



Straight Reconnaissance

The Best Assignment in "the Corps, Bar None"

By R. R. Keene

Grunts talk of Vietnam's battles in the red clay laterite craters pock-marking Leatherneck Square, or the dusty dunes that scorched Chu Lai and Phu Bai. But when someone talks of the Que Son Mountains, moving from a half to a kilometer a day through steamy, triple-canopy jungle in the A Shau Valley or Tiger Mountain, they've probably humped with recon.

For Marine reconnaissance in Vietnam, traveling light meant packing all the water and ammo possible for a man's back to safely support and then adding a little more before dropping into the jungle. It meant moving as slowly as a sloth, quietly avoiding the trails, leaving no sign, being keen to the scent of tiger spray and the telltale pungency of the fish sauce called *nuoc-mam*.

Like so many memories of the Vietnam War, it all depended on when you were sent there, where you were sent and what you did. A change in any of those variables made it an entirely different war to those who fought it, even if they served in recon. Maybe, especially if they served in recon.

Take Roger LaRue, Bob Gwinn, Ron Huegel, Bob Buehl and Ed Henry Jr.,

Sgt Bob Gwinn, somewhere in Elephant Valley, Republic of Vietnam, 1969: "One moment you would blunder into sheer terror and overwhelming things." (Photo courtesy of Bob Gwinn)

former members of Marine reconnaissance who returned to Vietnam with Military Historical Tours in June 2001. With the exception of Ron Huegel, all are men whose bodies, when they were 18 to 20 years of age, were stronger than pack mules. They had to be. Huegel, a small, wiry Marine, made up for his lack of size with a heart two sizes too big. He pays for it with a painful gait that has lasted to this day. He was, however, not a man uncommon to recon.

Now, as older men whose loads have shifted from their backs to their bellies, they find trekking through the remnants of the old Ho Chi Minh Trail or scaling over the shale rock foothills of the Que Son Mountains no easier than it was in the 1960s and early 1970s. But they hike them nonetheless. The hot morning sun is still as unrelenting as it was then. The sweat pours off as it did then, and their hearts pound a lot harder, making them remember when they were exceptionally young and uncommonly rugged men to be reckoned with.

Roger LaRue, who was a 19-year-old corporal in 1969 and '70 with Company D, 1st Recon Battalion, is a huge, imposing sight, who on this June return trip to Vietnam discovered Bier LaRue, a beverage whose name and taste were to his liking. He with the others, after long days of again exploring those precipitous ridgelines they once worked, quaffed down liter bottles in Da Nang's Bamboo Green Hotel Restaurant. Thirty-two years is a long time, but returning to Vietnam and seeing it all again made it seem like only a few ticks off the short-timer's calendars Marines used to keep when in Vietnam.

Tested and trained Stateside as a reconnaissance Marine, LaRue, now a retired policeman, was considered a salty veteran by those coming into recon in Vietnam. "There were actually a lot of people who really had not requested a recon assignment, and once they got to Da Nang, were assigned. They were looking for infantrymen, radiomen and machine-gunners. I can't say they looked for people with more particular skills other than marksmanship. It certainly wasn't dependent on size, because we had big guys, skinny guys, little guys," LaRue said.

Once in Vietnam, those assigned to recon were sent to RIP (Reconnaissance Indoctrination Program). It was located at Camp Reasoner, built into the side of Hill 327 overlooking Da Nang. (The French Foreign Legion has Captain Jean Danjou, who in 1863 died valiantly at Camerone, Mexico. Recon has First Lieutenant Frank S. Reasoner, 3d Recon Bn, who in 1965, on Hill 10, won the Medal of Honor and died in the process.) RIP



Cpl Roger LaRue (foreground) on patrol in 1969: "If we made a klick a day, we were either making tremendous time or asking for trouble."

training was a "shake and bake" three weeks of map and compass, rappelling, rubber-boat training, patrolling techniques, tracking, anti-tracking and booby traps.

LaRue smiled, saying he had already been on two long-range, in-country patrols before attending RIP. He beamed at Bob Gwinn sitting across from him. "Bob and I were in the same team."

Gwinn was all of 19 and already a sergeant in 1969. Still crew cut and ruggedly handsome, he remembered that no matter what the military book called for, there were never enough people to go around. "There were supposed to be 12 on a team, but seven seemed to be the best number most of the time. A team consisted of point man, deuce point, pri-

mary radio operator, team leader, secondary radio operator, tail-end Charley and a corpsman, if we could get our hands on one. He would go in the center position between the two radiomen."

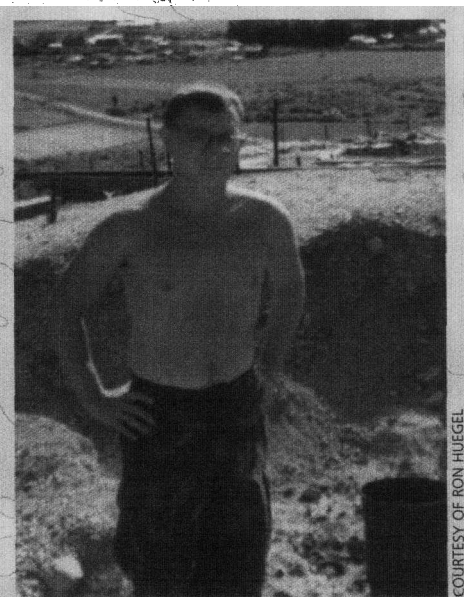
Gwinn explained why they had two radios: "You couldn't count on one and sometimes, when it got really bad, you needed to be talking to your radio relay on one and using the second to talk to your AO [aerial observer] doing the tac [tactical] air."

Gwinn paused as he remembered: "You need to understand, at some point, the link between the air wing and reconnaissance. The air wing provided us protection when we were out of artillery range. They were fast, accurate and their helicopter crews saved us. There would be no reconnaissance if it weren't for the air wing."

"There wouldn't be many of us alive," added LaRue.

If there was such a thing as what LaRue called "just a snoop, poop, straight reconnaissance" mission, it went down after a team was assigned grid squares on a map for an area of operation. Marines assigned to S-2 (Intelligence) briefed the team on every contact and sighting in the grid squares as far back as two years. LaRue said, "Most missions were to search and locate base camps, watch trails or take prisoners."

"We also did 'arc light' BDA [bomb damage assessments]," said Bob Buehl. Arc lights were the Armageddon-like electrical storms caused by the dust from U.S. Air Force B-52 Stratofortress massive carpet-bombing. At 21 years of age, Buehl was considered an old man when he and Ed Henry joined Co E, 1st Recon Bn in 1968 as Navy corpsmen. They re-



Cpl Ron Huegel, age 19, at Thuong Duc, Special Forces Camp in 1970: "Everyone had to count on everyone else."



In 1969 they left for their missions clambering aboard CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters out of Camp Reasoner at Hill 327 near Da Nang. (Photo courtesy of Bob Gwinn)

ceived no special treatment and were sent on patrols. "We went in to the area of an arc light to assess what the results were."

LaRue agreed: "You'd see a lot of people walking around with blood coming out of their noses and ears. Occasionally, they'd be shooting at you."

Most combatants did not fear the proverbial bullet with their name on it. They feared more the round that said "To whom it may concern," especially in recon where getting into a firefight was not on the list of what makes a successful mission. Nonetheless they went prepared.

The standard weapons were the M16A1 service rifle, M79 grenade launcher and .45-caliber pistol. LaRue rattled off the list of ordnance like it was printed in front of him. "I carried 36 magazines with 18 rounds each. (Two rounds were removed to preserve the magazine spring and thus keep the rounds from jamming.) I also carried a bandolier of 5.56 [M16 ammo] in my pack."

Bob Gwinn interrupted, "It was good to do that, because once I got down to 21 bullets."

LaRue said, "I carried 10 grenades, two of which were smoke, a white phosphorus, a gas and six frags."

Gwinn added two thermite grenades for the radios.

Everyone remembered carrying a gas mask. Buehl said, "Even had occasion to use it once." He added that on his patrols, the back-up radio operator also served as grenadier.

LaRue continued: "We split up the M79 rounds among the team. I carried 25 rounds per M79: HE [high explosive], white phosphorus, shotgun, you know, buckshot. I never got flechette [dart rounds] for the M79. They say they had it, but I just didn't get any. I carried a pistol with 10 magazines and a Ka-Bar [knife] and a minimum of eight canteens of water."

Figuring in rations, extra batteries for the radiomen, clothing items and other items needed in the field, the average load per Marine was "85 pounds," said LaRue. Add approximately 20 lbs. if you were carrying a radio.

"We had a Force Recon and battalion requirement that you had to take an M14 rifle as your squad automatic weapon and to mark targets with white phosphorus rifle grenades," said Gwinn.

Ron Huegel, who served with 1st Force Recon and Co B, 1st Recon Bn in 1970

and 1971, said that when he arrived in Vietnam, "There were few M14s. Most of the teams carried M16s or CAR15s bartered from the Air Force."

There seems to have been an assortment of other weapons. Ed Henry recalled patrols carrying an M60 machine gun all the time. Others carried them occasionally.

"We never took an M60 unless we were going on a Stingray mission," LaRue explained. Unlike reconnaissance missions, Stingray missions were designed "to go out and deliberately make contact and make kills."

"We'd start a fight and then call all our supporting assets (such as air and artillery) on them," said Gwinn. He added the all-important caveat, "But in the meantime, we had to hold our own."

Other weapons included everything from Swedish K to Thompson submachine guns.

Henry recalls his point man always carried a 12-gauge shotgun with standard 00 buckshot rounds. Huegel said, "I seem to recall sometimes a team member carrying a shotgun. The M79 also had shotgun and flechette rounds."

"I know a corpsman who carried a

shotgun," said Buehl. "We used to split the M79 rounds between us. I carried an M16, 20 magazines, three or four frags. For a noncombatant, I thought that was probably enough." The rest of the corpsman's load was medical supplies, as much as he could carry, and when he was overloaded, the corpsman spread it around.

Like all wars, fighting was a young man's burden. The responsibility of being a patrol leader fell to young corporals or "lance corporals!" they all responded from around the table in unison.

Gwinn elaborated: "You worked yourself through sort of an experience curve, and it was sort of by consensus that you were considered experienced enough to be assigned a team."

"But I also made patrols with lieutenants, staff sergeants and sergeants. The ones made with the officers were much less [often] than with the noncommissioned officers," recalled Ed Henry.

"Everybody else who came along, whether it was the platoon commander or platoon sergeant, was a straphanger," said LaRue.

Henry said, "The patrols were supposed to last five or six days, but it seems they always got extended a day or two."

"Unless things went absolutely awry," said LaRue. According to Gwinn, that could happen "30 seconds into a mission."

They left for their missions clambering aboard CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters out of Camp Reasoner and sometimes An Hoa southwest of Da Nang near the Que Son Mountains.

Most of the missions started out simple enough. A team would receive an order telling it where it was going and then it was handed a map. "We'd get a three or four klick [kilometer] by five or six klick, free fire zone," said Gwinn. "Once inserted, we'd move through the zone and find out what was there. We were there to observe and report. Period."

"That's how most of them started out. Sometimes we would go through incredibly beautiful territory. Sometimes you wouldn't hear a single shot or see a single footprint. Nonetheless it was very exhausting, and it was very, very hard work," Gwinn added.

"If we made a klick a day, we were either making tremendous time or asking for trouble and cutting trails," said LaRue. "Most of the terrain was all up and down."

"We also did crash site investigations to locate the crew or to destroy equipment that might be on an aircraft that went down," he added. "We would also go back into areas after grunt operations."

We went back into areas such as Charlie Ridge to see if the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] had come back. We would look for new bunkers, for signs that they had rebuilt stuff that had been destroyed. We looked for signs. Old signs were booby traps where water had washed away all the cover. The traps were still hot, but they were obvious. Punji stakes with their cover gone were just lying there. We marked a lot of that stuff.

"When we found a bunch of unexploded ordnance, we'd mark it and they'd send in a fighter-bomber hopefully to get secondary explosions and blow the stuff up. Caches of food we'd salt with powdered and liquid CS [tear gas] because we weren't going to chopper it out. A lot of time we'd booby trap weapons caches. For a while we had Lake City Armory ammunition for AK47 rifles. We'd salt that into the ammunition stores. The ammunition, instead of shooting functionally, would explode. Hopefully, they would lose confidence in their arms and their weapons," LaRue explained.

Most of the missions went off the way one would hope. But there were others.

"Sometimes the communists didn't know you were there, and sometimes they knew," said Buehl. "Once our helicopters set one of our teams right in the middle of an NVA camp. It was instant contact."

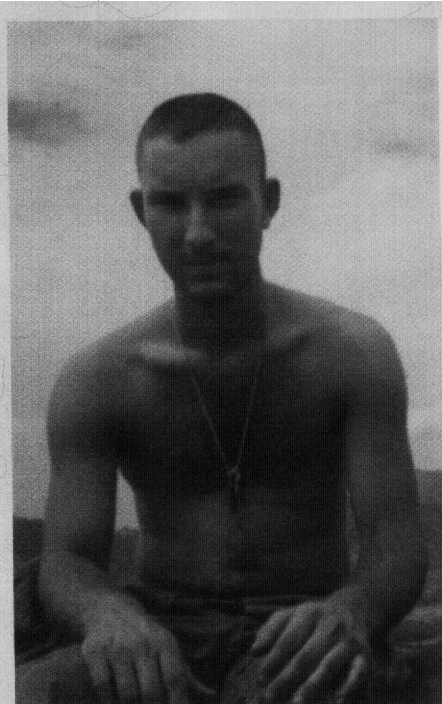
"Another time up on Charlie Ridge it was a surprise for them when they walked up on us. Our machine-gunner opened up, and they set world records going the other way."

LaRue nodded, "I'll use the word, because I think it is accurate. We sometimes blundered into base camps, particularly in areas where you had double and triple

canopy and all of a sudden you're in a clearing and you look around and there's bunkers behind you and [also] lean-tos."

"I remember once it was a transit mess hall," said Gwinn. "They were sitting there eating. It all happened so fast. We simply walked another meter, and the point and the deuce point were in the mess hall."

It didn't matter how it happened, but once a team was spotted or if a team member got hurt, the patrol was terminated. How patrol members then got out safely



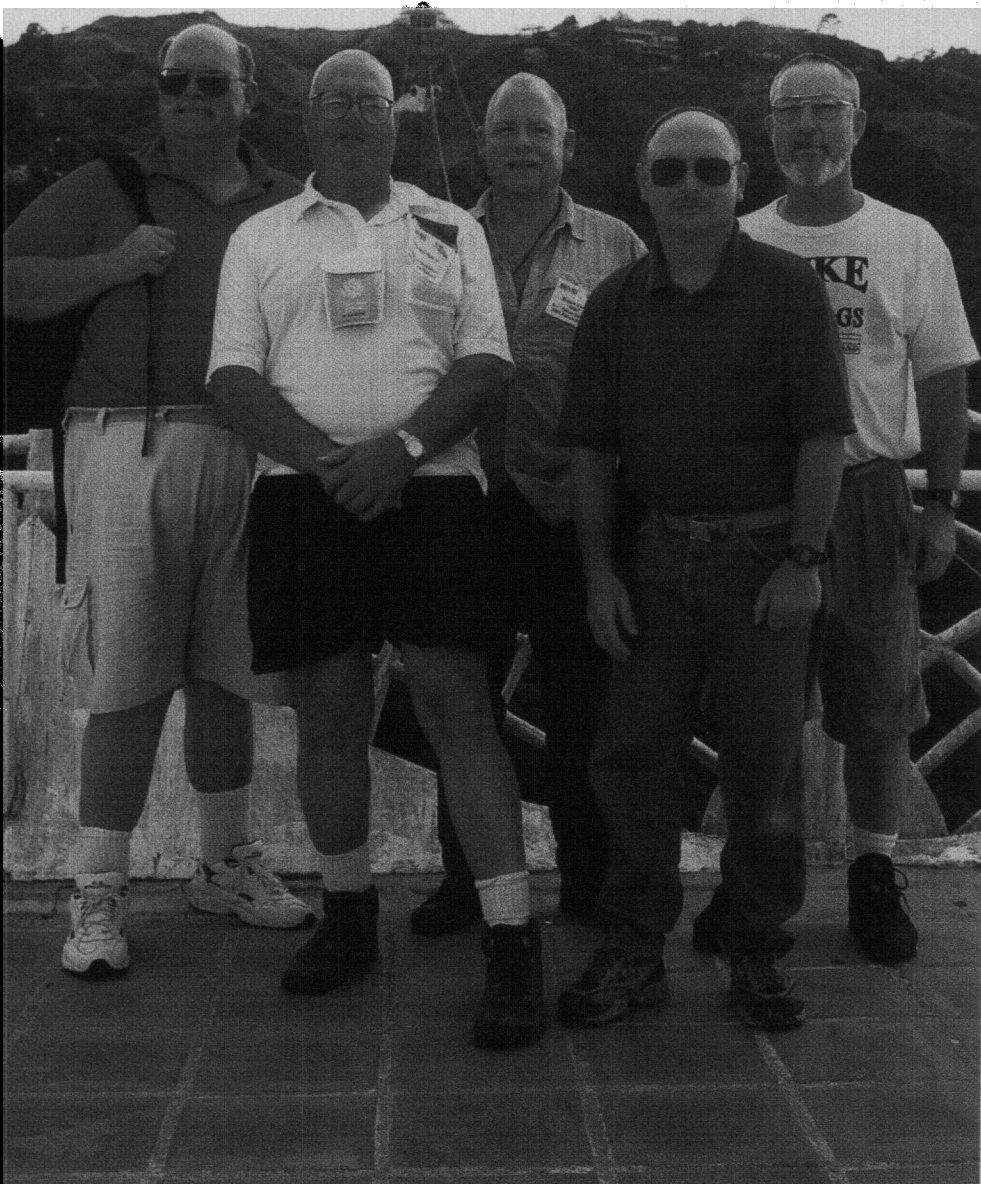
COURTESY OF BOB BUEHL

Above: HM3 Bob Buehl volunteered for recon in 1968.

Below: Gwinn caught "40 winks" while waiting for a helicopter after finishing his patrol.



GYSGT BOB JORDAN



Left to right: Roger LaRue, Ed Henry Jr., Bob Gwinn, Ron Huegel and Bob Buehl gathered once more atop Ba Na, an old recon radio relay and rest area, 28 kilometers from Da Nang and 4,890 feet above sea level. "I felt like I was in a new team," said Gwinn. "A lot of those same elements started resurfacing."

evolved over time and with experience.

By the time LaRue and Gwinn arrived in country the plan was to stay together. LaRue explained: "If we took fire and got hit, we would do whatever we could do right then to treat the wounded. Then we'd call in and let our command know what was going on. We had a list of LZs [landing zones] and would try to figure out which was the closest.

W if you had contact or you walked into an ambush, you would do whatever you could do to subdue their fire and take them. Once that was completed you wanted to get out. [You took] your wounded and your dead with you and you would beat feet to an LZ, screaming over the radio for people to come get you.

"Sometimes they'd tell you they couldn't get into this place or that place. An AO

would try to come up as quick as possible to find your LZs, find you and see what kind of Indians were coming after you.

"It wasn't easy. Once we had our point and deuce point both machine-gunned. We were able to get them on a helicopter, but the rest of us were chased for two days.

"When it got to where you had more wounded and dead than you could get out, you found a place to fight from and stood your ground."

"And called in tac air all the way around you," said Gwinn.

"That's also when recon sent in reaction forces," said Buehl. "Probably a couple of recon teams."

They all took pride in noting that on board one of those "birds" with the reaction team were usually the battalion

commander, company commander, platoon sergeant and the sergeant major.

"They were right there. We had some of the best officers who existed," said LaRue. "Every time we got shot out on an emergency extraction, our brass was on board one of those two choppers. In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Jack Grace, who was a tremendous man, got two Purple Hearts in seven days. One of them was getting us out of Happy Valley.

"I went in with another team," explained LaRue, "but when we got trapped, the birds came and got us. We had only one guy wounded, but he was shot through both legs. We carried him to some big rocks and made our stand. When they came and got us, Lieutenant Colonel Grace was on the helicopter and caught a piece of shrapnel from a .50-caliber round in the back of his neck and ear. On that particular incident, the guy behind me was shot. We turned and looked, and the NVA were on line from one side of the clearing to the other—running on line. They had an officer blowing a whistle."

"It was not unusual for 'em to use that tactic when they thought a recon team had been inserted," said Buehl. "They'd get on line to try to find you. They did it with one of our teams. They came through at night, on line in the general vicinity, firing, and they hit Danny Orsland in the head and killed him."

"You'd eventually get picked up," said Gwinn, "and all of a sudden you're back getting your cold recon shower. There were quite a few like that. There were quite a few that weren't."

Over the years and over a friendly drink, they all took pride in remembering that recon and the Marines in it were "very tight" when it came to getting along.

"I think the whole battalion was tight," said LaRue. "You could literally lay money on your rack, forget about it, go off to chow and remember: 'Oh crap, I left my money out.' You'd come back, and it was all there. However, if you had a package of chocolate-chip cookies, they were history."

Buehl explained: "You spent day after day, hour after hour with the same few people. You talked about everything that had happened in your life up to that point, so they became like friends, like family, like brothers. We were tight. When those people got killed or got hurt, it was tough. That's why it was all business when you went in the bush. Everybody knew that their lives depended on one another and doing the job right. That's what people did. I think we were damned good at what we did. I think the success of the reconnaissance operations in Vietnam speaks for itself."

"Among the Americans serving on Iwo island, uncommon valor was a common virtue." —Adm. Chester A. Nimitz

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Huegel said, "That's reflected in 1st Force [Reconnaissance]. When I was with them we had only five killed. And only two of those were the result of direct enemy action. One was indirect, one was a lightning strike, and a tiger killed one. You were each other's lifeline. So you could not afford to have that animosity out there. Everyone had to count on everyone else."

"One moment you would blunder into sheer terror and overwhelming things," said Gwinn. "And at two o'clock the next morning it would be monsoon raining and you'd be wrapped up in poncho liners hugging each other to keep warm. You can't get any tighter than that."

"I personally believe that Marine Reconnaissance was the best assignment in the Marine Corps, bar none," said LaRue. "But I will swear until the day I die, the reason we took so few casualties and the reason that we are alive today is the training and the discipline and the esprit de corps that we got in the standard Marine Corps training. I would not have wanted to go to the bush with any other unit."

"Because we all got a little different experience based on our time over here, I think reconnaissance evolved," said Buehl. "I believe we came to Vietnam with no idea of really what was going to



HM3 Ed Henry Jr., who served in 1968: "The patrols were supposed to last five or six days, but it seems they always got extended a day or two." (Photo courtesy of Ed Henry)

work, and I think little by little, by trial and error, we found out what was the best way to do things."

They were finishing their Bier LaRue, and talk turned from the past to the present. They had debriefed, almost as they had after missions during the war. Al-

most as if finally catching his breath, Roger LaRue said revisiting the battle sites "reminded me of how horribly hard the humping was, the ups and downs. The heat. This time we saw no leeches, no elephants and only saw tiger tracks."

Ed Henry was able to recall "the sounds and smells of the jungle. The last couple of days [during this trip] I could hear them blasting in some quarries. It was like sitting on a hill and hearing the artillery rounds."

Bob Buehl smiled and said being on those hills again "revived my memories of how bad it was on the observation posts day in and day out getting cooked by the sun. I remembered how tough it was, but also remembered we were young and we did the job."

For Bob Gwinn it was "almost like a reborn camaraderie. I felt like I was in a new team. A lot of those same elements started resurfacing."

Ron Huegel got the last word. "On these tours you do get that feeling of togetherness, and it doesn't matter whether you were a corporal or a colonel. It is really interesting to come back with people who served at different times and with different units and getting a little bit more of the big picture of what went on in Vietnam."

