

Crow's Nest

Story and photos by
SSgt Jim Elliott, USMC

The Marble Mountains, are a half dozen peaks of crystallized limestone. Aloof, forbidding and grotesquely beautiful, they jut up improbably in the fertile lowlands just south of Da Nang like angry sores on an otherwise smooth skin of plains, rice paddies and waterways.

The villagers of Nui Kim Sahn earn their livelihood from the mountain complex. The metallic clink clink of hammer and chisel against stone echoes continually from the village as its men, women and children ply an ancient art to carve handsome sculptures from hunks of raw marble.

The men of 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, headquartered near the mountains, have done some sculpturing of their own—they've chiseled out observation posts (OPs) on three of the peaks. But, unlike the villagers of Nui Kim Sahn, the livelihood of the Marines doesn't depend on their finished product—their very lives do.

To the Marines, each of the peaks has its own personality. Aside from "Marble Mountain" itself (so-named because it provides nearly all the stone used by the villagers), there's "Chin Strap," a double-humped mountain providing two small OP's called "Ostrich" and "Roadrunner," and two unmanned peaks called "Big No-Name" and "Little No-Name."

And, finally, there's the "Crow's Nest." It is here that 16 Marines, two soldiers, one land-locked Sailor and five dogs of questionable breeding serve as the primary "eyes" for U.S. forces in the Da Nang area.

It's not an easy life. Working, eating and sleeping atop the Crow's Nest is comparable to setting up housekeeping in a stone jungle. Huge, jagged rock formations, their uneven edges like cutting blades, are everywhere. Covering an area roughly the size of a football field, it's difficult to find a flat surface large enough to set up a folding cot. It's almost impossible to walk from one point to another in a straight line, and twisted ankles and bruises are as common as the gnats and mosquitoes. It's hot in the daytime and cold at night. Shelters can be built for protection against the heat and cold, but it's risky business;



As Cpl Racette spotted possible enemy troop movements, his radioman, LCpl Cliff Devost, relayed the grid coordinates to a 105 mm gun battery below.

more than once strong winds have blown them, and very nearly their occupants, off the side of the mountain.

There's no MOS in the Marine Corps for "mountain climbing," but if there were, the Marines who man the Crow's Nest would probably be first in line. Small as mountains go (its height is estimated at about 400 feet), the Crow's Nest makes up for its lack of size by rising almost straight up; its sheer cliffs and unpredictable footing provide a challenge to the amateur about as inviting as the Matterhorn.

But, unless you're lucky enough to catch a resupply chopper, climbing is the only way to reach the top or to get back down again. The Marines have made it a little easier on themselves by lowering a single rope from top to base, but it's still quite a climb.

"You can say that again," puffed Staff Sergeant Dave Aasen as he pulled himself over the final hump and let the inch-thick rope fall from his hands. "This will make your skin leak no matter how good a shape you're in." He cocked his hand in an arc and ran it across his forehead; rivulets of sweat poured off and he slung them aside with a whip-like motion. "But once you get to the top, you can appreciate the value of having an OP up here."

A better position to observe from would be hard to find. The Crow's Nest provides an almost limitless view in all

directions. To the north is Da Nang City, the sprawling Da Nang Air Base and the Marine Marble Mountain Air Facility; to the south, LZ Baldy, almost 20 miles away, is visible; to the west, Charley Ridge looms far in the distance and to the east are Barrier Island and the South China Sea.

"Like they say in the song, 'On A Clear Day You Can see Forever,'" Aasen chimed in. He chuckled at his own joke and entered one of the hootches the Marines had built from discarded ammo boxes and other scrap lumber. On one side was a faded sign that read: "Welcome to Crow's Nest - The Friendly Mountain Resort." And indeed, in a different time, a more peaceful atmosphere, adventurous vacationers might well pay handsome sums for the view, the privacy and the clean air afforded the Marines.

"Yeah, that's possible," Aasen agreed. He reached in his pack, pulled out some lukewarm cans of soft drinks and passed them around. "But our job here now is far from being a vacation. A helluva lot of people are depending on us to carry out our mission. We goof up and the price of our mistake is going to be some dead Americans. We're going to make sure that never happens."

The primary mission of the men on the Crow's Nest is to spot enemy rocket sites aimed at Da Nang and to provide



The Marines manning the Crow's Nest were resupplied by CH-46 helicopters from nearby MAG-16.

general observation support for Marine ground and artillery units in 2/1's Area of Operation.

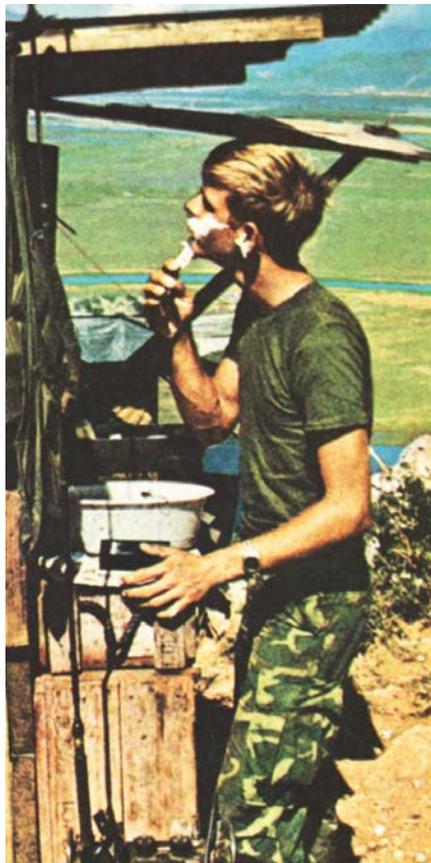
"Until recently, this area was known as the 'rocket belt,' " Aasen said. "The enemy would throw in rockets almost every night, aiming for the Da Nang airfield mostly. The job of the men here was to get return fire on the rocket sites as quickly as possible.

"But the situation has changed," he continued. "Our mission is still the same, but the enemy has been throwing very few rockets around lately. So, most of our time is spent detecting enemy movement in the area and observing for friendly artillery."

As the senior enlisted man, Aasen is responsible for the overall performance and welfare of the men on Crow's Nest, as well as those on the two smaller OPs. The Marines call him simply "Staff." He's a veteran of 19 years as a Marine "grunt," and wears two Purple Hearts for wounds received in Korea. Serving his second tour in Vietnam, Aasen has a reputation for looking out for his men.

"I've got a fine bunch of troops here," he said matter-of-factly. He paused to slap playfully at one of the men's "adopted" mutts. "They know what I expect of them. As long as they do their job, I stay off their backs."

The men on Crow's Nest are resupplied



HM3 Jim Tylasley, the OP's corpsman, "celebrated" his birthday with a clean shave atop the Crow's Nest.

by helicopter once every three days. Fresh water is delivered, but only enough for drinking purposes and a daily shave. Food is plentiful, but C-rations and dehydrated meat products make up the bulk of the diet. There is no electric power, so perishables such as milk, fresh fruits and vegetables cannot be kept for any length of time. To combat these conditions, Aasen has devised what he calls his "honor system."

"This means that as long as a man isn't on day watch, he's free to go down the mountain to get a shower, hot chow or go to the PX just about any time he wants to," Aasen explained. "The only thing I insist on is that he be back up here by 1700. Each man stands a four-hour watch every night, and as long as they're alert and ready when that watch comes up, then I'm happy."

This system has done much to raise the morale of the men on Crow's Nest. "Their spirits are pretty high," Aasen agreed. "But there's another reason for that, too. A lot of men up here are nearing the end of their tour. And for a grunt, this isn't a bad way to wrap up the year."

"Ain't that the truth," a cheerful voice injected. It belonged to Corporal Mike "Dizzy" Disdier, 19, the OP's "short-timer." His 12-month tour would be up in a few days. His wife and a nine-month-old daughter he'd never seen were waiting for him back in Key West, Fla.

Disdier was attached to Co E, 2/1, and his job was that of Forward Observer (FO) for the battalion's 81 mm mortars. He now had an additional duty—snapping in his replacement, Private First Class Don Rader, a muscular 27-year-old ex-dock worker from Chicago.

Disdier was in the main observation tower, a small wooden structure on the west end of the mountain. It was equipped with two AN/PRC-25 field radios, mounted 20-power ship binoculars, and a large “starlight scope.”

A veteran of four months on the Crow's Nest, “Dizzy” had served previously as a radio operator with F/2/1. During a river crossing with that company on Feb. 9, 1970, he earned the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for saving a fellow Marine from drowning.

“My job is to observe enemy infiltration routes,” he said. “I make routine checks of known routes and keep my eyes peeled for new ones. If I spot something, I plot the area on my map and relay the grid coordinates to the mortar battery. Once the rounds start landing, I call in whatever adjustments are necessary to get them on target.”

Rader nodded his head when Disdier spoke as if once again committing his duties to memory. He had six months experience as a member of a mortar crew, but this was to be his first attempt at being an FO. But he was accustomed to challenges.

“I've wanted to be a Marine for as long as I can remember,” Rader said. “But when I turned 18, my draft board gave me a 1-Y (medical deferment) classification. It was a minor thing; I had hay fever as a child. But it took me eight years to get them to change that classification to 1-A so I could join the Corps.”

In his new job, Rader would be sharing the observation tower with two other



Cpl Mike Disdier and PFC Don Rader called in night firing missions to an 81 mm mortar platoon at the base of the Crow's Nest.

Marines, Cpl Terry Racette, 21, and Lance Corporal Cliff Devost, 18, spotters for the six 105 mm guns of “Bravo” Battery, 1/11. The battery's guns were located in the “stack arms” area (site of the now disbanded in-country R&R center) near 2/1 headquarters.

“We work as a team,” said Racette, who was also nearing the end of his tour in Vietnam. “I'm the FO and Devost is my radioman. What we look for are enemy rocket sites, artillery positions or troop movements; anything the mortars can't reach.”

Racette is one of the few Marines manning the OP who was there during the last major rocket attack on Da Nang, “It was about six months ago,” he recalled. “There were two volleys, probably 15 or 20 rockets in all. As soon as we saw the first flashes, our own 106 mm recoilless rifle here on the mountain opened up. Then we passed down the grid coordinates to the 105 mm battery. By the time they commenced firing, the flashes had stopped. I don't know how many ‘Charlie’ planned to throw in

that night, but a sweep of the area a few hours later turned up 11 unfired rockets.”

The 106 mm recoilless rifle, heaviest armament on the Crow's Nest, is braced on a 10-foot wooden platform in the center of the peak. It belongs to the 106 mm platoon of H&S Co, 2/1. Its section chief is Sgt George Spear, a 20-year-old Marine from Cullman, Ala. His three-man crew consists of Sgt Mike Blake, 19, LCpl Clyde Brown, 18, and LCpl Patrick Yount, 19.

“Normally, I'd have a four-man crew,” Spear said as he climbed the ladder up to his gun's position. “But the fourth billet calls for a driver ...” He left the sentence dangling; obviously a driver was not in demand on the Crow's Nest.

Spear had two years in the Corps, and all but four months of that time had been spent with 106 mm units. During his first tour in Vietnam he served with a recoilless rifle platoon attached to 1/26.

“We're one of the few artillery pieces in this area that can fire automatically without gaining grid clearance first,” Spear said. “If we spot flashes from enemy rockets, we're authorized to fire three quick rounds. Then we check-fire and call battalion to get further instructions.”

Spear's gun crew is part of a nine-man security force under the control of Sgt Robert Farmer, 20, of Newington, Ga. The other Marines responsible for the overall security of the Crow's Nest include LCpl Dan Mrozek, 20, LCpl Larry Coulter, 19, LCpl John Lezeoli, 19, LCpl Tony Baca, 20, and PFC Ken Lewis, 18.

Farmer, who has spent 14 months of his two years' active service in Vietnam, keeps his security element together on the east end of the mountain. “I don't really have enough men to cover all sections of the OP in case of a ground attack,” he said. “If we're hit hard, we'll pull back to the center where we can concentrate our firepower in all directions from the highest point.”



A crew of Marine engineers was quickly initiated to the dangers of living on the Crow's Nest when a pallet of lumber was deposited precariously on the side of the 400-foot mountain.

The possibility of a ground attack on the Crow's Nest is not as remote as it may seem. In April 1970, a force of about 20 Viet Cong struck the Marines with small-arms fire and RPG's. "It happened about midnight," Farmer said. "We returned fire and they broke off contact after about 20 minutes. We didn't suffer any casualties, and apparently, they didn't either. We checked the route of attack the next morning, but all we found were a lot of shell casings."

The men on the Crow's Nest rely heavily on small arms and fragmentation hand grenades for their defense. "We keep about 500 frags on hand," Farmer said. "All we have to do is roll them down the mountain as fast as we can pull the pins." The OP's other weapons include M16 rifles, two M-79 grenade launchers, two M-60 machine guns and some .45-caliber pistols. Placed strategically around the sides of the mountain are Claymore Anti-Personnel Mines and trip flares. The Marines have also filled metal ammo boxes with TNT, adding nails, rocks and other items for shrapnel.

The Marines under Farmer couldn't be classified as a superstitious lot, but recent enemy boasts have them at least interested. "It all started with reports of a broadcast by Hanoi Hanna (North Vietnam's answer to Tokyo Rose and Axis Sally) a few weeks ago," Farmer said with a sheepish grin. "She reportedly forecast a 'Marble Mountain Massacre,' even giving the names of the units that were going to do us in!"

The Marines don't put much stock in the report—the communists have made many such boasts in the past and have been unable to carry them out—but Farmer admitted that, "maybe we've all begun to keep just a little sharper eye when darkness rolls around."

One of the best "eyes" on the Crow's



The OP's 106 mm recoilless rifle position offered a panoramic view of the area, confirming the advantages of placing an OP on the Crow's Nest.

Nest belongs to the U.S. Army—a 23-inch Xeon Searchlight operated by a two-man team from Battery G, 29th Artillery Regiment, near Da Nang. Connected to a 28-volt field generator, it is capable of producing 125 million candle-power. By throwing an over-ride switch, its power can be increased to 150 million candlepower for brief periods.



Sgt Mike Blake aligned a 50-cal. spotter round as Sgt George Spear loaded the 106 mm recoilless rifle.

"We also have infrared capabilities," said Spec-4 Bill Pastre, 21, senior member of the team. "We make nightly sweeps of the area, but it depends on the situation as to what light we use. If there are friendly patrols in the area, we use the infrared so as not to expose their position; if not, we'll use the visible beam."

Pastre claims to have no difficulties working with the Marines. "It'd be a little late to start having problems now," he said. "I've worked with the Corps since I got in country 10 months ago. My light and I have been attached to the 26th, 5th, 7th and now the 1st Marine Regiment. Hell, I feel like I'm part Marine myself!"

Adding to the Crow's Nest inter-service family is Hospital Corpsman Third Class Jim Tylasley, the Navy corpsman. "My birthday dessert," Tylasley said wryly as he poured C-ration peaches over C-ration pound cake. He had just turned 22.

"I do general preventive medicine," he said. "Mostly, I treat minor cuts and bruises, headaches and upset stomachs. Anything more serious, I see that the man gets taken down to the Battalion Aid Station. My main reason for being up here permanently is in case we come under attack."

Tylasley's private celebration was interrupted by the deafening roar of a CH-46 helicopter coming in low and slow. "Resupply," he shouted. "Hope they bring in something different for a change."

A check with the OP's communications chief, Private Richard Robb, 19, revealed that "something different" was indeed aboard the chopper. "The pilot says he's bringing in a crew of engineers," Robb said as he popped a yellow smoke grenade. The newest man on the Crow's Nest, he had the dual responsibility of keeping the Marines' six field radios in peak condition and of assisting the helicopter pilots in landing on the OP's tiny 25'x45' landing zone.

Robb handled his first resupply like a pro. The "46" made a pinpoint landing and deposited its cargo of seven Marine engineers without incident. Two other choppers were flying overhead with external loads of lumber and other building materials.

"I don't believe it," exclaimed Sgt Mike Blake of the 106 mm recoilless rifle crew. "They're really going to build us some livable hootches!" Blake had good reason for wanting a new home; his old one had been blown away a week earlier by a windstorm.

"We could see the storm coming from the north," Blake said, "but there was no warning that the winds would be so strong. There were two of us inside the hootch when all of a sudden the tin roof started



In addition to the Crow's Nest, Marines from 2/1 also carved out observation posts on a twin-humped mountain called "Chin Strap."

flapping and the center beam cracked like a match stick. We had just enough time to grab most of our gear and crawl out before the whole thing went over the side." Three other hootches were to suffer the same fate before the storm abated.

Even as Blake gave his account of the storm, the engineers were already at work. One group was unloading a pallet of lumber that barely missed sliding off the side of the mountain, while another was busy digging the foundation for the first hootch.

"We'll erect four new buildings and remodel three others," said Second Lieutenant Harold Copperberg, a platoon commander with "A" Co, 1st Engineer Battalion. "By using cement foundations and good lumber, they should hold up in any storm."

Copperberg grimaced as he watched his men trying to dig through the marble and stone-infested dirt. "Ordinarily, we could finish a job this size in two days," he said. "But in this stuff it'll probably take us a week or 10 days."

To the men on the Crow's Nest, "a week or 10 days" sounded just fine. For the "short-timers," the only new homes they were really interested in were in places like Florida, Illinois, Michigan and Ohio. And for those remaining, what were a few more nights out in the open when you could look forward to new quarters, complete with screens to keep out the mosquitoes?

"Yep, things are always looking up on the Crow's Nest!" It was Aasen, the "Staff." It was difficult at first to tell



Marines from the 1st Engineer Bn erected sturdy hootches on the mountain's wind-swept summit.

whether the statement was intended as a pun or an observation.

Aasen ran a calloused hand through his closely cropped hair, then spoke in a soft voice. "These men deserve all the comfort they can get. They're doing one helluva job, and they rate living like human beings up here." There was no mistaking his sincerity now; most of the Marines here were young enough to be his sons, and a tone approaching that of paternal pride had crept into his voice.

"Know what I'd like to see?" he said suddenly. "I'd like to see the morale go as high as this mountain!"

A few moments later, cheers and yells began floating across the Crow's Nest. A wall of the first new hootch had been raised into place by the engineers. Aasen smiled.

And if you've never seen what a man's face looks like when he's just seen a wish come true ... well, you should have been there that day. There on top of the Crow's Nest. 🐼