much less the MAF commander.

He talked to me like a son, though. I realized very quickly that there was a lot of compassion, a lot of concern in the general. But I remember how those blue eyes of his penetrated right through me.

Later, when he came in to speak to the 9th Marines, I remember he jumped up on the hood of a jeep and commented on my action. I guess I was his teaching point. People treated me with a great deal of respect because they knew that I’d been recommended for the Medal of Honor. I recall that on Christmas I was able to attend Cardinal Spellman’s Mass.

I wanted to stay in Vietnam for a full tour but left in February at the termination of my temporary duty. When I returned to Marine barracks in Hawaii, two more officers and two more NCOs from Security Forces (Pacific) went on this program.

I was at Fort Sill in the summer of ’67 and went to the Marine Corps League Convention in St. Louis. General Walt was there and one of his aides told me the general was looking for another aide and asked if I was interested.

I said, “Well, I’ve got orders for the 2nd Division.”

From St. Louis I flew to New Orleans, where I got the Military Man of the Year Award and General Walt presented it. After he hung it around my neck he said, “I want to see you afterward.”

I went to see him and he said, “Do you want to be my aide?”

I said, “I’d be honored, but I’ve got orders for the 2nd Marine Division.”

He said, “Go home and you’ll receive orders when you get there to report to Headquarters Marine Corps.”

When I got home, I had orders assigning me as his administrative assistant. I was his aide for a year. At the time General Walt had said he didn’t think an aide should be an aide for more than a year.

When you complete an aide assignment and have done a good job, it’s pretty much understood that you will get the next assignment you want. So, after I completed my

assignment as his aide I said, "I want to go back to Vietnam."

There was a little pressure at the time about me not going back into combat. He felt the way I did; that Vietnam was the place to be-where Marines should be. Here I am wearing the Medal of Honor, and I hadn't even served a full tour of duty in Vietnam. General Walt was a man of his word.

Going back, there's a week refresher course at Camp Pendleton and, unbeknownst to me, General Walt had contacted General Ray Davis-Medal of Honor, Korea-who had the division, and they had a battery all set for me when I got there.

I got to Camp Pendleton and checked in at four o'clock one morning, and a young lance corporal said, "Sir, the next company-grade officer coming in is supposed to take C Company through staging battalion.

I said, "If these are your orders, I am ready to carry them out."

I stayed at staging battalion for a month and got to Vietnam six weeks later. All this time that battery assignment awaited me. When I finally showed up, General Davis said, "Where have you been?"

I'm glad I took that company through staging, though. Not only did I help prepare the young Marines for combat in Vietnam, but it also got me prepared physically and mentally. I took over the Echo Two-Twelve, my old unit.

We were fire basing all the time; we built or reoccupied over twenty firebases. I've got a diary at home with all the details. We saw a good deal of action. We went through the A Shau Valley with the Ninth Marines-[Operation Dewey Canyon](#). We were firing in support of Wes Fox's Alpha One-Nine during his Medal of Honor action.

I did, and my Marines did what we were sent there to do; followed orders and considering the restraints under which we were operating, I think we did damn well.

We carry on our shoulders a proud tradition that has been molded by hundreds of thousands who have gone before us, and I'll be damned if we are going to let them down. There have been several times when the odds were phenomenal and how did Marines come through it? Semper Fi.

Marines don't say that they can do the job; they do it.

That's why Americans believe in us. I swear to God.

That is one thing I always remembered; if I got shot, a Marine would never leave me on the battlefield. Marines got killed going to the aid of other Marines. That is

something we know and we are proud of it.

And lead! If you can't stand up and lead, then get the hell out of the way. Someone else will do it. Don't tell your people with your hands on your hips to run around the grinder. You be up front running and let them follow you.

Since I've been in Washington people come to visit and I take them to The Wall, and it affects me differently every time.

The first time I went to The Wall was during the Inauguration several years ago. Whew! That was a tough day, really tough. That visit shot the rest of the day. I couldn't go out. The gal I was with couldn't believe the effect it had on me.

First of all, I say this, the location of it overpowers the design-the Lincoln Memorial on one hand and the Washington Monument on the other. What a place of honor. There is not another war memorial in Washington with that prominence. I'm proud of it and what it represents.

In November a few years ago, I was there with my mom and dad, and I got a little misty-eyed. Sometimes, emotionally, I just go to pieces, privately.

A couple of weeks later I was there, and I walked away with a little bounce in my step.

I really felt good.

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