

**So doc, you wanna be in recon? Two corpsmen learned the hard way, on the job in Vietnam**

Keene, R R  
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Courtesy of Bob Buehl

Courtesy of Ed Henry

# **So Doc, You Wanna Be in Recon?**

## **Two Corpsmen Learned the Hard Way, On the Job in Vietnam**

By R. R. Keene

*"For the most part, all the 'Docs' were considered Marines. They were our Docs. Nobody else better abuse them. Only us."*

—Bob Gwinn, former sergeant  
1st Recon Bn  
Republic of Vietnam, 1968

**W**hen Hospital Corpsman Third Class Robert G. "Doc" Buehl Jr. reported to "Echo" Company, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, Vietnam in 1968, the company executive officer, First Lieutenant Pete Badger, told him straight up: "If you think you're gonna run around with your little doctor bag, I got news for you."

Bob Buehl was 21 years of age, and in recon circles 21 was ancient. The fact that he was also a naval reservist who had never even been in a Navy ship was not considered a plus on the recon survival scale.

A good part of his reason for being in recon at Da Nang on Hill 327's Camp Reasoner came in the form of Buehl's cohort, friend and fellow corpsman, HM3 Edward "Doc" Henry Jr.

Ed Henry was a likable guy both then and now. Back in 1968, Henry was a former cross-country runner and railroad worker from the Midwest with a hankering for adventure. Buehl had known Henry since their days together in Field Medical School at Camp Lejeune, N.C. Although Henry was a year younger than Buehl, he had a persuasive gift of gab. Buehl recalled how Henry "almost had me talked into skydiving" over the Carolinas.

Later, on their flight to Vietnam, Buehl remembered Henry had talked to someone familiar with Marine reconnaissance, "and he managed to convince me recon would be a good place to go."

Henry told it a little differently. "I really had no idea of what recon was. It sounded a little more intriguing, and it sounded a lot safer being with seven guys than with about 200 out in the field somewhere. It just sounded like something a little different to try, and we both decided to go with recon."

When they arrived in Vietnam, they reported to the division surgeon's office at headquarters, First Marine Division for further assignment. They discovered that all corpsmen in the lower enlisted grades were assigned to grunt units unless they volunteered for recon.

Henry said, "When they asked for vol-

unteers, Bob and I were together and we put our hands up."

"Ed and I did this the morning after we arrived in Da Nang," said Buehl. Both soon realized there were two types of corpsmen in recon: those who actually had the recon military occupational specialty through the recon training and the two of them. "We would have to train on the job," said Buehl.

Buehl did a little self-diagnosis. He had been "fairly athletic" while growing up. He was an Eagle Scout who had a lot of camping and hiking behind him. But recon was a tough outfit, where a lapse in professionalism could easily prove terminal. They would have to learn fast, very fast. He also knew they would both have to improve their physical stamina quickly if they were to ever come close to keeping up. They did.



The jungle is still an enigma, but less deadly. (Photo by R. R. Keene)

*"If you think you're gonna run around with your little doctor bag, I got news for you."*

—1stLt Pete Badger

"When we got to recon, several people, including a fellow 'Doc,' told me I wouldn't be able to handle it," said Henry. "Fooled them."

"I've always maintained that corpsmen are really 'wanna-be Marines,'" said Buehl, who in truth knows it was more than Henry that put him into recon. "First, you have to say 'I want to be a corpsman' when you are making the decision with the Navy as to where you want to go for an MOS. Then you have to go and really do some things deliberately to end up with the Marines."

Buehl said they also had one other advantage. "Unlike the grunts, almost all of the recon units were very short of corpsmen, and they were very happy to get us."

Thus, the company XO's admonition was tempered with an explanation. "He explained what I was going to be required to do and he told me why," said Buehl, who still remembers: "The over-

riding purpose of reconnaissance in the area was to protect the gear being sent to Da Nang. We were out in what was referred to as the 'Rocket Belt' [the hills around Da Nang from where enemy rockets could be launched] to intercept enemy troops, detect large troop movements toward Da Nang and see to it they were attacked by infantry units, air or artillery. We were there to prevent them attacking the air base, which they thought was a primary target being it was the main facility in the I Corps area."

Both the corpsmen are still friends and returned to Vietnam this past June with Military Historical Tours. They had come back for what Ed Henry termed a reality check.

"Over the years I'd find myself dreaming of Vietnam, thinking of things that had happened and wondering if what I experienced was real or just dreams."

"When we touched down in Da Nang

**Opposite page: There were two kinds of corpsmen in recon: those who actually had the recon MOS through training and HM3 Bob Buehl (left) and HM3 Ed Henry, who volunteered for recon on their first full day in country.**



Above: The newness quickly wore off, and sweat-soaked Doc Ed Henry gained endurance on patrols in the bush.

Below: Waiting at an LZ for liftoff to another mission, Doc Bob Buehl was just another member of his recon team. What happened to him happened to all.



this time, I got goose bumps knowing that after 33 years I was returning and looking at the same jungles I operated in with recon."

For Ed Henry, the reality of being back in "the Nam" hit home on an old landing zone where he had made his first patrol. He stood on "that LZ remembering that same place some 33 years ago—hot, with red dust all over kicked up by the helicopters."

That they became good corpsmen and did their jobs is a matter of record. But back then they worried about survival and taking care of their fellow Marines.

"We got kidded a little about being 'squids,'" said Henry, who nodded in agreement with Buehl when he said, "I got no complaints. They took good care of me."

"At the same time, we weren't shown any leniency," said Henry. "I mean we were part of the team. We helped carry the ammo and the rest for the patrols."

Buehl added: "I learned to clean and take extra care of my M16 rifle, a weapon I had never seen before, because I wanted it to work. And I never had a misfire. I learned about web gear, how to use the radio in an emergency, how to use camouflage paint sticks, how to dress for stealth in the jungle, learned rappelling, learned about grenades and other ordnance quickly. I got in shape the hard way, humping the mountains." Corpsmen carried one medical bag, extra battle dressings, an M16 rifle, magazines and fragmentation grenades for their unit.

One of the recon leathernecks on the recent trip talked of the unit corpsmen who were strikingly similar to Henry and Buehl in their devotion to fellow members of their teams: "They carried tons of medical gear, and I can't tell you how many times they carried an extra health unit. You would also discover your Doc was carrying an extra four quarts of water just in case his 'stupid Marines' ran out."

Buehl added, "That's because we were all in it together. I also learned something about digging trenches and filling sandbags. Battalion reported to us that the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] had been spotted in the area humping a recoilless rifle and might be heading our way.

"Everyone knew bunkers offered little protection against such a weapon, so we dug the trenches deep and filled sandbags at a very quick pace. That night we slept in the trenches. Fortunately for us the NVA hit the Special Forces camp up river."

What was it like being a corpsman in the field with recon? Both said they were just another member of the team, emphasizing that what happened to one happened to all. But corpsmen had prescribed duties too. They kept track of the medical records for the Marines in their platoons and kept them current. They gave shots as needed, including penicillin. When vaccinations were not listed in the records, the corpsmen would break out the needles. Big medical problems meant sending a Marine to the Battalion Aid Station at Camp Reasoner. Everything else, such as cuts and rashes, was left to the corpsman's diagnosis and remedies.

In the bush or out on observation posts, the corpsman was usually tasked with taking care of the medical needs of seven to 16 men. That entailed ensuring everyone took his malaria tablets, drank enough water and swallowed the salt tablets. "I ended up putting antibiotic ointment on small cuts and scratches, treating insect bites and removing leeches from every place you can imagine," said Buehl.

Medically it wasn't a real challenge, until things hit the fan.

"My first combat came on my 24th day in Vietnam," Buehl said. In May 1968, Buehl and his team were on a special operation called "Quick Track" near the Laotian border. Five Marines from his team went out from their hasty jungle base camp to watch a river suspected of being an NVA supply route. "Our main group of 35 included 20 Army of the Republic of Vietnam Rangers and their Australian and U.S. Special Forces 'Green Beret' advisors."

It was in the afternoon when the five-man team took fire at close quarters from approximately 15 NVA soldiers. "The fighting was so close to the rest of us that NVA bullets came through the trees just above our heads," said Buehl. "I was too green to realize that I should be scared."

"Ron Anderson, one of our Marines in the five-man patrol, was killed outright, and another suffered shrapnel wounds. I was ready to run right out to where they were and treat them."



COURTESY OF ED HENRY

In 1968 Ed Henry took time to enjoy the sunset 28 kilometers west of Da Nang, where recon had its own radio relay and rest area at Ba Na in the ruins of an old French resort, 4,890 feet above sea level and approximately 20 degrees cooler than any place on the coast.

Two weeks later on Hill 344, Buehl became more seasoned. "We were hit, and several Marines were wounded, including one very badly injured from a grenade blast," Buehl recalled. "I operated strictly on instinct and training. I started an IV [intravenous] under the cover of a poncho liner and tried to bandage what I could. We got the very seriously wounded Marine off the hill during the fire-fight, but he died two weeks later. That really hurt me personally."

Oddly enough for Buehl it was not when treating Marines but when firing his rifle while under attack that "it finally dawned on me that this was for real, and then I felt plenty of fear. We got hit two nights in a row and had a total of four wounded."

"My last real combat came on Hill 200 on Aug. 22, 1968. By this time I had four months in recon and felt pretty experienced," Buehl explained. "We were on 100-percent alert."

"They hit us late in the evening. We killed a sapper in the wire, and then the small arms opened up. We called "Spooky" [an Air Force C-130 gunship] on station. He was working over the area when my team's radioman was struck in the upper chest with a small-caliber round."

"I went to him and found the bullet

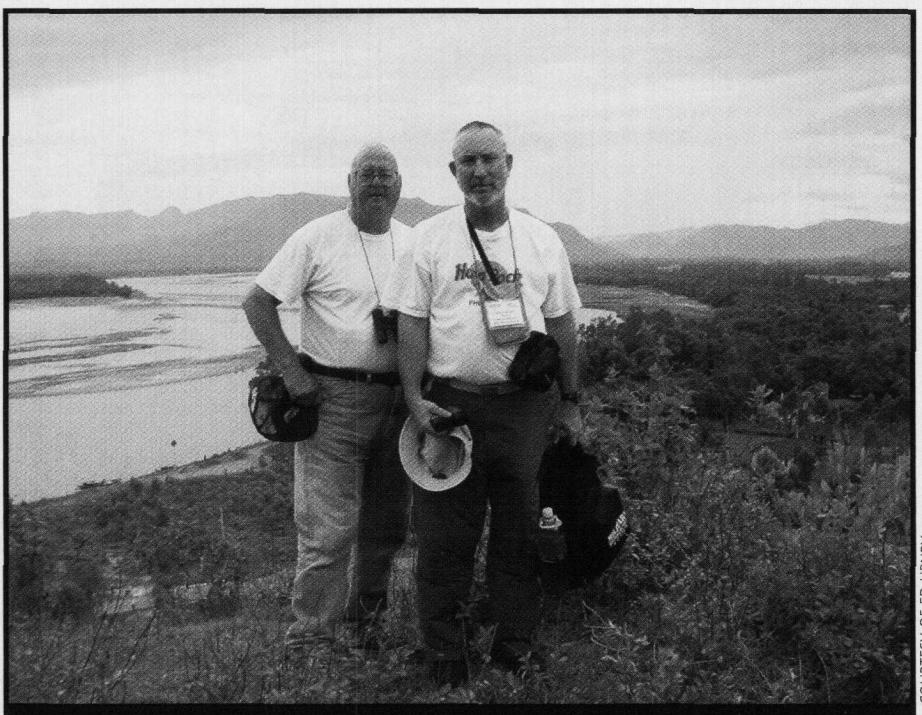
was lodged in his spine. He was paralyzed from the shoulders down. I worked to keep him stabilized, and we tried to get a medical evacuation by helicopter. During the attempt to land the medevac, our platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant William Rash, was also struck by shrapnel from an exploding grenade as he tried to direct the chopper into our position."

Previously, Rash had led the Marines on Operation Quick Track and was responsible for getting everyone out, essentially saving their lives. Buehl recalled how he, Rash and the others had cele-



The Buddhist symbol of peace, the lotus, has taken root in Vietnam.  
(Photo by R. R. Keene)

*Medically it wasn't a real challenge, until things hit the fan.*



COURTESY OF ED HENRY

"I got goose bumps knowing that after 33 years I was returning and looking at the same jungles I operated in with recon," said Ed Henry (left), who recently posed with Bob Buehl on Hill 200 southwest of Da Nang. Hill 200 has special poignancy to both men, but especially to Buehl, who lost a fellow Marine on the site.

brated with beer after being delivered from the operation. The frustration of being a corpsman was in the fact that much too often in such situations there really was nothing anyone could do.

"I raced across the hill to where [Rash] lay mortally wounded on the top of a bunker. Not thinking about anything but him, I jumped up and tried to render aid. But his wound was so bad he died in my arms."

Buehl continued: "It was like time stood still and I could not hear anything around me. The next thing I heard was Corporal Stan Grodski hollering for me to get down off the bunker before I got hit.

"Corpsmen take an oath similar to that of a doctor, and we take it pretty seriously. It was my training that got me through and a desire to make sure the Marines with me came home in one piece.

"During combat the adrenaline is pumping so much that you go into automatic and do what you have been trained to do," Buehl explained.

Marine 1st Lt L. J. Grassilli, who wrote Buehl's combat enlisted performance evaluation, gave the corpsman what he considered his best award by writing: "He goes to the field as the only medical representative with his unit, and his comrades respect his skill as a corpsman and know they can depend on him in any situation. HM3 Buehl has been faced with seriously injured men and has acted

quickly and effectively in the treatment of their wounds. He has been an outstanding example of what a good recon corpsman should be."

Until his combat tour in Vietnam, Buehl had never heard "about the honor and the prestige of being with recon. So we felt very honored that we didn't go

### The Navy's Finest

*They were different than we,  
a bit more gentle,  
usually less profane,  
more well-read and not quite as  
rough around the edges,  
but they weren't soft  
and didn't lack courage.*

*They went on every patrol and  
night ambush, stood their share of  
watches on the perimeter of some  
lonely combat outpost and  
saw every hot LZ that we did.*

*If you need a translation for  
"gung ho," it's "working together."*

*If you need an example,  
it's a Navy corpsman.*

—R. C. Suciu

through the training, but mainly by volunteering we got to serve with them. I went on to train several recon Marines as aid-men to cover other teams operating without a corpsman. For not having any formal medical training, they did an outstanding job."

Henry said, "It's been a real honor being connected with the Marine Corps. I've been proud of it ever since.

"I never really intended to, but I got out of the service," shrugged Henry. "Even though I spent time humping up and down hills, I went back to my old job on the railroad, and two months ago I retired from the railroad with 35 years."

Buehl also broke off his military involvement. "I had a hard time for a long time reconciling what I thought were my failures as a medical person because we lost people, and I really felt guilty for the three guys who died and another one who ended up paralyzed for life.

"I distanced myself deliberately from medical-type jobs, and I've worked for General Motors [Corporation] for 23 years assembling pickup trucks. I had no desire after Vietnam to be involved with anything medically because there's always that feeling that I could have done something more.

"However, I also felt then and still do today that I made the right choice. Corpsmen who served with the grunt units and had to deal with mass casualty situations certainly are my heroes. There were 628 Navy hospital corpsmen who died in Vietnam, and another 3,353 were wounded. I am sure if units were identified it would show that most were serving with the grunts."

Former Corporal Roger LaRue, who served from 1969 to 1970 in Vietnam with recon, and former Sergeant Bob Gwinn, who served from 1968 to 1969 in Vietnam with recon, had sat for the most part listening to the two corpsmen.

Gwinn spoke first and measured his words. "The docs. I was awestruck on the flight over when someone gave me a copy of the *Marine Corps Times*. I noticed two stories. One was on the new Marine Corps utility uniform, and I understand a lot of the digital patterns are little eagle, globe and anchor emblems. It tied into the next story. The gist of it was a controversy among some Marines as to whether or not corpsmen assigned to FMF [operating forces] units with their Marine buddies should wear an eagle, globe and anchor. I won't even hesitate. I will speak for any field Marine who has been in combat. Don't ask me whether

*"It was my training that got me through and a desire to make sure the Marines with me came home in one piece."*

—Bob Buehl

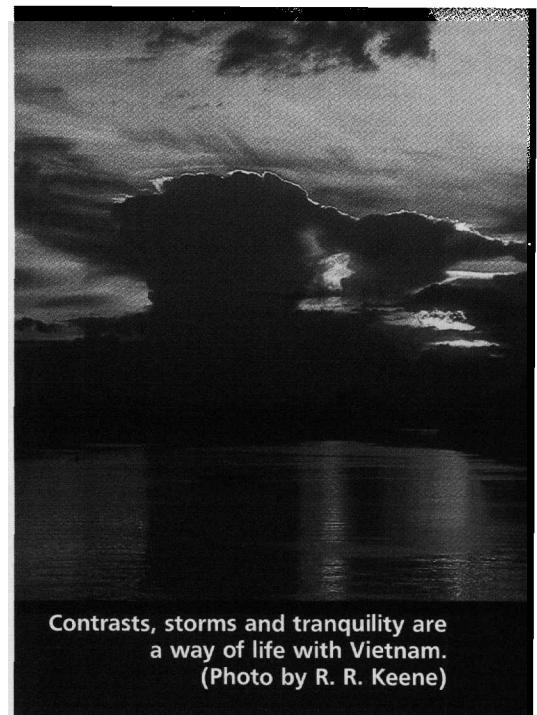
a doc is a Marine. He's a Marine. Period. He is our corpsman, and I will take Marines over that. Guys who have not been there, they don't get that vote."

Buehl said, smiling, "I remember someone at some higher level once telling me, 'You can't wear your Marine Corps uniform. You have to wear your Navy uniform.' That really torqued me off. We got issued a Marine Corps seabag."

"You got issued Marine Corps weapons," said Gwinn.

"You're our people. You're part of the Marine Corps," said LaRue. "You guys functioned as team members of long-range, deep-penetration reconnaissance teams."

"I volunteered to serve with recon," said Doc Buehl, grinning at Doc Henry. "I think the Marine Corps treats their corpsmen extremely well, and I was well taken care of. I have enjoyed the cam-



Contrasts, storms and tranquility are a way of life with Vietnam.  
(Photo by R. R. Keene)

raderie at reunions and the recent years of getting back together with my guys."

*Editor's note: Since 1775 the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps have been an unbeatable team. Oct. 13, 2001, marks the 226th birthday of the U.S. Navy—Happy Birthday, Navy!*



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