



# The Night Recon Called In “Guns-A-Go-Go”

Story by R. R. Keene • Photos courtesy of Bob Gwinn

It was 1969, the Chinese Year of the Cock. A time when the Plastic Ono Band sang “Give Peace a Chance” and Marines from recon answered, “Yeah man! There it is!” and from Hill 119 helped blow the livin’ hell out of a regiment of North Vietnamese.

Former Sergeant Bob Gwinn and former Corporal Roger LaRue returned to Vietnam’s Hill 119 after a 32-year interlude — back across what they used to call the “Big Pond,” from where they lived in

the “land of the big PX”: CONUS, the Continental United States.

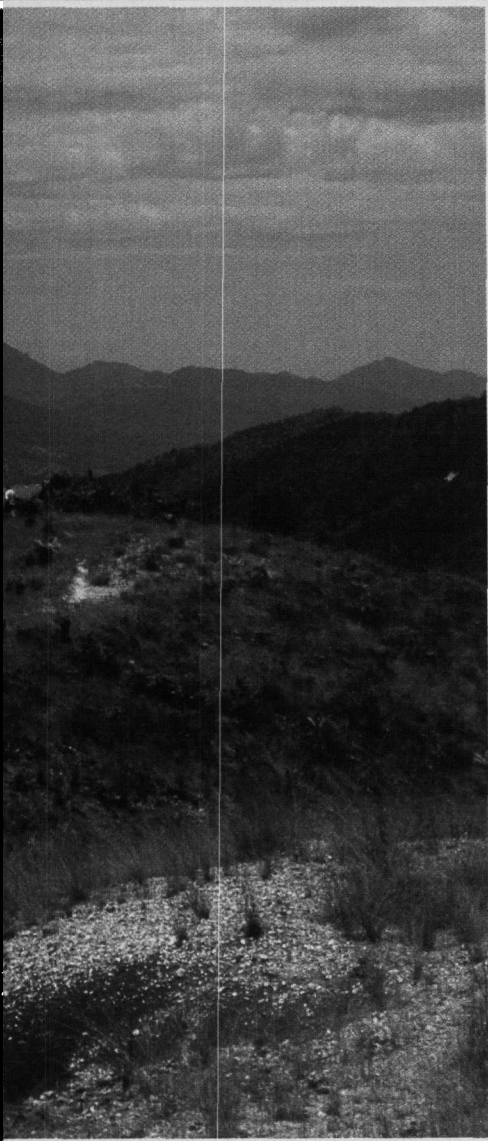
In their late teens, they not only had been the forward eyes and ears of the Marine Corps at war but also had been at the pinnacle of a tumultuous era: “The Sixties,” peace, love, sex and drugs, none of which applied to leathernecks stewing in their own juices atop a hill in Southeast Asia.

“The rest of the world could have ceased to exist and we’d have never known,”

shrugged Gwinn, whose only memory of 1969 aside from Vietnam was the fact that astronaut Neil Armstrong had walked on the moon.

The war, although the subject of division and derision Stateside, was a very long way from the culture of “flower power.” The Marines atop Hill 119 were “Ricky Recon, swift, silent and deadly.”

While “hippie pinkos” sang “Bring Them Home,” reality for men of 1st Reconnaissance Battalion was that they



weren't going anywhere until their 13-month tour of duty was over. The only respite from their deep reconnaissance missions was being assigned periodic duty atop hills similar to 119, filling burlap sandbags, stringing tangle-foot and rolls of razor wire, and positioning claymore mines.

"There were 450,000 sandbags on that hill," said LaRue.

"How could you know that?" asked Gwinn.

"I counted 'em and personally filled most of them," was the reply.

Gwinn conceded that he might have filled the rest.

Bob Gwinn still suspects Roger LaRue of commandeering the CAR15 rifle that Gwinn had commandeered from the Air Force. As the Military Historical Tours-chartered minibus made its way toward the Que Son Mountains along Route 537, sometimes called "Liberty Road," the two argued like first-termers debating the pros and cons of being sent to the bush on missions, coming back to cold showers at Camp Reasoner in Da Nang, or doing hard time on Hill 119.

Hill 119 today, aside from having the accoutrements of war removed, probably doesn't look all that different than it did

**Hill 119 and the view from it haven't changed all that much (left and below) in the 30-plus years since 1969. Looking southwest toward what was called "Alligator Lake," it is easy to see the edge of the valley floor on the left where an NVA regiment walked into a well-planned American ambush.**

in 1969. As an observation post, the hill was better than most. It is the last mound on a ridge line that leads to the Que Son Mountains. Located maybe 25 miles south of Da Nang, it commands an excellent view of what was then Indian country: the Thu Bon River basin and Goi Noi Island to the north; the leather-neck bastion at An Hoa and the Arizona Territory to the west; and to the south, Alligator Lake on the right and a flat valley floor that gradually sank into the South China Sea on the left.

There was only one problem with Hill 119. It was as barren as the old, one-armed woman who lived in the village below, and if the Marines could see everyone moving below, rest assured everyone below knew exactly where the Marines were. No wonder 119 was buried under bags. Anyone wanting to be king of the hill had to come up with their own cover.

"The Marine Corps had men with strong backs and arms to wield picks and shovels," said LaRue, who further lamented, "You could only dig down so far because of the rocks. The idea was to build bunkers that would take a direct hit from a 60 mm mortar or a gun pass from 'Spooky' the Air Force AC-47D gunship in the event Hill 119 was overrun."

LaRue, then a lance corporal, first stepped onto Hill 119 in March 1969 to "help to monitor the big valley out there by Alligator Lake and the area of Goi Noi Island itself. We were also a radio relay point for our teams in the bush."

It was radio watch with an attitude.

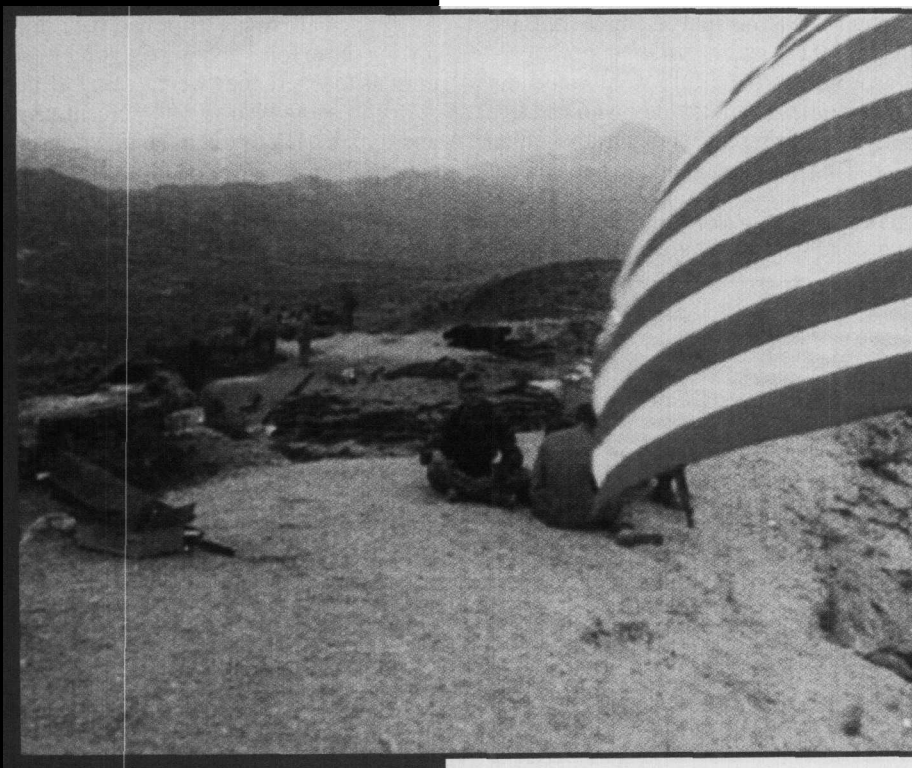
They forsook comforts provided by generators, electric lights or even candlepower. It was total blackout when the sun went down.

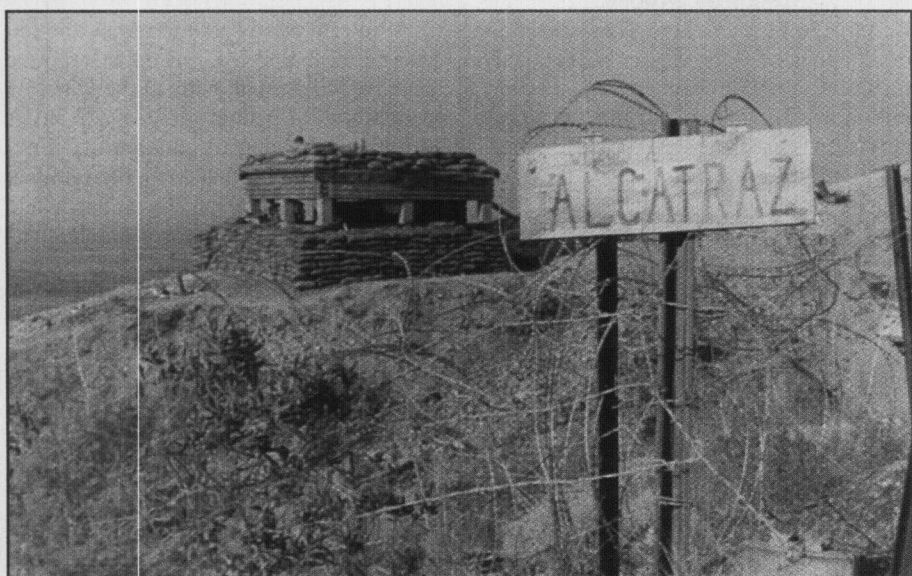
Fortunately, according to LaRue, the enemy "didn't see us as a threat or decided we weren't worth losing a bunch of people over." As a result they seldom drew more than occasional mortar or sniper fire, and at night the only thing beyond the wire was LaRue's imagination.

LaRue recalled one of his first night watches. "I was sure I heard NVA [North Vietnamese Army] coming up the hill. I had a grenade ready, but dropped the frag's pin." There was no way LaRue would find the pin in the darkness.

"I didn't want to be the first of the new guys on the hill to attract attention, so I stood the rest of the watch holding the spoon. I learned then to carry extra grenade pins."

The 18 or so Marines sent to occupy the hill at any one time were at a perpetual 50 percent alert with six hours on and six off. There were patrols every morning to the wire. Later, there were working parties and housekeeping duties.





Like Alcatraz, Hill 119 was an island of sorts in a sea of danger fraught with Viet Cong, North Vietnamese soldiers and their sympathizers. The men of recon lived on that "island," serving as the eyes and ears of the Marine Corps at war.

Food was a combination of C-rations and care packages from home.

"We usually took the pound cake, ham and eggs, beanie weenies and some long-range rats [rations], you know, the freeze-dried stuff," said LaRue. "We kept all the fruit except apricots. They gave you incoming. Even 'doggie' grunts knew that."

"There were no hot meals except for heat tabs," said Gwinn. "We added a little spice by using indigenous rations which were rice, fish and pepper tailor-made for the Vietnamese."

Conversation topics were similar to conversations held by young men everywhere in Vietnam: women, R&R (rest and relaxation), women, food, women, families.

A battery-powered transistor radio provided about the only entertainment and contact with "The World."

LaRue said, "We listened to Armed Forces Radio and Television Service, and just before 0600 every morning we would crank up the radio and listen as the disc jockey screamed, 'Good morning, Vietnam!' And we would respond with '--- you!' We also listened to certain segments of Radio Hanoi because they played more current hits from the States."

Songs from that era are memory mechanisms. "They must have played Scott McKenzie singing 'San Francisco' 10 times a day," said LaRue, who does not need Military Historical Tours to take him back to Vietnam. He's back on Hill 119 every time he hears that song.

But they weren't there to listen to Motown. They were dealing in life-and-death matters.

"We got a set of ships' binoculars and a NOD [night observation device], which was a giant starlight scope," explained

LaRue. "We had a laser-aiming device that was linked to the guns of ships at sea. What that allowed us to do was see as far as 12 miles. We could easily pick up human figures six miles away. It had crosshairs, and you could put it on a troop concentration or put it on one person. With a burst from a laser it read out grid coordinates and could guarantee a hit within 10 yards. At that point you would call in your fire mission. We had some spectacular successes off of that hill partly because of the equipment and simply because it was a free-fire zone in a very open area."

Today at the north base of Hill 119, there are farmhouses situated close enough to pass as maybe a hamlet. Back in 1969 there was a "ville."

According to LaRue, what stood out in the ville was an old lady who had lost her arm during the French Indochina War. Thin and small under her conical

hat, she flashed a reddish-black smile from chewing the fruit of the areca palm known as beetle nut. She'd always be at the wire at dawn, bringing those who were sick or were wounded by bombs and booby traps up for medical treatment.

One night in March or April 1969, a main force of NVA marched down the ridge trail that linked Hill 119 to other hills to the west. "They blundered into our wire," said LaRue. "One of them hit a trip flare, and it was open season. We found pieces of maybe eight or 10.

"Later, there were two NVA standing at the wire with their rifles and waving *Chiêu hồi* [literally meaning 'open arms' or surrender] pamphlets. We sent people down to wrap their eyes up and bring them up."

One defector identified the one-armed lady as the head Viet Cong for the neighborhood.

Things continued on and off similarly on Hill 119 until one day in August when it received a surprise visit from the commander of the First Marine Division: Major General Ormond R. Simpson.

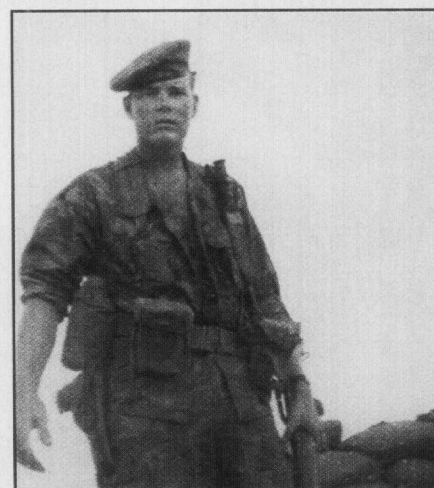
"He visited and briefed us. The division was about to launch an operation to block off Go Noi Island and Arizona Territory," said Gwinn. "The general wanted us to keep our eyes open. They started the operation early the next morning. We saw more Marine helicopters than I'd ever seen before and could hear sporadic firing off in the distance."

Sometime between midnight and 1 a.m., recon's radio watch received word of major enemy movement heading its way on the valley floor to the south and southeast.

"A Special Forces team had been following those folks and were getting word to us as to where they were," said LaRue.

Recon scrambled to 100 percent alert and took a peek through the night observation device. What Bob Gwinn saw

Cpl Roger LaRue (left) and Sgt Bob Gwinn were young Marines, but as professional and deadly as men become under the circumstances of war.





caused him to almost whistle as he exhaled. "We could actually see in column, unobstructed, 835 people as they were coming around this little mound. They were headed for Alligator Lake. We presumed they were trying to make it through the pass and into Laos. They were in file, looking sharp as they marched down that trail."

LaRue said it was "a reinforced regiment. They were wheeling carts with heavy machine guns and anti-aircraft guns."

"We had arty [artillery] registered all the time anyway," said Gwinn. "We could get an AO [aerial observer] out there almost immediately. It was probably 10 minutes from spotting them until the first VT [high explosive with a variable timed fuze] came in."

In the interim, the occupants of Hill 119 prepared.

"We left two men per bunker on the back side with one M60 [machine gun]. We had our little mortar, and we had a .50-caliber machine gun Special Forces had given us," said LaRue.

"As a reconnaissance unit, we didn't rate mortars, but we had a captured 61 mm Chinese mortar we'd brought in off a hump from somewhere," said Gwinn. "We used 60 mm illumination rounds with it at night. It worked very well."

"When they got into the valley right below us," said LaRue, "we had an artillery and air ambush set up. When it went off, it went off like clockwork."

Thump! The old 61 mm belched and flares went up.

"When we first spotted them [the NVA]," said Gwinn, "they had two security units out. One [was to the] south, and they had another security unit on our side. It was a textbook movement of troops."

Wham, Wham! In came the barrages of rolling gunfire.

"We would see the NVA trying to get away," said Gwinn. "And we could see their groups dwindle. At one time we spotted 100 NVA carrying 60 bodies, then it was 40 NVA dragging or carrying 50 or 60 bodies. Then those groups got smaller and smaller."

Recon received further assistance from a Douglas AC-47D gunship. The twin-engine gunship was nicknamed Spooky. It was a flying "Guns-A-Go-Go" with three SUU-11A 7.62 "miniguns" that expectorated 6,000 rounds per minute.

"When Spooky fires close to you, it looks like molten rain. Just little spurts, about every foot or so," said LaRue.

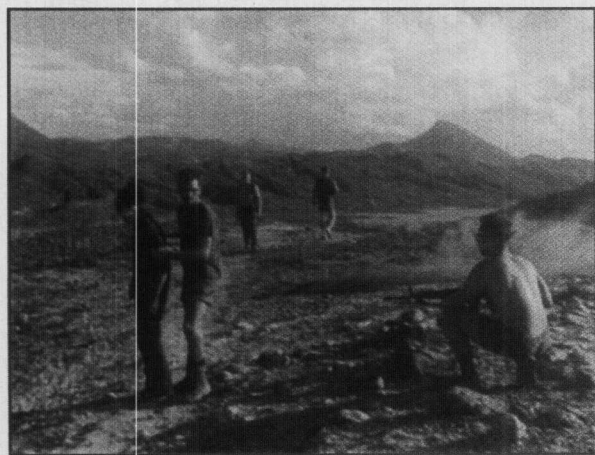
Gwinn remembered that when under air assault the Communists would, when humanly possible, hug close to the American forces for protection. It was a des-



Above: Recon Marines on Hill 119 originally commandeered a "water buffalo," which the VC blew up during a mortar attack. That gave recon leathernecks the "right" to request a new, regulation, USMC-stamped water buffalo delivered via a Marine CH-53 Sea Stallion.

Below: The 1stMarDiv commander, MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, congratulated Marines after the ambush: (left to right) PFC Frank Moneypenny, Staff Sergeant Michael Gawlak, MajGen Simpson, 1stLt Pfiefer and an unidentified Marine.





**Above:** It is still tricky footing working one's way down Hill 119's northern face. Being older does not help in the descent.

**Left:** In 1969, Marines were able to scramble up and down the hill a lot more easily. Roger LaRue's patrol came down after the ambush and captured the NVA equivalent of a sergeant major (far left), who later became a Kit Carson Scout.

perate tactic, but beat almost certain death in the open. And the only American forces around were atop Hill 119.

"We shifted a large number of VT rounds on the slope of our hill. We knew that if they came up the hill we would have been in deep Sierra," Gwinn said.

"As insurance, Roger was sitting behind an M60 machine gun," he added.

Down in the valley the fire continued and so did the carnage. "The last move-

ment we saw was at 5 o'clock in the morning.

"We still had the C-47 overhead," said Gwinn. "Their targeting guy had a Southern accent and was talking to us on the radio. He said, 'Well, I only see two fellers moving down there. They look like Mutt and Jeff.' And the C-47 rolled in on a 30-degree left bank turn. It would let go and it looked like 'Star Wars.'

"They'd fire two or three bursts and

still couldn't get those guys. Finally the guy on the radio said, 'What say we let these two fellers go just for fun?'"

LaRue watched from his machine-gun position. "Spooky had just hosed them. The kill zone actually went for miles. Tac air chased the stragglers and the people who were carrying bodies. They chased them out of the valley down another. The AOs were saying they could see NVA carrying more than 250 bodies."

Later that morning, LaRue was sent out with others to count bodies and collect weapons. "There were Ho Chi Minh sandals laying everywhere: legs, arms, pools of blood.

"We walked up on a ditch and found nine NVA alive in the draw. Their weapons [were] stacked, and they were eating. One of them was making notes as I shot him. Private First Class Robert Quigley, my point man, shot another. Sergeant Mike Gawlak shot one more, and the platoon commander, First Lieutenant Pfiefer, killed one with his shotgun. I started flipping frags. We took no casualties or injuries whatsoever other than ringing in our ears.

"All of a sudden, out of the mist of the dust and the smoke came this guy in uniform running and screaming, '*Chiêu hời! Chiêu hời!*' It was from sheer training and discipline that nobody shot him. He ran up and he lay down with his face down in the sand and his arms straight out. One of us ran up, kneeled down on him and stuck a gun in the back of his head until we got him searched and we made sure that everybody else was dead.

"The guy we captured turned out to be a sergeant major or the senior equivalent. He and the rest had been one of the point elements, and when the whole thing started they just dropped down in the draw.

"We gathered everything up and loaded him down with most of the packs and several rifles, tied him and taped him with duck tape so he couldn't run or get away and helped him up to the top of the hill," LaRue continued. "We talked to him, and while he seemed amiable to most of us, he had been murderously nasty as a prisoner can be to Bob Gwinn. Perhaps Bob's skill in Vietnamese had something to do with it."

Anyway, two months later the reformed NVA was back at battalion as a Kit Carson Scout working for the Marines, and according to LaRue, he still didn't like Bob Gwinn.

Gwinn fired back, "I bet you swapped out that CAR15 with him."

"Nah, he wanted to work with our team, but we turned him down," said LaRue, smiling.

