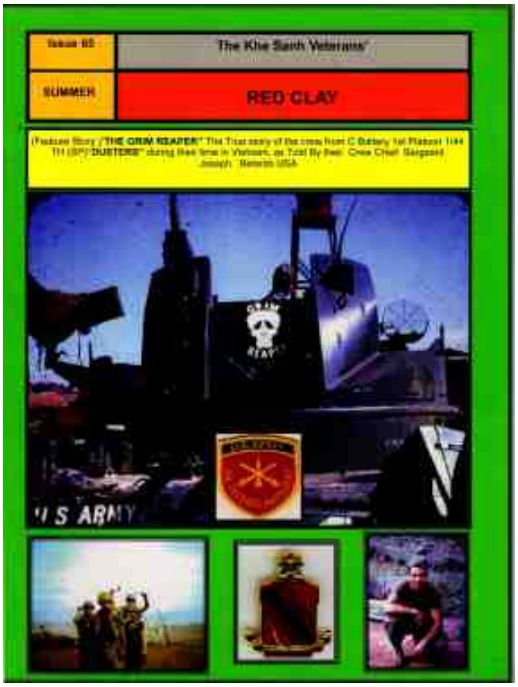
Issue 65

The Khe Sanh Veterans'

SUMMER

RED CLAY

(Feature Story)"**THE GRIM REAPER"** The True story of the crew from C Battery 1st Platoon 1/44 TH (SP)"**DUSTERS"** during their time in Vietnam, as Told By their Crew Chief Sergeant Joseph Belardo USA



MEMOIRS

Charlie Battery
1st Battalion - 44th Artillery
Automatic Weapons – Self Propelled
Twin 40mm
Duster C131 "Grim Reaper"

By Joseph Belardo

March 1968: If we weren't doing convoys up and down Route 9, my Duster C131 "Grim Reaper" did search and destroy missions behind Camp Carroll, deep into the southwest, towards Khe Sanh. We had observed tracks from a suspected NVA PT76, Russian made tank. Our hope was to be the first to take out an NVA tank, a dream that never happened. Our Duster was one of two Dusters assigned to meet the "1st Cav" by a small outpost behind Camp JJ Carroll called Delta-5. The area where they assembled was a large, flat expanse of land we called the "Plains of Delta 5." We waited all day and all night for them to completely arrive and assemble. We looked at each other in amazement as the morning dew lifted and we saw all the equipment they had. It seemed like they had more equipment than all of the Third Marine Division. You name they had it.

We could smell hot chow coming from one of their portable mess halls, and asked one of their officers if we could get a hot meal. He rudely replied, "You live with the Marines, go eat with the Marines." I told the cocky bastard where to stick it and gave him the finger. The crew thought it was great and heckled him as he walked always as we sat and ate our C-rations. We were attached to the Marines, and were damm proud of it. Needless to say we did not get off on a good start with the Cav. I really didn't care. After about fifteen minute I approached the same officer, and reintroduced myself (the Grim Reaper), the person the Cav was talking to all night. I informed him that my Duster would be his leader on the convoy down Route 9, and the second Duster would be at the rear. Looking him right in the eye, I said "Saddle up Lieutenant; it's time we got going."

He did not like the idea that I, only a Sergeant was giving him orders. (On a Duster an E-5 was the Squad Leader, and considered the Track Commander) I explained that our Lieutenant would catch up to us on the road. We did our job and escorted the Cav. up to Route 9 and west to Calu, which was

now being transformed into LZ Stud. Stud would be the jumping off point for the famous Operation Pegasus. Pegasus was the name given to the reactionary forces assigned to reopen the road to Khe Sanh. This particular group of the 1st Cav would brag how they saved the Marines from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, how they kicked NVAS' ass. But, we knew better. The NVAS' ass had already been kicked and beaten by hundreds of Marines, artillery, jets, Dusters, Quad-50's and a million pounds of bombs dropped by the B-52s. We fought side-by-side with the Cav. The resistance the NVA gave the Cav., on a whole, was minimal compared to the

NVAS' actual fighting abilities. Their "minimal" gave the Cav trouble. They saw some action, but nothing like we saw in the prior months. But, the Cav always claimed bragging rights, but as an honorary Marine we knew who the real ass kickers were.

April 9th: LZ Stud was hit by 50 NVA artillery shells. We continued to help the Cav open Route 9 from LZ Stud to Khe Sanh. I always thought they were helping us.? The going was slow and the fighting sporadic. We finally rotated and got a rest. Our

new position was on top of Outpost Hill 250 situated outside the northeast corner of Camp Carroll. I can still remember that spectacular view of the DMZ, Dong Ha Mountain, Con Thien, Cam Lo and Route 9. Hill 250 gave us a chance to regroup. My crew would get credit for shooting out three NVA artillery rocket positions in three days. The secondary explosions were fantastic. We yelled with a madman's joy as the enemy positions were destroyed. Dead NVA meant Marines would not die that night. I enjoyed shooting the Marine .50 caliber sniper rifle from the tower on top of 250. It was an awesome experience. The shooter would use Willy Peter rounds from the 106 Recoilless and give us NVA targets to shoot. I must have been back on someone's good list. If I could have chosen a place to spend my tour, it would have been 250. The view from Hill 250 was magnificent. At day break you stood above the low clouds. As the mist lifted, you could see the horizon. It was breath taking, and it also took the breath away from the enemy because of the hills firing and shooting advantage. It is a shame how war mixed and twisted emotions, including mine, I felt safe there. That alone allowed my brain to get much needed relaxation.

April 11: The Rockpile got hit by six NVA rockets. One of the rockets damaged a Duster and wounded one of the crew.

April 12: We were on a search and destroy mission with the Marines behind an old plantation slightly southwest of Delta-5. All of a sudden about thirty Viet Cong (VC) walked out of this tree line. They were all holding their hands and rifles high, yelling "Chieu Hoi – Chieu Hoi" (I surrender).We expected it to be some kind of trap. Almost all of them were dressed in their traditional daytime white pajamas. The Marines searched them and confiscated all their weapons and we marched them all to Delta-5.We kept them huddled in small groups outside of D-5. It was funny, because when we first radioed Carroll that we had captured over thirty of the enemy, they thought we were joking. The leaders of the VC constantly spoke and caused unrest amongst the prisoners and had to be individually separated from the other prisoners. It took all day before they finally arrived with some trucks and took them away. I always wondered where the prisoners went. Another thirty NVA rockets hit The Rockpile. One of our Dusters at the Rockpile spotted the NVA forward observer and hit him with a fast-eighty 40mm rounds. The NVA stopped shooting for the rest of the day.

April 13: At the Rockpile, two Dusters dueled with an NVA rocket team and observed secondary explosions as they hit their mark. Larry Roundtree's Duster was one of two Dusters to be the first to drive into Khe Sanh in 77 days. We got a call on the lima-lima from LT Bligh,"Saddle-up, you're going to ro-

tate to Khe Sanh." immediately. I was shocked when he told me to choose the other track that would be sent with me. To this day I feel guilty for suggesting Steve Harris's track. I knew he would jump at the request, and he knew I would choose him. Steve and I had gone from boot camp to Nam together. He was a courageous soldier and had a good crew. If the Khe Sanh I knew had changed like they said it had, Harris was my first choice. I also knew that LT Bligh would love to send Harris. A few weeks earlier, Harris and LT Bligh had exchanged some serious words about an ambush they were in on the road to Khe Sanh. This was going to be a first; Dusters C131 and C132, sister tracks, would be together, defending one base.

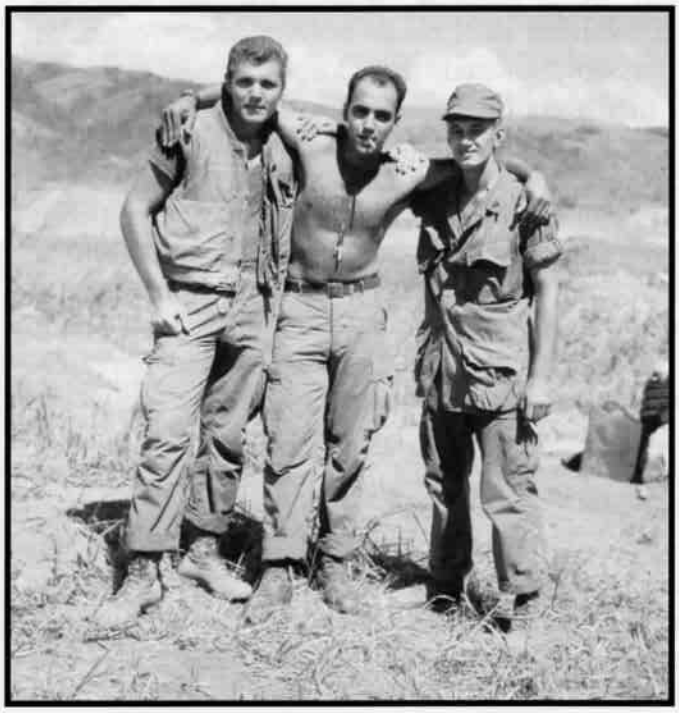
Harris, who was now stationed at the Khe Gio Bridge and had cut his foot real bad while bathing in the river, had been medivaced to Dong Ha. Another real good friend from boot camp, Frank Bardone, became acting squad leader. Bardone would take Harris's crew to Khe Sanh. Harris was never told, and I mean never, that he was going to Khe Sanh. He wasn't even told that his track had left for Khe Sanh without him. Rumor has it, he was really pissed when he got back to the "Bridge" and found that track, complete with crew, was gone. I understand he got very upset with me when he was told I had volunteered him for Khe Sanh. What are friends for? It was about a month before he caught up to his Duster. I always wondered if they gave him KP and shit burning details while he waited to catch a convoy to Khe Sanh.

Captain Vincent Tedesco our new CO would escort us to Khe Sanh. We did not go with another convoy or any other group, just three vehicles; Tedesco and his jeep driver, "Smitty" along with Duster C132, and my Duster, C131.Captain Tedesco was the best commanding officer we ever had at C Battery. He would lead us with courage and a true understanding of how the NVA fought. But, driving to Khe Sanh with only three vehicles I thought was a bit crazy. But, what the hell, you can't live forever! I was always comfortable when Tedesco was in charge. He treated all the Duster and Quad crews with respect and asked for our advice and opinions from each other. The Captain and I hoped our little convoy would not become an accident on the ride to Khe Sanh.

We were the first and, as far I knew, the only idiots ever to make a solo attempt to drive to Khe Sanh. We were about one third of the way to Khe Sanh when my engine blew. Black smoke was pouring out the engine grates. The Duster, known to be fast, was now reduced to a top speed of less then 5 miles per hour. Our track was a great target for any decent NVA sniper, RPG team, or satchel charge thrower. We briefly stopped along the road to assess the damage. Tedesco informed us that he and the other Duster would proceed to Khe Sanh, with all due speed. If anything should happen, he would send help and return with all the Dusters and Quads at the base. My driver Earl Holt, who never cursed or used God's name in vain, uttered his first words of profanity under his breath. Tedesco and Bardone departed for Khe Sanh, assuring us how we were great soldiers "Rough Riders" and knew how to fight, just radio us for help. Bardone yelled: "Remember, we don't make house calls."

We waved goodbye to each other as the dust from the departing Duster hid us from view. Deja vu of January 24th battle on Route 9 was stirring in my brain. One of my crew even took pictures of their Duster as it sped down the road on the other side of the valley. I ordered my crew to unlock the turret, open all the upper ammo boxes and slowly traverse back and forth, and stay extremely alert. I instructed my gunner Wally Owens that if shit happened to shoot the first minute with both 40's on full auto (240 high explosive rounds a minute), and, I'd sweep the area. One cannoneer, George Lewis, was to remain seated, holding two hand grenades to throw in the enemys' direction before he started loading the 40's. The other cannoneer, Benny Sitello was ordered to squat and use the M-60 machinegun to cover the hill and cliff above our right side, and to never stand up. George would load the auto-feeders. All were instructed to keep a low profile and no talking, absolutely no talking. Taking to each other while on the road or during incoming was something I absolutely forbade. All your attention and concentration had to be on your job, the enemy, and the direction they were coming from. They were a great crew and knew what had to be done. It was routine business for road warriors. The balance of the ride to Khe Sanh seemed to take all day. We all thank God to this day that nothing bad happened. Over three hours alone on Route 9 to Khe Sanh was no place to be. Years later at a reunion, we would joke with Tedesco and Bardone about how they left us on

the road that day, and how Frank would not accept collect calls. I guess we were the only idiots to ever ride that section of road from Calu to Khe Sanh all alone.



I had not been completely down the road to Khe Sanh in many months. I could not believe how this once picturesque winding road had changed. The all out American push to save Khe Sanh had destroyed the area. The weeks of artillery, napalm and B-52 strikes had leveled everything. I told my men: "Welcome to Death Valley. Almost all the trees were gone or splintered. The terrain looked like the earth was upside down. It made my hair stand on end. We had already chewed up Route 9 from Camp Carroll to Calu. The area was filled with bomb craters, napalm scars, and dead NVA decaying along the sides of the road. The smell of death burned the nostrils and the rotting flesh upset our stomachs. This sight was like nothing I had ever seen. Our slow crawl to the infamous Khe Sanh changed our souls even more. I didn't think we would make it to Khe Sanh alive.

Our arrival at Khe Sanh would turn into a bad omen for my superstitious crew. The Captain was with Bardone, having him take up position at the east end of the runway by the old ammo dump. Our combat section from Charlie "C" Battery was relieving Alpha "A" Battery which was commanded by LT Bruce Geiger. "A" Battery had done the test of time during the infamous 77-day siege. Tedesco would go back with a large convoy and the two Dusters we were replacing. We were taking the bunker at the northwest end of the runway across from "Charlie Med." Another Duster which was departing Khe Sanh was pulling out of the parapet as we arrived. They expressed their joy about leaving. Two Marines waving goodbye stood in the mouth of the track's three-sided parapet next to our new bunker position. The NVA opened up with a barrage of artillery from Co Roc, a mountain enemy fortification in Laos. The first shell was a direct hit on the two Marines. We never heard it coming. They were blown to smithereens. Parts of them were scattered all over our parapet, bunker, and Duster. Tedesco and the convoy left as quickly as possible. We helped the Marines quickly bag as many parts of their comrades as they could find, and ran them across the runway to graves registration.

Our new position was still covered with the remains and blood of the two poor Marines. My crew stood there in disbelief. It was a bad omen. Our job after the battles on Route 9 was body recovery. They had seen death many times and knew all about dying and suffering. But this, direct artillery hit on a fellow American next to what was our new private sanctuary, our new bunker, our new home, was totally unacceptable. We were hoping our bunker at Khe Sanh was off limits to artillery. We should have known better. It happened so fast that you could not even take cover. We did not have time to close our eyes, or, even blink.

The crew had given out their fair share of what we

called "being smoked," a term we used when the 40mm cannon shell hit an NVA soldier. When one of ours got "smoked," it had a whole new meaning. My men would remember this day forever. On our Duster we carried rakes, picks and shovels. As my crew checked out their new bunker, I hastily raked the rest of the Marines' remains into a pile. I then shoveled the pile into an old rusty half of a fifty-five gallon drum. I had the crew carry the drum about a hundred feet west of our bunker. I then shoveled dirt on all the blood stained ground around our area. Holt backed up the Duster into the parapet. We were now ready for the NVA. As a team, we quickly finished our task of "it's only a thing – it ain't anything" and went back to business. After we were settled into our bunker, I burned the remains in the drum. As the ashes rose, Earl walked over and read from "the Good Book." The words of God took the mental edge off what now had turned into a very bad day. We would find parts from those Marines who died in our area until we left Khe Sanh. The drum would become our area's crematorium for all the body parts that never made the body bags. We hoped the NVA artillery would not hit our crematorium and kill our friends again. Earl's words from the Bible continually healed our fragile souls.

Dear Diary: <u>FEAR</u>

Nam, where lives are lost and saved everyday without thought of its psychological consequence. I remember the many days of being shot at and the sight and inner fear of seeing a friend shot or dead. Bullets are like something reaching for me, unseen, but heard, unbiased and deadly.

My mind cannot grasp the swift change of events in an all out fire - fight. My trained reflexes have me running, dodging, hiding and returning fire. The shadow of death is all around me. The sounds of war, the suffering, the dying, are in itself... unbelievable.

The fear of perishing that struggle for self-preservation keeps me going. It was just like they said it would be all blood and guts. The only thing they left out was John Wayne.
The military could train me for just about anything, except the harassment and interdiction of artillery warfare. It was like nothing I could imagine. The sound alone made my heart stop. I can only relate to this by having you lie between railroad tracks and have the Baltimore Express pass over you.

One artillery shell fired at you isn't too bad. It only lasts for a few seconds and only hits one spot. When the barrage begins, destruction is devastating. The long lasting artillery attack plays havoc with my mind. If I'm caught in the open, I'm scrambling for the nearest shelter, preferably a bunker. Once inside I'm still not safe. All I have accomplished is the elimination of a lot of shrapnel. We just sit and wait in huddled masses. Listening, wondering, and waiting for the one with your name on it. That endless time, working on your nerves. Minutes seem like hours, hours that feel like days. Screams from the wounded, sighs of the dying, the helping that never seems to be enough.

I begin to wander, dreaming of home, my loved ones and the things we haven't done, but want to. I begin to pray, praying silently, praying in groups. Fear has come a-calling and I have to suck up all that is holy to me, all that has made me what I am, all that will show the men around me that I will get them though this and send them home in one piece.

Like the scream of a murdered woman, a shell lands close and reawakens me to my surroundings. A twelve-foot cube, seventeen feet below Mother Earth, totally in darkness.

Finally it's quiet and we crawl from the bowels, the womb of our Mother, exhausted from mental fatigue. "Thank God I'm alive."

April 19: A Convoy heading to Khe Sanh with Marine Unit G-2/9 was ambushed by the NVA. Dusters provided direct fire support on NVA main positions, enabling the marines to extract their wounded and dead. Four Duster men were wounded in action protecting the marines.

My crew and I hated Khe Sanh. It was a stagnant position and we were road warriors. The siege was over, except for a few snipers that were always trying to kill us. The incoming never stopped, the big guns from Laos pounded the base at will. Hundreds of enemy artillery shells hit the base daily. Living conditions were deplorable. The NVA had blown the base into little pieces. Garbage and debris was strewn all over the place. The only true thing that ruled the base was the rats. Rats were as big as rabbits. Rats grew larger by the day as they feasted on

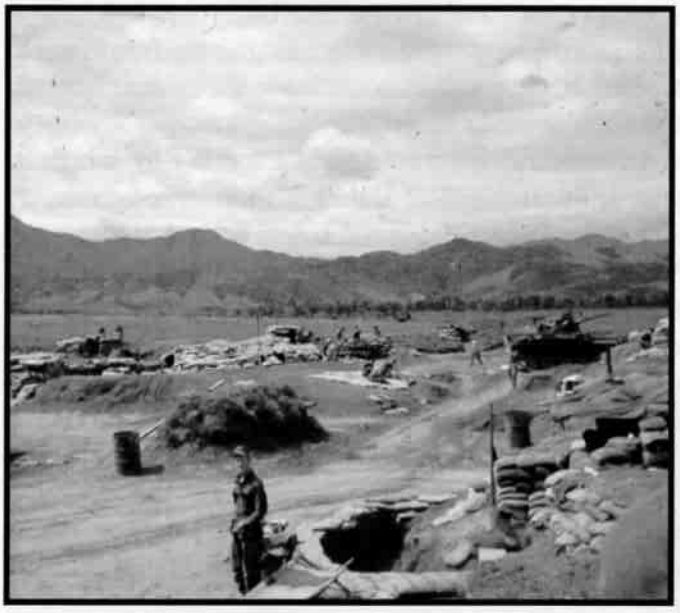
the dead NVA in what we called Death Valley. We shared our bunker with families of rats. A rat crawling on you during your sleep was an everyday common occurrence.

We had inherited a dog, or should I say puppy, named "Rex" from a Marine named Bruce. The dog's name was instantly changed to Comanche, the handle given to Dusters from Charlie Battery. The dog broke the monotony of the constant incoming and that lonely isolated feeling. He was a good dog and was the mascot of everyone on the northwest end of the runway. One day Comanche started frothing at the mouth and shaking. We feared the dog might have rabies. He was still just a pup and liked to gnaw on your fingers. Panic set in. We all thought we had rabies. Rabies meant getting two weeks of shots in your belly, something we all dreaded.

We preferred fighting the NVA and not dying from rabies. I came up with this great idea and gave the dog a name, PVT Charles Comanche. On the next medivac chopper, we sent George Lewis and PVT Comanche to the hospital in Da Nang. We knew

George would get some doctor to treat our dog. Avoiding rabbi shots in all our bellies depended on him. Comanche was diagnosed with distemper and was sadly put to sleep. George was no fool, and stayed a few extra days at China Beach. George claimed he could not get back to Khe Sanh. His stories about the USO shows were refreshing. We were all jealous. Our new LT, whom we called LT Dan, lived at the other end of the runway just past the Quad-50's. The LT never knew George was gone.

May 14: Jose Diaz was killed. Khe Sanh removed what little was left of your shame and modesty. The constant incoming had blown up almost all the shitters. The empty 40mm cans became our depositories. The cans, filled with a little kerosene, were placed in the trenches or brought into the bunkers.



God, it was embarrassing. The airtight lids kept the smell down. It was only bad when in use. Burning shitters at Khe Sanh was a no-no. The NVA could and would put an artillery shell on top of them as you took a crap, a mess that nobody treasured cleaning.

Our Duster still had a bad engine and was used only to retrieve recon teams and Marines close to our perimeter. I guess this was good for us, because we could not do convoys, mine sweeps, or search and destroys. The constant body recovery fried our brains and gave a whole new meaning to brotherhood.We all felt guilty when, on June 9, our brothers-in-arms from the 3rd Marine Tanks were destroyed and killed just outside the gates of Khe Sanh. Marine SGT Clifford Evans was killed. He was one of our best friends. I had fought a lot of battles with him on that "Road to Hell. "Our engine was now almost completely dead. If they had replaced our engine in a timely fashion, we might have been able to help or save them. Cries for help on the radio haunt me forever. We questioned everyone, over and over, if they were sure he was dead. I pray for him on my yearly visit to "THE WALL." It wasn't until a few days before we closed Khe Sanh that our engine was finally replaced. I had worried that our engine would finally stop running before getting

this replacement. We got there doing five miles per hour, we could also leave the same way.

Water was a prized commodity at the base and we were unable to get our own water, so we built a shower. We cut the lid off an old Agent Orange drum and cleaned the inside out with rags and dirt. The men put a hand release fire hose nozzle in the drums small screw hole. We wedged the drum on top of the bunker and announced to the marines that we had a shower. The guys thought I was crazy because we had not showered for weeks. We took little baths out of our helmets and didn't have enough water for showering. So, I made a deal with this Marine LT who was in charge of the marines who lived in the trenches on our north perimeter. We had showers for all his men, if he supplied us with water. Our position always had water, thanks to our shower. We used our gasoline pump to pump the water up into the drum. It was great while it lasted.

One of the other items we never had enough of was C-rations. Our convoys brought us ammo and mail, but always seemed to forget to bring rations on their weekly jaunts. I would lose another thirty pounds during my stay at Khe Sanh. I weighed around 145 pounds and had lost over 60 pounds since I arrived in Nam. We started to monitor the helicopter drops each evening at our end of the runway. Minutes after the chopper was gone, the Marine Ontos crew and us would raid the shipments. Our stretcher was used to carry off all usable items and food. Our best raid yielded dehydrated hamburgers and string beans. They looked like little gray cardboard squares. If you placed them in your mess kit frying pan, added water and a little heat from C-4, then "Ole" - you got hamburgers. Gary from the Ontos opened a big can of string beans and we all ate like kings.

It was like the original 77-day siege had never ended. The NVA continually pounded the base with heavy artillery. I stopped counting incoming at 250. My brain was beginning to fade. I was losing track of time and dates. I really didn't give a shit. I walked the area tall and proud, defying the snipers. My men didn't question me.

To amuse ourselves, we would have wrestling and boxing matches with the other Duster crews who came in on the convoys from LZ Stud. Our crew, because of our bad ass Kung Fu Master George Lewis, was always the winner. Occasionally we'd even have a rock throwing fight. We were totally nuts. I remember getting hit in the face with this big rock and getting this giant black eye. Captain Tedesco arrived out of nowhere on the next convoy. I think he came just to bust my balls and tease me. "Belardo, I heard how you got that black eye and you're not getting another Purple Heart," the Captain bellowed. My crew thought this was great. We could have all been dead and the command would not have known or even given a shit. Get whacked in the head with a rock and the whole DMZ knew about it. That shiner lasted a couple of weeks. I was known to have handed out a few black eyes. This must have been God's way of getting even. The joke was on me and that was okay.

June 9: Manuel Martinez was killed.The convoy brought me an extra man named Simon. Benny, my cannoneer, tried to take Simon under his wing and teach him what was to be expected and what was happening at this base. Simon was his own man and rubbed everyone wrong. We had a C-ration policy that each person on the crew would take turns eating the famous beanie weenies. Simon was left alone one day to guard the bunker while our Duster went to the other end of the camp to shoot at a suspected NVA position. After our return, George Lewis discovered that Simon had eaten his beanie weenies. George was a very large, very strong man, much larger than Simon and a Kung Fu Master. He was truly a real badass, not someone you wanted to piss off. George carried an old razor sharp "Enfield bayonet" strapped to the back of his flak jacket. He had it out and wanted to carve up Simon. It was amazing how a simple can of food could make a man crack. Simon thought it was a joke, but George went ballistic. Simon was going to die, if I could not calm down George. I had never seen George get so angry with anyone or anything. Simon had crossed the wrong bounds of crew trust. Trust in each other was the only thing we had to offer. It was sacred to my men. To appease George and the rest of the crew, Simon covered our bunker with a new layer of sandbags. Simon filled, tied, and stacked every sandbag by himself, with George as his personal watchdog. I explained the situation to our lieutenant, and about my fear for Simon's safety. Simon left a few days later on the next convoy. Before he left he had to empty all the sand bags he had filled plus a few hundred more. We were taking Khe Sanh apart.

A Douglas A4 fighter plane from one of the aircraft carriers signaled "May Day" to the base that it must attempt an emergency landing on Khe Sanh's short runway. The edges of the runway were already filled with planes and helicopters destroyed during the siege and since our arrival. The base came alive: Men scurried from their holes to get a better look at what might be added to the collection of relics along the runway. Poised with shovels, fire extinguishers, stretchers, and water, we waited with cameras around our necks for the jet's arrival. It was the most excitement we had since the chopper had left dehydrated hamburgers and grapefruit on the runway for us to steal.

The A4 plane landed with its brakes locked and engines in full reverse thrust. It came to a screeching halt a few feet short of the end of the runway. Everyone ran to its aid. The pilot was a little shaken, but seemed to be in good health. The jet had a small hole in its fuel tank and had run out of gas. The pilot was lucky that the plane's tail hook didn't catch on something as he came down the runway. We were all lucky that the NVA were not shooting at the base from Co Roc. The fighter plane was dragged off the runway and into an old helicopter revetment for protection. It would emerge a few days later with its gas tank repaired, a tail hook strapped to the plane's fuselage, and a pilot eager to fly off the base. As the pilot got into the cockpit, he gave all of us the "High Sign." The thumbs up gesture made us all start cheering. The jet roared down the runway, lifted and was gone. Minutes later, the pilot flew the jet about a hundred feet over the runway and did a spiral victory roll skyward. It was a good day for all: The monotony was broken with joy and excitement, and no one was injured.

June 21: I celebrated my twenty-first birthday. My family and girlfriend Nancy had sent me cookies, popcorn, pepperoni and provolone cheese. My crew thought we were at a feast as we celebrated my passage into manhood. We ended our feast with eating our favorite meal from home, Lucky Leaf Baked Apples in a can. After we finished the apples we each took turns putting our tongue in the can, getting those tasty last licks.

We had trouble with this helicopter pilot and crew who got their kicks hovering over our position and causing a dust bowl. This helicopter arrived twice a day to pick up Marines leaving the base. The red clay dust clung to the oiled 40mm cannons. The pilot hovered a few feet over our bunker and had his door gunner point his gun at my men. It was so dusty; we had to re-clean the guns every time he came. One day I met the helicopter at the runway and advised the pilot that his dusting and pointing his gun shit had to stop. The pilot was some arrogant bastard with a severe attitude problem and told me where to shove it. I told him it's not a game and the next time I'd beat his ass. Plus my men would love to have a reason to shoot his mangy ass out of the

sky. The next day he did his same routine. As the helicopter was hovering over us, we heard a loud popping noise as the NVA shot him out of the sky. The chopper burst into flames and crashed just outside our perimeter wire. We ran out and saved the mangy bastard, his crew and its passengers. They were lucky only to have some broken noses and minor cuts. The following day we had a group of officer's show up at our bunker and accuse us of shooting the helicopter out of the sky. I laughed and advised them that if we had shot them, they all would be dead. I told them they should go check out the helicopter. It was only on the other side of the wire and visible from the perimeter. I told this officer that they should give us a medal for saving their sorry asses. We were never questioned again.

June 26: I got hit in the left shin with shrapnel. I reported to what was left of the aid station, Charlie Med, across the runway from our bunker. The Navy doctor treated me for my minor wound. After viewing all the Marines with much more serious wounds, I was overcome with mental shame for being treated for my nicked shin. The next several hours I spent assisting as a stretcher-bearer for the wounded and the dead. Again, I was introduced to body registration, a small reminder of the small price I had paid compared to so many others.

Stretchers, wounded and the dead were a daily vigil. When needed, we would help Graves Registration clean and care for the dead. Cleaning their faces and loading them on outgoing choppers was the least we could do for their mothers. The whole crew sometimes helped. We called this detail "Cleaning Faces," an ordeal with much mixed emotions that has lasted a lifetime. Months later, a small rusty spot appeared on my left shin from the shrapnel. It's been over thirty years and the rusty spot still appears. Putting on my socks each day is my daily reminder of my stay at Khe Sanh.

My crew did not get upset when I added a new Grim Reaper symbol on the front gun plate situated between the 40mm barrels. I up-graded from a skull painting to a real NVA skull. The hardships of war had caught up with my moral fibers and my Christian upbringing. Besides, NVA bones were everywhere. To my surprise, the crew thought this was the greatest. They nicknamed the skull "Ho Chi." Kissing their first two fingers; they each took turns patting the skull for good luck. I started speaking openly of never going back to the real world. My crew and I had crossed over to the dark side of life. It was becoming hard to focus on anything nice or anything real. If it wasn't for our CARE packages, perfumed letters from home and mail call, I think we would have totally flipped.

We had been ordered weeks before, to abandon the KSCB. This was something we thought never would have happen. We had kicked NVA ass all over the DMZ. My Duster crew had been in many firefights and lost five Dusters before arriving at Khe Sanh. We were winning the war. The troops thought it was time to keep the ground we fought for and march on Hanoi. Abandoning this base destroyed all the reasons we had fought for. It was political suicide and the warrior did not count. So many Americans had died in vain. So many Americans were severely wounded, both physically and mentally. We all knew it was the turning point of the war. Even though I did not like the war, it was not in my mental make-up to give up, quit, retreat or lose at anything that cost lives. The warrior in me would rise to the occasion, step to the front of the line, face my adversaries head-on, and be mentally and physically accountable. Abandoning Khe Sanh was a personal insult to all Vietnam veterans.

As instructed, without haste, we continued to dismantle the base. I became in charge of our area. I was told not to leave anything standing. All trenches and foxholes were to be filled. All buildings, bunkers and shelters were to be torn down If we could not take them down, blow them up. Nothing, not even the garbage, was to be left for the NVA. Our bunker and the Ontos crew's bunker next to us would be the last to be destroyed. These bunkers would be used to shelter the remaining clean-up crews from the enemy.

The NVA snipers never stopped shooting and the NVA artillery from Co Roc increased their fire missions each day. As trenches and bunkers diminished, our living conditions became a nightmare. As far as we were concerned, the "Siege" was still on. Hundreds of enemy artillery shells hammered us twenty-four hours a day. I stopped counting each time when the hundredth round hit. We would strip the bunkers of all their sandbags. As the sandbags were removed, they would be cut open and the dirt dumped

out. All metal roof decking, ammo cans and empty brass used for roof artillery deflecting material was gathered, loaded on trucks, and shipped off the base. The Dusters were used to pull the big roof timbers out of the bunkers. Bulldozers filled the empty bunker holes and the area was plowed flat.

Men crowded into a few small holes and trenches

trying to stay alive. The rats scurried over the debris, men searched for cover and their own place to live or die. Rats, our other enemy, became comrades trying to stay alive. Living under the Dusters became everyone's second home. The enemy knew we were abandoning Khe Sanh. Some asshole had it plastered all over the front pages of every newspaper. The enemy continued to increase their daily artillery barrages on the base. The NVA shelling was unbelievable, killing and severely wounding many of the Marines who lived in shallow shelter holes they had dug in front of our Duster. There was no safe place to hide. We stacked the dead and wounded by the old "Charlie Med." A small group of corpsmen assisted those brought to this area as best they could. Convoys and helicopters seemed to be coming and going on a daily basis.

June 30th: Khe Sanh had all but vanished before our eyes. We didn't waste time and leveled the Ontos bunker with the use of C-4 explosives. Incoming was fierce. We took cover in our bunker, the last full standing fortification. As we crowded in this twelve-foot cube, ten feet underground, an enemy artillery shell hit. The NVA bunker buster artillery shell exploded and collapsed the left rear corner of the bunker, burying Wally and me alive. The only thing that kept us alive and from being crushed to death was the homemade bunk beds we took cover under. It took the guys hours to dig us out. When you dig for men, you dig slowly so you don't cut them in half with the shovels and picks. It was hard work clearing the sandbags, ammo cans, old 40mm brass and runway matting off our bunkers roof. Wally was lucky and only had small cuts and lots of black and blues. My left leg had been partially pulled out of its hip socket and had turned purple, red and blue. I had black eyes, fat lips and a flattened nose. I must have been in shock because it didn't hurt and I didn't remember much. At the aid station the guys held me down as the Doc pulled my leg back into place. It hurt like hell and I passed out. The good old Doc gave me a bottle of that military cure all pill, the APC's (all purpose capsule – aspirins), and sent me back to my position.

Later in life I would suffer from blood circulation damage, a bad back, and numb legs. My men gave me the day off. Mother Earth under our Duster

would become our home. I watched as my men slowly removed about five feet off the remaining top portion of our bunker. Hundreds of enemy artillery shells pounded the area around our position. Hell would have been a better place to live. My men slept in the fetal position as if hoping to return to the womb and get a new chance at life. I couldn't take it any more and ordered the bunker to be leveled by C-4. I didn't want anymore of the men in my charge to die from exposure to the enemy artillery. We all started praying with Earl.

The only thing we left was the three-sided earthen parapet for the Dusters, Quad-50's, and Ontos. We slowly moved our clean-up crew toward the east end

of the runway. Our Duster would accompany us as a portable artillery shelter and bunker. We eventually rendezvoused with Steve Harris's crew at the other end of the runway. Most of the Marines had already left the base. Our Duster crews and a hand full of Marines guarded the entire length of the north side of the old runway area. It was July 2nd and the mighty Khe Sanh was no more, reduced to a flat plateau with a small group of America's best guarding her.

We frequently moved the Duster to different locations all day, so the NVA artillery could not get a fix on us. Our Dusters were giant silhouettes on a barren plain, the biggest targets left standing on Khe Sanh. Each evening to keep the NVA in check, we continued the Vietnam tradition of shooting from the camp perimeter. Some called it "Mad Minutes." I called it a "Moment of Madness." The Dusters twin 40's cleared the perimeter nightly of any NVA hoping to get close to the base until we could leave for good.

July 4: The day for old glory was spent watching the choppers speed across the base, trailing different colored smoke grenades. This was hopefully our last night at the infamous base. The NVA, who always seemed to have good intelligence, knew this was their last chance to shoot at Khe Sanh. The constant incoming, eventually without my knowledge, fried my brain. July 4th would take on a whole new meaning. Fourth of July fireworks became my Achilles Heel. My family and friends joke at my involuntary twitching and my fast departure from our country's yearly display of freedom.

My family thinks it's the explosive of the fire-works that makes me anxious. I try to explain to them that fireworks are like Dusters shooting. Everything starts real slow, a few bursts here and a few there. There's lots of white, as if the enemy is probing the wire and we're popping flares for illumination with smoke trails floating away in the breeze. Then come a few big explosions, and then a few more; followed by lots of whistling ones and colorful ones. A noise rises from the crowd as both sides start screaming their "oohs" and "aahs." Explosion after explosion, momentum building and building, to the grand finale, then comes the final push from the enemy. There's a final human wave rushing at you, with guns blazing as if they were special ground effects. The crew of the Duster, holding fast in their turret, wait and wait; waiting patiently for that terrifying moment, the heart stopper of every war when the "enemy is in the wire." The Duster on full auto-fire becomes the grand finale, shooting 240 high-explosive cannon shells a minute at point blank toward the advancing enemy. Shells rip them to shreds, exploding in front of you like giant red paint-balls. Each round is followed to its target by the burning tracer of death in its tail. Explosion after explosion can be heard, followed by the roar of war - giving witness, to your day of killing. Like the fourth of July, it ends as fast as it started; and the only thing left is the smell of sulfur and that quiet calm.

July 5: Marine Unit 2/1 had departed Khe Sanh in the middle of the night. I was shocked when I checked the perimeter and found no Marines. Nobody told us they were leaving. I radioed the other Duster to stay on 100% alert. It was eerie looking through our Starlight Scope and seeing no Marines manning their respective positions. LT Dan was radioing everyone for assistance and help. Nobody came or helped.

July 6: The last few troops from Khe Sanh were loaded on trucks and convoyed back to LZ Stud. Steve Harris and our LT Dan took out the first convoy. I was asked to be the rear security on that last small convoy. It was a terrible feeling seeing everyone on that last convoy standing in their vehicles, taking that last look, at what was once Khe Sanh. A Marine officer asked if we could drive around the abandoned base looking for stragglers. The Marines, who were short on radios, were afraid that all their men did not get the word to leave. As we drove around the base, the NVA artillery gave us their final good-byes. So as not to be caught in the NVA artillery, I instructed the last convoy to leave the base and that we would catch up. I told my men to take a good look and say their personal good-byes, because we were the last Americans to leave the mighty Khe Sanh. We were even nutty enough to stop and take a few pictures and make some personal comments about leaving. Standing on the Duster, we each paid a silent homage to our stay at the famous "red clay". The NVA artillery was getting closer and heavier. It was time to catch up to the convoy. I told Earl to put it in high gear; it was time to go home. It was going to be good to get back to Camp Carroll--hot food, showers and seeing our old

friends. We had been gone for almost four months.

While at Khe Sanh, I forgot that Steve Harris and I were still on the top of someone's shit list. We would only get as far as LZ Stud, the next combat base. Harris took the north side of the camp, and we had the higher southern slope. We were issued a tent, cots, shovels and picks. An officer I did not know told us to make this our permanent position. The officer ordered us to dig and build a bunker. After we finished, we could get rid of the tent.

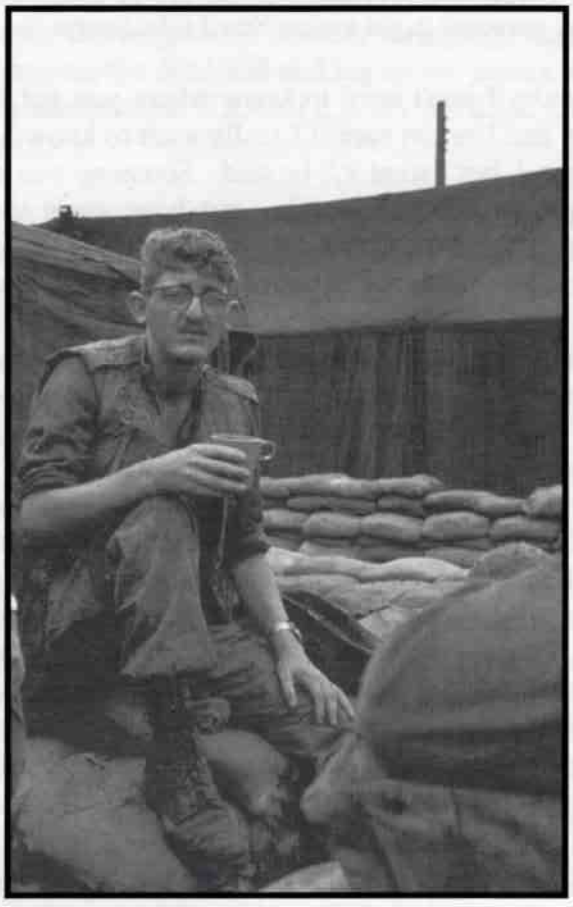
The ground was so hard that, after a week of digging, we had a hole only about a foot deep and ten feet square. My men, who had already helped fill in by hand an area about a half-mile square at Khe Sanh, refused to dig anymore. Instead, we helped each other make shallow, individual little graves. The graves were surrounded with sandbags and rocks. During incoming, we would lie in our graves and pray. The ground was so hard on this hill that it was impossible to dig any deeper than a foot. We started to scavenge each day for building material so we could build our own above ground bunker. The bunker would never be built and we really didn't

give a shit.

LZ Stud gave me the opportunity to visit with two of my hometown friends who were in the Marines, John Paulus and Leon Rejman. It was good to talk of home and seeing old friends. Years later, Leon would die from Agent Orange related cancer. I recently gave his sister, Stella, some old pictures of us from Nam. John opened his own restaurant in Asbury, N.J., a fabulous place with great food and service.

The Grim Reaper was back on the "Road", running from LZ Stud (Calu) to the Rockpile. Ambush Alley was still holding true to its name. The rear deck of our Duster again became stained burnt umber, and smelled of burning flesh from our hot exhausts. We returned daily to our shitty little tent, now riddled with shrapnel holes. It became a different existence because we had no means of illumination. There were no candles, no burning homemade gaslights, and no electricity. We occasionally lit a candle to see inside the tent. Someone always yelled: "Lights out, keep it low, keep it down." Maybe someone cared if we got killed. We surely didn't give a rat's ass anymore. Our inner core was drained, running on a reserve of pure hostility and hate.

August 5: We arrive back at Camp Carroll at lunchtime. We had not had a real hot meal since Christmas. Our first stop was the mess hall. We had been



gone from Carroll so long we felt like strangers. True to our reputation we pushed to the front and ate first. Our first stop "MILK". Our new position was called the "Water Point" and was situated to the right of the main gate leading into camp. I was now a short timer and scheduled to leave Charlie Battery, 1st/44th around August 13. Earl, Wally, and I openly

discussed having Earl become the new squad leader. George would become the driver, and they would get a new gun bunny. As the days passed, I became very uneasy about leaving. I had trained my men to the best of my ability, but I was not sure if that was good enough. I thought about re-upping. My insides churned with mixed emotions about going home.

Will they all make it home? It wasn't that I was leaving that made me restless. We had lived and breathed and fought as one unit. To this day I am sure that we were the best in all the ADA. I hoped that the "newbee" coming to my crew would not let my men down and rise to the occasion.

My last day at Camp Carroll was spent in the look-out tower next to the water point. It had been a long year and the view from the high tower sort of put things in perspective. It was my time to leave the DMZ. Captain Tedesco, to my surprise, asked me for my personal night vision Star Light Scope.

"Belardo, I don't need to know where you got that scope, and I'm not sure if I really want to know how you got it, but I want it," he said. Someone was still squealing on me. "Captain, my boys can't shoot gooks in the dark if you take our scope," I replied. We both smiled and laughed. Tedesco joked and said, "Joe, all of us can now take turns shooting gooks in the dark. It's time for you to go home." Captain Tedesco was a great officer. He made the difference through true leadership that was needed in a Charlie Battery captain. I knew he would look after my men. I considered him my friend, and knew my men could trust him and his combat judgment. We shook hands and patted each other's back as we said our farewells. Before I let go of Tedesco' s hand, I thanked him and reminded him about how my crew would follow him to hell and fight the devil for him. I thanked him for not sending me on the Dong Ha Mountain missions. I always felt that mountain had my name on it.

August 13: I said our traditional "So long, see you later" to my friends. I was going home. We never said goodbye; goodbye was forever and bad luck. Leaving was an unbearable mental pain. Part of me has never left Route 9. We would joke and say we knew each other "when." You can add a lot of endings to the word when. When.... nothing you held sacred was sacred anymore. When.... you thanked God you lived and another died. When.... you stopped thinking about dying. When...you stopped thinking of home. When...you (fill in the blank).

Dear Diary: <u>My Memories</u>

Zippos, red ants, rubber trees, bamboo, Lucky's, Camels, Salem's, Paul Malls, Tarrytons, Menthols, hedgerow, triple-canopy, re-supply, medic, sulfur, death, mosquitoes, leaches, fox-holes, sweating, monsoons, rice paddies, booby traps, elephant grass, trip-wire, fire-support, water buffalos, B-52, Tet, perimeter watch, Ho's Trail, search and destroy, incoming, fire in the hole, dust storms, dust-offs, flares, night vision, infra-red, shit burning, outgoing, friendly fire, hot chow, no chow, cold chow, c-rats, big rats, piss-tubes, chow lines, mail, saddle-up, WIA, MIA, KIA, POW, BNR, corpsman, gunny, mad minutes, spotter round, willy peter, RPG's, AKA's, land mines, toe poppers, punji pits, Montagnards, ARVNS, friendly forces, snipers, sappers, body bags, no bags, green smoke, red smoke, yellow smoke, short rounds, air bursts, tiddy bops, real world, my world, short time, long time, no time, make time, medivac, CP, recon, LRRP's, big guns, arc-lights, NVA, Viet Cong, R & R, China Beach, scented letters, mom's cooking, home, live friends, dead friends, no friends, tracers, H & I's, high explosives, full-auto, rapid fire, return fire, single fire, blocking force, L-shaped ambush, malaria pills, Agent Orange, bamboo vipers, cobras, scorpions, spiders, centipedes, rats, Rock Apes, Spider Monkeys, body counts, mass graves, no graves, pieces, 364 days and a wakeup, tracks, trucks, jeeps, Mules, Mighty Mites, wreckers, guard duty, KP, hooch, bunkers, LZ, bros, napalm, 57 recoilless, claymores, choppers, MOS, NFG's, REMFS, daytime, nighttime, one kill, ten kills, hundred kills, Star Light, dig-in, parapets, slit trench, tears, crying, screaming, cheers, joy, laughter, hate, killing, fear, buddies, cold beer, hot beer, no beer, soda, water, hot , dusty, stinky, hot shower, no shower, river bath, helmet shower, no sleep, papasan, mamasan, Yards, number one GI, number ten GI, dinky doa, number one boom-boom, Chieu Hoi, ROKs, Aussies, sanctuary, repose, church, prayers, praying, dreams, bugs, darkness, electricity, candles, the night, C4, lightning, sunsets, mud, red clay, freedom bird, goodbye, later, bouncing betty, .50 cal., bloopers, 175, 155, 105, 106, 40mm, 90mil, 4.2, M60, 81's, M16, M14, M79, sandbags, ammo boxes, Puff, blood, beetlenut, frag, flak jacket, LAW, flame thrower, rocket launcher, mine sweeps, Dusters, Quads, Search-

lights, PRIC-29, PC's, am-tracks, tanks, wire, mine field, nurses, Donut Dollies, round-eyes, generators, lima-lima, SOP, trip flares, convoys, rough riders, make a hole, foul odor, death, lookout tower, we're nothing, they're nothing, ain't nothing, going home, NAM.

In Dong Ha, I was given my unit separation papers and casually handed another Purple Heart with masking tape holding the medal box closed. "We think this is yours, soldier," the personnel section said drolly. True to the end, my personnel files were all screwed up. I was discharged from the Army with what they call "temporary records and a Soldier's Affidavit." It took twenty years of letter writing before I was re-issued my Purple Hearts, Good Conduct Medal, and my other Unit Citations. In 1997, the Air Defense Artillery Magazine did a feature article about the January 24th ambush. Thanks to this article, John "Tank" Huelsenbeck, Earl Holt, Chester Sines, and I were awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for Valor. I had made a promise never to forget Roger Blentlinger, the Marine who risked his life for mine. I refused a medal unless Blentlinger was also awarded the same medal. It was nice that we all finally got some recognition for our service to our country. It was even a better day when I called Roger and told him he was getting an Army Medal. I made a big thing about getting the medal. I was so proud, and yet embarrassed that it came to my house via UPS. I had been told a Senator or Congressman was going to present the award, not the UPS man. What was finally going to give truth and proof to all the Vietnam stories I had told my family has remained in its shipping box?

Everyone going home from the 1/44th met at China Beach. The officers never knew that we had made pre-arrangements for one of our convoys with about twenty men from "C" Battery and Headquarters to meet us at the "Beach." Major parts and supplies had to be picked up at the Da Nang docks. It was an excuse to party for three days. China Beach was glad to get rid of us. We had taken over the whole place. All of us (Steve Harris, Frank Bardone, Larry Roundtree, John Gunesch, Noble Grinner, Wayne Bailey, Haden Waite, Paul Raymond and Ray Ellis) were singing, dancing, drinking, eating and acting twenty-four hours a day as if this was our last day on earth. "It felt great." Jim "Doc" Butler was the last to shake my hand. We said our goodbyes because this was a forever farewell, then I caught the next plane to Cam Ranh Bay. At the Cam Ranh Bay departing center they gave us a quickie debriefing and shipped us the next day to Fort Lewis, Washington. We left Vietnam singing "Summer Time and the Living is Easy" as Paul Raymond strummed his guitar. Thirty-six hours later, August 17, 1968, fitted in my new dress uniform; I got my final discharge from the Army.

As I flew home in what we called the "Freedom Bird", I could not help but think about my past year: about no electricity, just candle power, limited food (C-Rations), water rationing, hundreds of enemy artillery barrages, occasional bathing, no bathrooms, burning shit, living with the rats, scorpions and insects. I remembered every thing crawling on you in your small dark bunker many feet underground, using Agent Orange to defoliate the area around our base positions, friends wounded and dying, taking turns helping at the medical stations and graves registration, carrying the wounded, wrapping, tagging and bagging the dead and picking up the pieces, and, taking another life. GOD, IT WAS A HELL OF A YEAR.

The 1st Battalion 44th Artillery was one of the highest decorated combat units in Vietnam. It earned the Army Presidential Unit Citation, Army Valorous Unit Award, Army Meritorious Unit Commendation, Navy (Marine) Presidential Unit Citation, Navy (Marine) Meritorious Unit Commendation, The Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, and The Republic of Vietnam Civil Action Honor Medal.

I ironically had to take the last step of my journey home in a helicopter from JFK to Newark airport. On August 18, 4:59 PM, I emerged as a civilian, still dressed in military clothes, from the shuttle helicopter at Newark Airport, NJ. My family, girlfriend, and about thirty relatives and friends greeted me. I was surprised about how frightened I was about getting off the chopper. I could see them screaming, yelling and crying. I had changed and did not want them to know. It would break their hearts. I never wanted them to know the other Joe Belardo. After a few restless minutes, the pilot told me it was time to go. Like nothing ever happened, I fixed my hat, straightened my tie, put on my shades, took my last deep breath, and stepped out of the chopper to meet my family. My father was the first to meet me. We

just stared at each other. We both knew the price of war, he fought in the Battle of the Bulge and we did not need to speak. He extended his one hand to me and just said, "Well." I removed from my wallet his small red religious scapula he had carried in WWII and placed it in his hand and thanked him. "You can have this back when I die," Dad said softly. He hugged me tight and kissed my cheeks and cried. "Now go say hello to your mother, Brenda, Kenny, Nancy and the rest of the family." I was fortunate, my homecoming was wonderful. I was loved and had forgotten how good it felt.

When we arrived at our house, my father had placed a banner on the front lawn that said WELCOME HOME SON. I came home in time for the Labor Day parade. The local newspaper asked to do an article about my tour in Nam. The parade was in my name, and I rode with the mayor in his Cadillac convertible. It was a great homecoming. The following month my parents had to make their telephone number unlisted. The twenty-four hour a day calls never ended. Nameless voices yelling, "Baby burner – child killer – rapist – bastard – village burner – war monger," and a hundred other terrible names. My mother cried, and my father questioned my tour. I was never so sad. The war was bad enough. I thought what we read in the papers was journalistic bullshit. I was wrong. My fellow countrymen hurt me more then I can ever express. For years if I were introduced to someone as a Vietnam vet, the reply would be a single expressive word "Oh." I always wondered what that "Oh" meant. That little word cut me like a knife. Life has its ups and downs. Vietnam filled them both. To this day, I tell everyone that I was "A DUSTERMAN," one of the "LAST GREAT GUNFIGHTERS" and damn proud of it.

Over twenty years would pass before I spoke to an officer from 1st/44TH. Out of the blue, I had this overwhelming urge to talk to them. I had to tell them I understood. They would know what I meant. I wanted to thank him for getting me home. Maybe without any of us knowing it, they gave us that inner drive to make it home. They had signed my New Jersey flag I flown on the DMZ and added their hometowns. After three calls, I was talking to Lt Harden's mother. I was amazed. She knew who I was. She told me the now Lieutenant Colonel Harden would love to talk with me. I called the old lieutenant the next day, and we spoke on the phone for almost three hours. Like magic, speaking with him released my mind and soul from years of hate. It was time for my mind to lock the other me deep in the back of my brain and get on with my life. Talking to him was great. He gave me, the now Colonel Vincent Tedesco's home telephone number at Fort Bliss, Texas. My good ole Captain couldn't believe it was me. We spoke for hours. We all met that year at a military reunion at Fort Bliss. The hugs, tears and stories were the best. The reunion helped us all bury a lot of demons

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