



220th Aviation Company

(Surveillance Airplane Light)

(Reconnaissance Airplane)

(Utility Airplane)



"Catkillers" and Family, and all Friends and brothers in Arms, in memory of those who have served.

Lima Company



A Story Of Survival

By

John Alan Hudson



I grew up in San Marcos Texas, and in the 1950s my dad worked at Camp Gary where thousands of Army pilots learned to fly in L-19s from the Graham flight school. Gary AFB was transferred to the Army in 1956 and became Camp Gary. At the time of its closure in December 1963, the base consisted of 2,282 acres, 750 buildings, 1.7 million square feet of floor space, barracks space for 1,100 men, family housing for 108 families, five runways, and seven taxiways. The site is now used by the San Marcos Airport and by the Gary Job Corps Center. My dad was line chief there and we accompanied him on the flight line all of the time. I loved to watch the pilots practicing in L19s, Otters and Beavers! However, flying was not meant for me at this point in life. My goal, at this

young age, was to be an infantryman and from my perspective the Marine Corps was the best branch of service to provide that training; training that would ultimately save my life for the war that was awaiting me.

By January 31, 1967 *Operation Prairie II* started, and on February 27, Lima Company 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines and a tank platoon were involved in a battle near Hill 48 to save a recon team that ran into a NVA Regiment. On the 28th of January, other Marine companies including Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, were brought in for ground operation. When the operation ended total casualties for both sides were put at 93, Marines killed 483, wounded and the NVA losses were put at 694 killed. *Prairie II* ended on March 18; however, as with many operations, *Operation Prairie III* started the very next day.

At this point the Battalion was pulled back to regroup and rebuild. For the next couple of months the Battalion worked Route 9, guarding lines near Cam Lo, The Rock Pile and Camp Carroll, which was the largest concentration of artillery pieces in northern I Corp. By July and parts of August it was time for the Battalion to spend their time back in action and were reassigned to Con Thien. On September 4 the Battalion was ambushed just south of Con Thien, with heavy casualties. The Battalion was subsequently pulled back again for rebuilding its manpower due to those losses. As the months wore on, other major Operations in 1967, including *Operation Hickory* (May 18 to May 28), *Operation Kingfisher* (July 16 to Oct 31) and *Operation Kentucky* near Con Thien in the western area of Leatherneck Square, led me and Lima Company to two crucial engagements in January 1968.

Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines Command Group



L-to-R; Capt John David Carr (Lima Six), LtCol L Bendell (Call Sign Darting Star), 1stLt Steve Joyner (2nd Plat), 1stLt Jim Day (XO), 1stLt Thomas Hoare (1st Plat), and Lt. Ken Christy (3rd Plat)

In addition, to help set the stage for January, the United States Marine Corps Engineers in early 1967 were ordered to bulldoze a strip of land to at least 500 meters wide from Gio Linh westward to Con Thien. This area became known by the Marines as *The Trace*. A report of August 1966 would call the bombing campaign against North Vietnam a failure, saying that it had "no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the South". Instead, advisors proposed as an alternative two defensive barriers. The first barrier would run from the coast some distance inland along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and would seek to block the NVA infiltration through conventional means. The second barrier would run from the remote western areas of the border into Laos and would be a barrier of air interdiction, mine fields and electronic detection requiring minimal troops. However, as history would note, this concept would fail miserably.

Now, as a Marine grunt in Vietnam from March 1967 to November 1968, I often saw and worked with Army aviation; mostly O-1 spotter planes and the Marine Aerial Observers (AO) that often flew with them. On 7 January 1968 I was a radioman for a three man Killer Team. We were part of a larger group of Marines left behind by a patrol to try and bag a sniper that was firing on our perimeter. 3rd Battalion 4th Marines was on a small hill just 500 meters below the DMZ and 500 meters north of the Trace, guarding the new fire base Alpha 3 which was between Gio Linh and Con Thien, and just south of the Trace. The snipers had fired for several days from the ridge to our north. The top of the ridge was the lower boundary of the DMZ or Dead Marine Zone as we called it. And with good reason!



Lima One Charlie in May of 1967 during our first time ever inside the DMZ.
I am third from right, bottom row, right next to the radioman. I carried the M79 back then.

1-03 73A/B OP Ocala GOC Kentucky
VMO-6 AFTER MISSION REPORT

OPERATION NAME AR Kentucky DATE 10/10/68 TIME GROUP 071500Z TT

MISSION NO. 73A/B SORTIES 18 TASKS 8 BAX 0

	TYPE	SORTIES	TASKS	HOURS
III MAF	<u>A/H/SF</u>	<u>14/4</u>	<u>8/2</u>	<u>6.3</u>
ARVN	_____	_____	_____	_____
RKMC	_____	_____	_____	_____
OTHER	_____	_____	_____	_____

FIXED WING ORDNANCE EXPENDED 0

NO OF A/C HITS 0 ORD 0 2.75 55 7.62 600

OT D-YD318448 for emerg. extract of team KNIFE
Boy by High Boy 5-1, 2, 3 in marginal wx. D
YD 352390 for team BUS STOP in extremely bad

OPERATIONAL DISCREPANCY INCLUDED: YES NO

ETD 1508 ETR 1906 CALL SIGN OF LEAD A/C CADAVER 4-3

F. Ruffelt
SIGNATURE OF FLIGHT LEADER

NO 1 A/C BUNO WB-9 NO 2 A/C BUNO WB-11

PILOT	<u>KUFELDT</u>	<u>WORKMAN</u>
CO-PILOT	<u>MAL. MAAS</u> ✓	<u>STEELE</u> ✓
CREW CHIEF	<u>GRAHAM</u> ✓	<u>GRE ELLIS</u> ✓
GUNNER	<u>Whisenant</u> ✓ <u>Whisenant</u>	<u>GIBSON</u> ✓

MISSION CREDIT COORDINATES YD 318448, YD 352390, YD 254467
YD 178738

FLIGHTS 2 STRIKES 2 MISSION CREDITS 6

MISSION NO. 73A/B IN SUPPORT OF 3 MAF DATE 7 Dec 68

INST APPROACHES:	RADAR	TACAN	GCA	FIX
	<u>/</u>	<u>/</u>	<u>/</u>	<u>/-56</u>

NO OF SORTIES IN SUPPORT: _____ 1ST MARDIV
18 3RD MARDIV

Wx - High boy 6-1 1/2 did excellent job in finding
 & extracting team \rightarrow Q.T. GOB Q.T. \rightarrow YD
 254467 for VR and SNIPPER work with
 CADAVER 4-18 - obtained high reading and dropped
 smoke - 4-3 & 4-4 expended 28 rockets w/o
 ever no known BDA. \rightarrow Q.T. GOC \rightarrow YD
 178738 for A/N support of Darting Star
 14 L who was in heavy contact ^{also} ~~Smithy~~ ^{Southern}
 to assist in medevac. Controlled by
 Charlie (C2t killer 4-1) ~~and~~ expended
~~42 2.75~~ 28 2.75 on VC position - no
 known BDA \rightarrow Q.T. 178738

Retrieved fire from general area of
 VC on several occasions.

1st Platoon, Lima Company, heavily reinforced, swept the face of the ridge at 1100hrs on January 7th dropping off a rifle squad with a M60 machine gun team, a two man Marine sniper team with a Remington scoped rifle and a spotter with a sniper M14. In addition, our three man killer team, of which I was a member, was dropped off as well. Within an hour of being dropped off, a sniper to my west started firing and hit some guy in the perimeter. We were ordered to link up with 19 Marines and one Navy Corpsman and sweep the ridge face and hopefully kill the sniper. We were ordered to not go over the top of the ridge and into the DMZ for any reason, both prior to the patrol, during the briefing, and when we were told by radio to link up.

So what happened you might ask? The NVA were skillful warriors and used the oldest trick in warfare to lure us into an ambush. Three different NVA jumped up and ran from us toward the top of the ridge. We killed the first two without suffering a single casualty. We were talking directly to our Skipper telling about the kills when he again ordered us not to cross into the DMZ. That was when we sighted the third NVA running and like complete morons we followed him right into a reverse slope ambush. An entire dug in NVA Company pinned us down in a little natural gulley about 80 meters long and we were there for the next few hours as the enemy slowly picked us off. Right off the bat, our Navy Corpsman completely lost his mind and became as helpless as a blind drunk. Our entire company came out to save us and just as it looked like we were going to be wiped out, a voice on my radio brought us some very welcome news. Southern Charlie, Lieutenant Robert Carswell, a Marine AO, told me that he was above us and that he would get us out! The other radioman had been shot, the bullet going through both his hand and the handset. He had the radio to his ear and was talking to me when he was shot. The bullet just missed blowing his brains out! Anyway, as the only radioman, I was kept busy calling in some 155mm artillery rounds until Southern Charlie took over.

As the declassified flight mission indicates that Captain Jan Smith, Catkiller 41, of the 4th Platoon, 220th Aviation Company (photo below), was flying that mission with LT Robert Carswell, Marine AO call sign "Southern Charlie." Unfortunately, the Catkiller roster does not have a photo of Robert. CPT Smith served from September 1967 to May 1968 at Phu Bai:

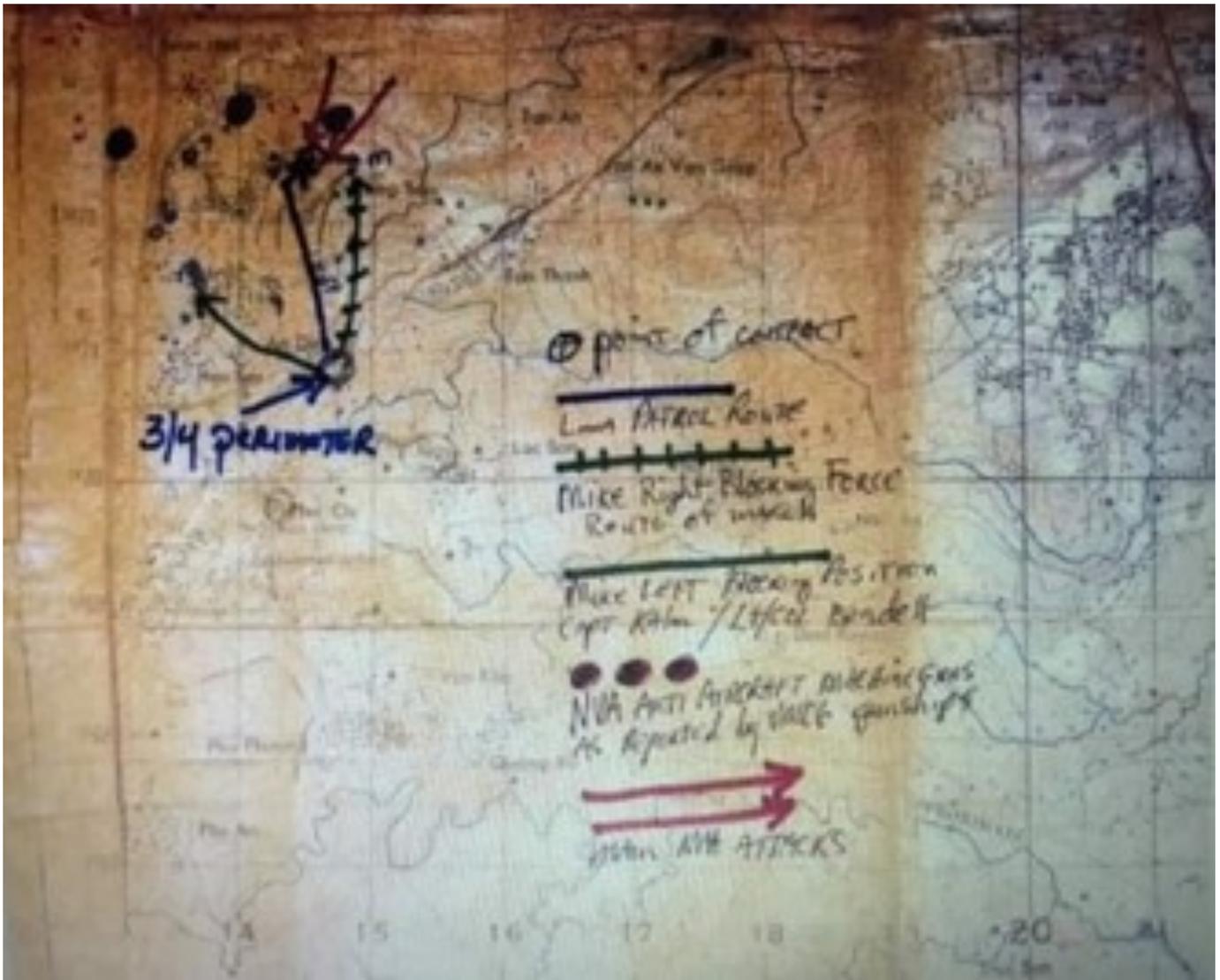


Again, our eyes in the sky saved us. They directed the relief force to us, pinpointed NVA positions and directed both artillery and air strikes, including F-4s that dropped snake eye bombs right on a group of flanking NVA blowing them to bits. We finally were able to get out but it was costly with 7 killed and 40 wounded. One known dead Marine was somehow left behind but was recovered on the 11th when Lieutenant Colonel Bendell led a three-company patrol to recover him. The patrol, on that day was a tactical masterpiece. Lieutenant Colonel Bendell had all three companies depart the perimeter before dawn under complete radio silence. Lima blocked from the south as Lieutenant Colonel Bendell and the remaining two companies swung northeast around the NVA ambush and then hit them from the north, routing the enemy and recovering the missing man. As a footnote, the enemy booby-trapped the body with an M-26 grenade, which was not discovered until the body arrived at Delta Medical in Dong Ha.



This picture is of me when I made Corporal as CO radioman.

Then once again, a week later, on 18 January, Lima Company 3/4 Marines launched a patrol, 3.2 km northeast of Con Thien, into an area nicknamed “The *Marketplace*”, by the Marines. The Marketplace was a destroyed market at the junction of two important trails – one was Route 561, a 10 foot wide cart path that connected Cam Lo to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The other was the east-west Route 605. This day would become a very bad day for Lima Company.



Map from a fight on 18 January 1968 between two Marine infantry companies and more than a battalion of NVA. This happened just south of the DMZ and just east of Con Thien and a few hundred meters above the Trace.

VMO-6 AFTER ACTION REPORT

OPERATION NAME KENTUCKY DATE/TIME GROUP 18 Jan 68
MISSION NO 83/60A SORTIES 4/8 TASKS 2/2 PAX 0

	TYPE	SORTIES	TASKS	HOURS
III MAF	<u>AH/AH</u>	<u>4/8</u>	<u>2/2</u>	<u>9.6</u>
ARVN	_____	_____	_____	_____
ROKMC	_____	_____	_____	_____
OTHER	_____	_____	_____	_____

21

FIXED WING ORDNANCE EXPENDED _____

NO OF L/C HITS 0 ORD 42 2.75 3800 7.62

Turned up for msn 19F, G, H but working birds
failed to show, shut down / Q.T. → Review LZ
briefed for inserts - put on wx hold → Q.T. ^{msn 83}
over.

OPERATIONAL DISCREPANCY INCLUDED: YES NO

ETD 0810 ETR 1335 CALL SIGN OF LEAD A/C Cedover 4-1

SIGNATURE OF FLIGHT LEADER

	NO 1 A/C BUNO <u>WB-13</u>	NO 2 A/C BUNO <u>WB-8/WB-11</u>
PILOT	<u>McAdams</u> ✓	<u>McGaw</u> ✓
CO-PILOT	<u>Monroe</u> ✓	<u>Hopkins</u> ✓
CREW CHIEF	<u>Beach</u> ✓	<u>Ellis</u> ✓
GUNNER	<u>Torrey</u> ✓	<u>Newcomb</u> ✓ / <u>Wagner</u> ✓

MISSION CREDIT CO-ORDINATES YD 140 729

FLIGHTS — STRIKES 3 MISSION CREDITS 6

MISSION NO 60A IN SUPPORT OF Parting STAR DATE 18 Jan 68

INST APPROACHES: RADAR ✓ TACAN ✓ GCA ✓ FIX ✓

1-141

NO OF SORTIES IN SUPPORT: 1st MARDIV _____ 3rd MARDIV 12

Q.T. → YD 140 729 worked for Southern Hotel
 and Cat killer 44 in support of Darting STAR 4/M.
 who was in heavy contact with NVA. Delivered
 suppressive fire within 10 meters of friendly troops
 confirmed 9 KBA's. returned Q.T. for fuel
 & re arm. → YD 140 729 to continue
 support of Darting STAR 4/M. MSN aborted
 when 4-2 near miss with A4 and over
 stressed A/C. flight returned to Q.T.
 flight received heavy fire from YD 140 729/
 YD 131 725 / YD 147 728 Also NVA ARTY!

So, it was now the 4th day of my 10th month with Lima Company 3rd Battalion 4th Marines, and I was a 20 year old Lance Corporal and radioman for our Platoon Sergeant, Staff Sergeant James Berger. Our Platoon Commander was Lieutenant Thomas Hoare. Lance Corporal Bob McConnell was his radioman. The platoon corpsmen were Cecil Belt and Jeff Aker. I cannot recall the name of

the Right Guide, he had just taken the job replacing Sergeant Stanley Strobles, who rotated home. PFC Fred Taylor was platoon runner. I had been a member of the 1st Platoon CP group as a radioman since late October. I knew everyone in the CP well. At about 1100hrs on January 18, Lieutenant Hoare told me that Gunny Blakey wanted to see me. I wondered what I had done wrong. Turns out I had a new job; I was taking over from Corporal Thom Whorley as radioman for Lima Six. Captain John David Carr had commanded Lima since 3 August. A lanky, very fit former Sergeant, Carr was a superb infantry officer. He carried a pump 12 Gauge shotgun, a .45 pistol and smoked a silver pipe. I was astounded to get the job! I had no idea that I was even being considered for the job. Scuttlebutt had it that Bob McConnell would get the job, as he was far and away the best radioman in Lima Company. Corporal Worley told me that Carr had liked how I handled myself on the 7th during a very heavy fight that we were in. I went back to the 1st Platoon CP to get my gear and everyone congratulated me. Ted Oval, my boot camp buddy, came over and slapped me on the back. My best friend, John Kmiec, called me a "CP Pogue" and said, "you'll be a sergeant before I ever make Lance Coolie." I never made sergeant and Kmiec never made lance corporal. I was kind of sad to leave my old buddies of so long, but I liked the idea of being Carr's radioman. I figured that being in the CP Group would be the safest place to be in an infantry company at war. I knew that I would always be surrounded by the rest of the company, probably safely in some hole with Carr and the others directing the company. Boy was I in for a rude awakening! Less than 24 hours later Lima Company would be surrounded by NVA, at a place called "The Marketplace," fighting off human wave attacks and ducking incoming artillery and mortars.

NVA forces ambushed Lima Company, minus 2nd Platoon, as we swept up from our patrol base located just south of The Trace. Mike Company, also minus one rifle platoon, and the 3rd Battalion Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bendell, call sign Darting Star, were in two supporting positions a few hundred meters away. The NVA had destroyed two companies of Marines on 3 July 1967 — at the very spot that Lima Company was ambushed. When I say two companies were wiped out the July before, I mean almost to the last Marine. This was the single worst loss of life by any Marine unit in our time in Vietnam. 18 January 1968 would be Lima Company's worst day, too, with 10 KIAs and 50 wounded out of about 100 Marines total!

The NVA planned their ambush perfectly; we were quickly pinned down with about a dozen initial casualties. The NVA were all in covered, low bunker positions, when pre-registered mortar fire and artillery started pounding us. Our reserve force was targeted, too, with hundreds of NVA artillery and mortar rounds pinning them in place as well. The ceiling was about 300 feet in heavy monsoon clouds, but we had some guardian angels above us.

Right when the fight started, an Army O-1 spotter plane starting circling above us. It was flown by Catkiller 44, Captain Richard Johnson and Marine Aerial Observer (AO), 1st Lieutenant Robert Happe, call sign Southern Hotel (photos below), saving the day for us, as they spotted enemy positions, alerted us to the enemy moving to flank us and much more. And all the while, they dodged heavy NVA ground fire from 12.7s located on three different hills around us. It is a miracle that they were not shot down! Also the gunships of VMO6 showed up just as human wave attacks started hitting our flanks! Looking at the after action reports, they fired as close as 10 meters to our lines and mowed down dozens of NVA that I observed personally. I was firing my M16 as fast as I could on semi-automatic, but there were too many NVA at close range. They would have overrun us had it not been for those gunships and the Birddog directing them. Finally, as the ceiling lifted slightly, Marine A-4s darted in under the low clouds and started dropping snake eye bombs. One of the gunships was making a strafing run just above us when an A-4 flashed past and the two almost collided. The after action report noted the over stress of the gunship and both left the area. At that point, we only had the little O-1, which stayed over us, with the AO firing a rifle a few times and dropping both smoke and M26 grenades on enemy positions. We finally made it out that day but only by the skin of our teeth! My fellow Marines fought like tigers, but truthfully I know the NVA would have killed us all, if not for those brave aircrews above us.



L-R: CPT Richard W. "Rick" Johnson, 1967-68, Catkiller 44, DFC; 1stLT Robert E. "Bob" Happe, 1967-68, USMC, AO, 3rd Marine Division, Dong Ha, Phu Bai, Call sign, Southern Hotel

There were 13 members in my squad; ten of our members left Vietnam, with one or more Purple Hearts. Four of those members were sent home in caskets. Casualties for Lima Company on the 18th were 9 killed with one succumbing from their wounds overnight at Delta Medical in Dong Ha on the 19th. In addition; Mike Company lost their artillery Forward Observer, KIA on the 18th. In the two fights on 7 and 18 January, we lost 17 killed and more than 70 official wounds. Numerous guys did not report minor wounds, as they were treated in the field. This was especially true of Lieutenant Ken Christy, who did not claim any of his three wounds on 18 January. He had been shot on the 7th and another wound would put him out of the field. But on 27 January he was shot in the chest by AK-47 bullets and survived to get a Navy Cross for action on 18 January and retire as a 30-year Colonel.

After Vietnam, I married my loving wife and we had two children and now three grandchildren. However, my love for aviation would lead me to follow a varied career path in which I learned to fly from a former instructor at Graham! Once I had my pilots license, I flew civilian versions of L-19's towing gliders, and I also flew an Otter some and carried skydivers in Twin Otters as well as flying as a bush pilot. My aviation career led me into buying and selling aircraft and ultimately into the sport of Rocket Drag Racing, where I drove rocket dragsters for four years, from 1977-1981, and regularly went over 300 mph in the quarter mile. I also owned one rocket dragster and one rocket funny car while running a hot rod shop. I even drove another rocket dragster and funny car for Fred Goeske part time.

I do not fly any more, but I still think of those aviators in Vietnam, to whom me and so many other Marines and soldiers owe their lives. Thanks you, Catkillers, from an old Marine who somehow survived. Semper Fi.

Edited and arranged for publication by Dennis D. Currie, Assistant Editor, 220th Aviation Company's www.catkillers.org