
THE

BRUTALITY
OF WAR

A MEMOIR OF VIETNAM

Gene R. Dark



PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRETNA 2009

In memory of Harmon J. Bove, Jr.

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ISBN 9781589807150



Printed in the United States of America
Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

Man is the only animal that deals in that atrocity of atrocities, War. He is the only one that gathers his brethren about him and goes forth in cold blood and calm pulse to exterminate his kind. He is the only animal that for sordid wages will march out...and help to slaughter strangers of his own species who have done him no harm and with whom he has no quarrel...And in the intervals between campaigns he washes the blood off his hands and works for "the universal brotherhood of man"—with his mouth.

—Mark Twain, “What Is Man?”



Acknowledgments

My gratitude goes out to all the marines I served with in Vietnam. I thank my drill instructors, who made me a man, and Dwight Anderson, my squad leader in Vietnam, for trusting and believing in me. Anderson was also instrumental in helping me remember certain events, names, and places that were clouded by the “fog of war.”

I thank Davis Brown, author of *Battlelines*, a book about Fox Company, Second Battalion, Fifth Marines. By writing the book, he unknowingly helped me sort out events that I participated in while serving in Vietnam but was unable to remember accurately.

This book is for all who have served this great country on the battlefield, and especially for Harmon J. Bove Jr., a friend, a man, and a great marine who died fighting for America.

To my friend Claude Duet, a friend and mentor who encouraged me throughout the writing of this book.

Thank you to my mother and father for loving me enough to teach me right from wrong. And thanks to my sisters, Allison, Eve, and Margaret for supporting me through the years when I needed it most.

With great love and gratitude I thank my wife Nettie, sons Brian and Beau, and my lovely daughter Jennifer who all continued to love me through the good times and bad.

Prologue

It is well that war is so terrible; or we should get too fond of it.

—Robert E. Lee

I was a marine. I was assigned to Fox Company, Second Battalion, Fifth Marines. Fox 2/5 was one of the most decorated marine companies that served in Vietnam. I still love the Marine Corps; everything it stands for is honorable, as were the marines that I served with. I wasn't special in any way. I was just a young kid. I wasn't brave, and I wasn't proud of some of the things I did. I was cast as a leader not by choice but by default. I was a grunt, an infantryman, a fire team leader, promoted to squad leader and then promoted to platoon sergeant. Then, for the last few months of my tour in Vietnam, I was promoted to NCOIC (non-commissioned officer in charge) of Fox Company Headquarters in An Hoa, Vietnam. I was meritoriously promoted three times, once when I graduated from boot camp and then twice while in Vietnam, where I was meritoriously combat-promoted. I went from being a private to a corporal in a little over thirteen months.

I never considered myself brave or worthy of praise for anything that I did. Others were much braver than I was. In my mind, I had failed so many times. Even if others weren't aware of it at the time, I often felt like a coward inside. After thirty-seven years removed from my war, I still remain in awe of the marines that I served with in Vietnam and the valor they displayed. The rain, mud, heat and disease of that third world country were horrendous. I

was hospitalized for immersion foot and malaria. I survived the notorious mosquitoes of Vietnam from July 1969 to July 1970. My poncho was my home—it kept me dry during the monsoon and shielded me from the relentless sun in the summer.

I saw death. I know and understand the terror of the firefight, with rifle rounds zinging past my head, filling the air. Once you have experienced an ambush you never forget it. I know what it's like to feel the heartache of losing a fellow marine. I've looked down the sights of a rifle barrel and stared into the eyes of the enemy, coldly pulling the trigger and killing him. I am still haunted by the image. Killing is not something to boast about.

Even though I never thought highly of my abilities, I guess others recognized my potential, since I scored 4.8 out of a possible 5.0 when judged by my superiors for conduct and proficiency. As the marines would say, "I was squared away." I received the Purple Heart, the National Defense Medal, the Navy Commendation Medal, the Combat Action Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal, the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry Medal, and a Sharpshooter Badge.

These are my memoirs of war. I have no agenda other than telling the truth about war. I hope you will feel the same emotions that lie deep within me and perhaps understand how war can so deeply impact the young marines that we ask to protect America, many of whom are mere children.

I love America. I volunteered to serve my country and specifically to serve as a marine. I wasn't drafted; I joined out of pride for America and what it stands for. I am a patriot. It matters not which war one fought; the emotions of battle are all the same.

Ask any marine who has walked point while leading a column of tough marines during a night movement, deep into the heart of the enemy's territory, and he will always remember that night. It's just that frightening of an experience. He moves slowly, sweating profusely as he waits to see the flash of the rifle muzzle aimed right between his eyes, and fears the horrifying, unmistakable cracking sound of AK-47s firing on automatic—KAK-KAK-KAK—whizzing by his head, slamming into the ground around him. Yes, he will remember that night forever.

Or he nervously awaits the blast from an explosive device under his foot, which will shatter his limbs, blowing him away, maiming and crippling as many other marines as possible. He is alone, out front, by himself, exposed, naked except for his flak jacket and helmet. He asks himself, "Who is faster or smarter tonight, me or the enemy?" Alone with his demons, fighting to maintain his sanity and not to be exposed as a coward, he moves forward—honor, duty, country—bravely he moves, creeping, one step after the other. He has been hurled into a situation for which no amount of training could have prepared him.

Is it any wonder that man is so affected by war? War is typically fought by naïve kids who get thrown into battle and are subjected to the most horrendous acts imaginable. Then we wonder why Johnny is a little different when he returns home. Why is he so quiet? Even if he is lucky enough not to be reminded of war by a missing limb that was blown off his body when he stepped on a mine, or a scar across his belly where shrapnel ripped him open, or a hole in his leg where a bullet found its mark that fateful day on the battlefield—even if he is that lucky—his mind remains warped with dreams. The stench,

taste, grit, and dread of war never leave his mind, and the years drift by while the memories remain.

The fog of war is real. I've tried to recall events that happened during war as accurately as possible, but sometimes I'm not sure if my memories are real or imaginary. I don't remember names very well either. Maybe forgetting your buddies' names protects your sanity when they got blown away. Yet, I have never bonded so strongly with anyone as with a fellow marine that I served with in combat. I tell myself that it was just a long time ago, but I know there is more to it than forgetfulness.

When in war, the marine's brain insulates him from the painful memories, not allowing him to keep experiencing the pain night after night. I used to have a reoccurring dream. I don't have it anymore, but for years it haunted me.

I dreamed that I was sitting in my foxhole on a nondescript hill in Vietnam. My position overlooks a rice paddy five hundred meters away. The monsoon fog lays low. The clouds are dark and a light, misty rain falls; it's late afternoon and will be dark soon. An eerie quiet falls on the growing darkness and the heavy, humid air smothers me like a rain-soaked blanket.

In my peripheral vision I see a marine in the distance. He is walking point, holding his rifle in front of his chest, finger on the trigger, burdened with his gear, glancing from side to side as he emerges from the brush. Reluctantly, he begins to cross the open ground to continue the patrol. Cautiously he advances, taking precise steps, then motions for the rest of the marines to follow. In single file, one after another, they emerge from the tree line, advancing across the paddy dike towards their objective: a hill only a few hundred meters away. Just as the point man

reaches the high ground, an explosion rips the still evening. Dirt and mud fly into the air, and I feel the concussion of the explosion from hundreds of meters away. The marines freeze.

When they realize what has happened, they emerge from the shock and start running to help their fallen marines. Another explosion rings out, then another. The enemy did well setting their trap. A series of mines rips the flesh of the young marines. The confusion sets in once again. Will their next step trigger another explosion? The squad leader grabs a marine humping the radio, grasps the radio headset, and calls for a medivac chopper. The other marines dash about to form a perimeter to defend the chopper already on its way from Da Nang in a race to save the wounded marines.

Within a few minutes a yellow smoke is thrown by a marine onto the LZ (landing zone) to give the wind direction to the circling chopper. The thumping blades beat the air, signaling the arrival of two attack choppers, which fly around the LZ occasionally firing into the brush to discourage the Vietcong from attacking the medivac chopper. Then, like a rock, the chopper drops, freefalling from the clouds onto the side of the hill. The back door of the chopper flies open and the wounded marines wrapped in ponchos are hurriedly carried onto the bird by their buddies while the other marines load what appear to be body parts onto a third poncho and then hoist the hideous cargo aboard. Instantly, the chopper lifts off the ground, twisting the yellow smoke into a vortex and disappearing like a ghost. The noise from the fleeing choppers fades and the silence returns, as if nothing happened.

My heart races. I am helpless. I watch the remaining marines form into single file. Slowly they search the

ground for more booby traps as they move out, cautiously and deliberately, into the dusk. The smaller squad of marines, having lost almost half their men, disappears into the evening and continues its patrol.

I wake up sweating.

Fifteen years went by. I saw a fellow marine who I served with in Vietnam, and as we talked I told him my dream. He looked at me, astonished, and said, “That happened, man. That was no dream. We were on road security. Don’t you remember?”

It was bizarre to think that I had witnessed the tragedy yet didn’t remember it. My terrified mind insulated me from the reality. It was my mind’s way of protecting me yet leaving the memory behind in a more benign way, in the form of a dream lest I forget the horror of war.

For years after returning from war, it was hard to adjust to civilian life. Every time I saw a war-related broadcast or read a news article about the war, I felt guilty that I’d left my buddies on the battlefield. I carried the weight of war like the pack, ammo, and weapons I carried into battle. In reality, leaving the battlefield is only physical—you never really leave. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of war. I will rarely talk about the war to anyone, but it’s there, deep inside, and I know that talking about war to civilians who don’t have a clue what I went through is a waste of time. The images are tightly woven into my dreams, reminding me of a distant life where the pale faces of my fellow marines no longer have names. Emotions still rule my life.

As I watch young marines being interviewed, sometimes it saddens me, because no one talks about the ugliness of battle. It’s all about, oorah and oorah! I know you have to get pumped and ready to kill before battle or

else you won't win, but it is still hard for me to watch knowing what's in store for those kids, who are barely old enough to drink a beer. I know there will come a day when each of those marines will be sitting in their living room, some looking down at a stump where a once-strong leg used to be that he lost on the battlefield, and they will ask themselves: Was fighting for America worth the sacrifice?