

# Dong Ha Mountain

Story and photos by MSgt Tom Bartlett, USMC

In the mud and the crud of the monsoon rain came a figure.

And out of the fog and the mist, walked a man.

As he walked, his feet “slished, slished” through the puddles. At other times his feet went “shlonk!” as the soles of his boots were gripped by ankle-deep mud.

As he came closer you could tell that he was wet, clear through to his dog tags. And he smiled ... .

It had been raining continuously for four days. Fog limited visibility. A breeze swept across the flat top of the mountain, carrying a chill. Men slid in the mud, making involuntary flanking movements while attempting to walk in straight lines.

Men on security had difficulty seeing those on adjoining posts because of the rain and fog.

But smiles come easily atop Dong Ha Mountain. Marine grunts and gunners

can grin in the mud and the chill. The mountain is high, but morale is higher. And they smile ... .

Providing security atop Dong Ha Mountain, which is also known as “Fire Support Base Fuller” is “Charlie” Squad, Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment.

The 3rd Marine Division will leave Vietnam and with it, 3/4. What makes 3/4 a little more “special” than other units



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**Above: Marines LCpl Robert S. Allen Jr. and LCpl Bev Dodson check the antennas atop Dong Ha Mountain. The communications network at the fire support base was of prime importance.**

**Left: A Marine CH-53 Sea Stallion delivers an externally loaded 105 mm howitzer to Dong Ha Mountain. All of the supplies were brought in by helicopter despite often poor weather conditions.**



**Above: Fire power was provided by the 105 mm howitzers of Battery H, 3/12, while they were stationed on the summit of Dong Ha Mountain.**

in the Division is that they were the first Marine ground unit deployed north of Da Nang.

The 4th Marines arrived at Chu Lai in May 1965, and the following month, 3/4 moved to the Hue-Phu Bai area, with 1/4 and 2/4 remaining at Chu Lai, patrolling outlying areas and providing security for the air base.

Not only was 3/4 the first unit north, but it would seem that President Nixon's Phase II troop redeployment of Marine units had saved one of the best for last—3/4 will be one of the last units of 3rdMarDiv to board ship and head for Okinawa.

"I'm damn glad to leave here for Oki," volunteered Private First Class Thomas E. Haskell of Charlie Squad.

“Me too,” echoed Lance Corporal Jack F. Cundiff. “I don’t mind Vietnam too much, but my folks are worried about my being here.”

“I can’t really say that I’m sorry to leave either,” said LCpl George N. Taylor.

PFC Abraham M. Mailings, an ammo humper with 81 mm mortars atop the mountain, looks forward to Okinawa and hot chow, showers and clean sheets.

LCpl Ronald E. Vasquez is the “old man” of C Squad. He’s 22 and the squad leader.

“We got the word in September that the Division was being redeployed,” Vasquez recalled. “It’s great that we’re going to Okinawa. Most of the squad has been in ’Nam from six to nine months and not all of it has been easy,” he explained.

Prior to their assignment atop Dong Ha Mountain, C Squad and Lima Co were

**Right: LCpl Mike Romanger, left, advises PFC Walter D. Ward where to set up his M60 machine gun as part of the nightly defense for the strategically important fire base.**



**When the weather clears, helicopters bring the mountain Marines chow, water and mail. This CH-53 Sea Stallion also ferried Marines back to the Dong Ha Combat Base.**

on an operation near the Demilitarized Zone, which lasted for 48 days. They were humping the slopes and crevices of Hill 950 near Khe Sanh, searching for enemy rocket sites.

“Contact was relatively light,” Vasquez recalled, “but the terrain was rugged.”

The battalion found large caches of rockets, mortars, grenades and assorted small arms ammunition in enemy bunkers which were destroyed by the sweeping Marines.

Following the month and a half in the bush, they were assigned to the Vandegrift Combat Base where they provided security and patrolled roads leading into and out of the Marine base. They also watched Highway 9.

Their rest was short lived. The battalion separated and companies were ordered back to the mountains. India Co was ambushed en route to the valley near Mutter’s Ridge. Mike Co was hit by enemy mortars and small arms fire.

Lima headed for Fire Support Base Russell, which was raked by enemy mortars and rockets.

But the North Vietnamese soldiers pulled back to snipe and shell, refusing to meet the Marines head on. Contacts were limited. Enemy shelling continued.

Then 3/4 was eased from the mountains and headed toward Cua Viet for five days rest—five days of swimming, showers, stage shows, hot chow and cold beer.

It sounded so promising.

“We got rocketed during our third night there,” Vasquez grinned, “and we returned to the hills the next day.”

As elements of the 3rdMarDiv were relocated, Lima Co, 3/4’s Charlie Squad found themselves manning the northernmost Fire Support Base, providing security for the 105 mm howitzers of Battery H, 3/12.

During the month prior to the redeployment of the 4th Marines, Companies A, B, C and D of 1/4 were located at Quang Tri. Companies K and M were sitting atop Mutter’s Ridge. Co I and the command post were at the Dong Ha Combat Base, and companies E and G were at Elliott Combat Base.

Headquarters Company and Co F were near Landing Zone Mack, north of the Rockpile, and Co H was near Landing Zone Sierra, southwest of the Rockpile.

As the time drew near to board ship, the companies moved south, first to the Dong Ha Combat Base and then to Quang Tri.

The difficult part was waiting. They knew they would be leaving, but so many rumors circulated concerning the actual date that members of Charlie Squad ignored dates and times. But still, they smiled ... .



**PFC James P. Gardner readies the ammunition for an M60 as LCpl Jerry L. Woodruff, the team leader, assumed his post prior to the night watch.**

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Vasquez assigns his men to security positions, taking his turn along with the others. Patrols are sent out daily and nightly. An observation post on a finger joining the ridge usually held three Marines. A listening post held two.

Marines not on watch would generally “crash,” (sleep) or “sky,” (get out of the bunker to visit “homeys”—meaning Marines from the same hometown).

They play “back alley,” a card game, or write letters or replace soaking wet uniforms with clammy uniforms.

There is no electricity on Dong Ha Mountain, but they strip the wax out of containers which held 81 mm mortar rounds and cut the waxed fiber into two sections, twisting hard. The fiber is made of beeswax and burns like a candle for quite a while.

It also provides a little heat.

Dong Ha Mountain is one of the highest points in a group overlooking an important bridge and Highway 9. Nature doesn’t oblige with a view too often during the monsoon season. It restricts visibility with a curtain of fog and a covering of rain.



**Left: An Army helicopter emerges through the fog atop Dong Ha. Below: It had come to pick up Col Gil Hershey, regimental commander, 4th Marines.**



The Marines lived inside bunkers, and in the torrential rains of the monsoon, many of the bunkers leaked and collected as much as 6 inches of water. Eight Marines slept in the bunker with Vasquez, which had one small puddle, but no pool.

At night, with the transistor radio broadcasting music and news over Armed Forces Radio, Quang Tri, other sounds could be heard.

Marines walking their posts, ponchos rustling as they moved. The rain beating deeper into the mud. Rats scurrying across sandbags and wooden beams, and the guns shooting illumination flares.

In the morning, they shave with cold water. They make coffee out of their C-rations. They talk and laugh.

Vasquez thinks back on the 52 belt buckles that he won competing in rodeos, riding broncs and bulls and roping. LCpl

**Col Gil Hershey, right, CO, 4th Marines, confers with Maj Lee A. Peterson, operations officer for the regiment.**



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we fight together.**

**We sometimes come close  
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**—LCpl Ronald E. Vasquez**

Howard L. Cooper also won a belt buckle for bronc riding, but he boasts that he'll catch up with Vasquez once he's back in the States.

“What the hell you gonna do with 52 belt buckles? You only got one pair of pants,” a voice in the dark asks.

They talk of cars and motorcycles and girls.

“Grunts are the greatest,” Vasquez says.

“We eat together and we fight together. We sometimes come close to dying together. We share what little we have, not only material things, but even private thoughts.

“Sometimes I think that I should have finished college. I had two and a half years studying commercial advertising. But then, if I had received a degree, I might never have been a grunt, and this has been an experience I'll never forget.

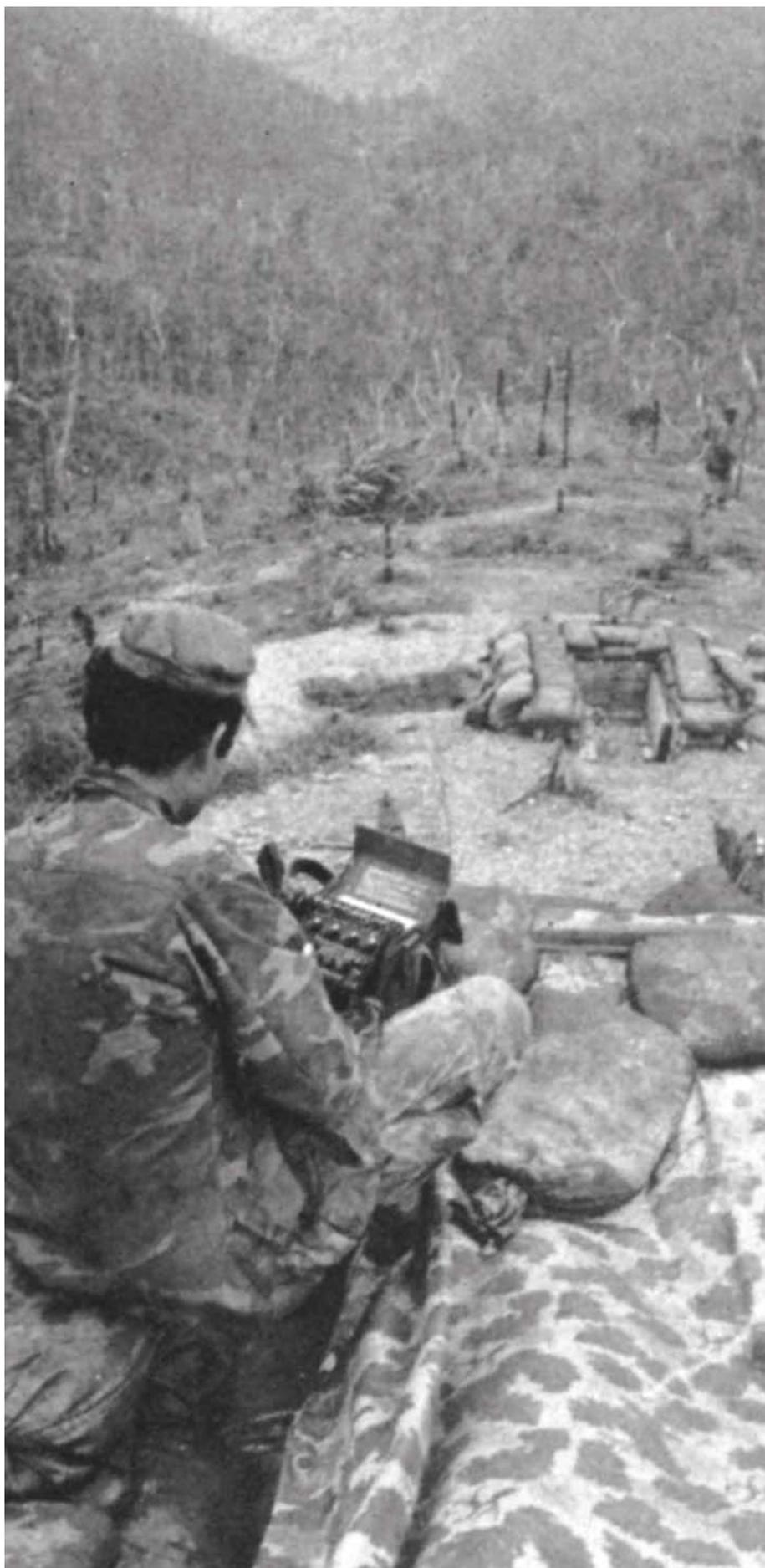
“I'd rather be a grunt than a general. Don't take me wrong, I mean I want to get out of the Corps and finish my education, but if I had a choice about what field to serve in the Marine Corps, I'd choose to be a ground pounder,” Vasquez said.

“Marines here are great,” Second Lieutenant Robert B. Haseman said. He's the weapons platoon commander.

“Their spirit is good. They seem to enjoy themselves in bad circumstances. Guess you could call them ‘motivated’ or ‘proud.’ ”

The squad will move off the mountain, onto ships and off to Okinawa.

But who can forget that a unit of 3/4, first north and last out, once sat on Dong Ha Mountain? And in the mud and the crud of the monsoon rain; in the fog and the mist; in the boredom and the chill lived a group of Marines ... and they laughed!



**Before setting up for the night, LCpl Ronald E. Vasquez checks out a Seismic Intrusion Detector, used to warn of approaching enemy.**

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