

HILL 881 SOUTH

Captain Bill Dabney Led His Two Companies in a Desperate 77-Day Fight, Where the Only Way Out Was To Be “Flown Off or Blown Off”

Story by R. R. Keene

Photos courtesy of David Powell

“The Secretary of the Navy, Washington, D.C. 20350-1000

“The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY CROSS to COLONEL WILLIAM H. DABNEY, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS for service as set forth in the following CITATION: ...”

Colonel William H. “Bill” Dabney, USMC (Ret), 70, was presented the Navy Cross on April 15 in Lexington, Va., at Virginia Military Institute, his alma mater, Class of 1961. It would be the last and most senior medal of many other medals for valor Bill Dabney has received since enlisting as a buck private in 1954. Yet those who know Dabney say the medal is not about him. For Marine officers, it can never be about them, but rather about those whom they lead. The veterans came, 37 of them, from across the country to VMI, to once again honor a man who led them by example and stood by them for 77 harrowing days on a hill called 881 South in Vietnam.

Virginia Military Institute is nestled in the Shenandoah Valley well above the Virginia fall line. It is a long way and a long time from an off-ramp of the Ho Chi Minh Trail known as Khe Sanh, and Hills 881 North and South. VMI and Vietnam are



Hill 881S was a classic example of Marine air supporting Marines on the ground and both being under heavy fire. A smoke screen provided by Marine A-4 Skyhawks based at Chu Lai provided some concealment for the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters of the Purple Foxes. Here, a total of 12 helicopters delivered 24 tons of critical supplies in approximately three minutes. Above: Capt Bill Dabney (left), with his Forward Air Control team, called for CAS and received target briefs.





An A-4 Skyhawk delivered smoke to cover the knoll of Hill 881S as the final procedure prior to sending helicopters into the landing zone with much-needed supplies. It was all part of what was called the "Super Gaggle," a unique logistical support tactic devised by the 1stMAW to protect aircraft and Marines as they delivered supplies to the beleaguered leathernecks holding Hill 881S for 77 days.

pungent memories. The former recalls the pleasant musk of gray uniforms, white belts, polished buckles and shakos on parade while the latter is of dust-caked helmets and tattered uniforms stinking of one's own filth while hunkered down in the laterite clay between burlap sandbags.

"For extraordinary heroism while serving as Commanding Officer of two heavily reinforced rifle companies of the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines, in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam from 21 January to 14 April 1968."

Hill 881S: The Marines there burrowed deep on Dabney's orders, which essentially admonished them to dig, dig, dig to make the trenches deeper. Sleep by day and dig by night. He promised: "I will report the first man I see without his flak jacket and helmet!" His men later would say, "Thank God he made us do it." It had become accepted as a truism, between shovels of clay, "There are only two ways to get off this hill: flown off or blown off."

They were strong, tough men of "In-

dia" and "Mike" companies, 3/26. Surrounded by the communist North Vietnamese Army (NVA), they daily risked life and limb for each other. They were so tough they took their R&R at Khe Sanh Combat Base, and they improvised not only to survive, but also to leave an indelible memory of pain on those enemies who would be fortunate enough to survive. The Marines took an unrelenting and brutal pounding and with cool efficiency provided what help they could to other Marines also under siege at Khe Sanh four miles to the east. And in doing so, they inspired others from all U.S. forces providing support in one form or another to the beleaguered garrison at Khe Sanh.

One reason for their tenacity was their "Skipper," Captain Bill Dabney. At 33, he was a well-muscled Mustang who mastered small-unit tactics and creatively commanded an assortment of trench-filthy leathernecks standing up against hordes of NVA infantry and sappers looking to make Khe Sanh another Dien Bien Phu and Hill 881N another Battle of the Little Bighorn.

The Marines, however, were neither the French nor the 7th Cavalry, and they boasted when Dabney wasn't in voice range, "Ya know, the Skipper's Chesty's son-in-law," referring to Marine Corps legend Lieutenant General Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, USMC (Ret), winner of five Navy Crosses.

They had dug in since 26 Dec. 1967 on Hill 881S and Hill 861 (more than a mile east), regimental outposts that had been seized from the NVA in bloody battles the previous spring.

North Vietnamese Army replacement units had been spotted coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They'd made a left somewhere near Lao Boa, a Laotian ghost town, and Co Roc Mountain, whose formidable cliffs were shrouded in clouds and mystery. Then the NVA units would simply disappear and it became exceptionally quiet.

That was until a Marine reconnaissance team walked into a platoon-size ambush near Hill 881N on 18 Jan. 1968. Dabney sent a platoon from India Co to recover equipment abandoned by the recon team. The platoon ran into

what was estimated to be at least a company of NVA.

His interest piqued and antenna up, Dabney knew he needed to quickly head off whatever the NVA were planning. He requested to make a company-size reconnaissance-in-force to Hill 881N about a mile away.

Mike Co, less one platoon, was to hold Hill 881S while India left the knoll and fanned into the jungle below and between the two hills. India Co pushed north and ran headlong into an NVA battalion doggedly marching south. Dabney had forced the cover and shrouds of mystery to come off the NVA, and the bullets, grenades and mortar rounds flew. By nightfall regimental commander Colonel David E. Lownds radioed "India Six Actual" (Dabney's radio call sign) to break contact and get back up 881S. Dabney's men were fighting the battalion that was walking point for two NVA divisions preparing an attack on Hills 881S, 861 and Khe Sanh.

The area erupted into firefights, artillery duels and close-in aerial bombing brought on by a Marine regiment under siege.

"During the entire period, Colonel (then Captain) Dabney's force stubbornly defended Hill 881S, a regimental outpost vital to the defense of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Following his bold spoiling attack on 20 January 1968, shattering a much larger North Vietnamese Army (NVA) force deploying to attack Hill 881S, Colonel Dabney's force was surrounded and cut off from all outside ground supply for the entire 77 day Siege of Khe Sanh."

As the senior officer, command of Hill 881S and the Marines on it fell to Dabney. Initially it made for crowded conditions with approximately 400 Marines and corpsmen. In addition to India and Mike companies, there were two 81 mm mortars, two 106 mm recoilless rifles and three 105 mm howitzers from Charlie Btry, 1st Bn, 13th Marines. At times, casualties reduced that number to about 250 Marines and corpsmen. Capt Dabney remained with his men through it all, always observing and counting ways to kill his enemies.

"Enemy snipers, machine guns, artillery, and 120-millimeter mortars responded to any daylight movement on his position. In spite of deep entrenchments, his total casualties during the siege were close to 100 percent. Helicopters were his only source of re-



An F-8E Crusader, a fast-mover from Marine All-Weather Fighter Squadron 235 based in Da Nang, made a tree-top run after being "cleared hot." The Crusader let loose a 500-lb. canister of napalm on suspected communist positions around Hill 881S. It was the kind of close air support only Marines can provide.

supply, and each such mission brought down a cauldron of fire on his landing zones. On numerous occasions Colonel Dabney raced into the landing zone under heavy hostile fire to direct debarkation of personnel and to carry wounded Marines to evacuation heli-



The Marines on Hill 881S were by necessity unshaven and unkempt, but they were also stubborn and tough—held together by their skipper, Capt Bill Dabney. They frustrated the attempts of an overwhelming communist force out to overrun them and capture or destroy the leathernecks holding Khe Sanh.

copters. The extreme difficulty of resupply resulted in conditions of hardship and deprivation seldom experienced by American forces."

"Thank God for Marine air," wrote Dabney for the Web site "The Warriors of Hill 881S." Dabney's call sign was India. He recalled the following transmission with the CH-46 helicopter pilot with Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364 "Purple Foxes" (whose call sign was "Swift").

"'Swift, India. You're taking rounds above your blades!'

"'India, Swift. Roger.' The pilot maintained his hover, holding the ramp against the hill. Five casualties aboard now, then another burst from the NVA twin .51s [caliber machine guns].

"'Swift, India. Hits in your right engine!'

"'India, Swift. Roger.'

"The pilot continued to hold his hover. The engine started smoking. Another burst. This one hit the deck beside the ramp, catching a stretcher-bearer in the leg. The crew chief jumped off the ramp and pushed the stretcher in, then dragged the wounded bearer aboard. One more emergency wounded to go. We got him aboard, and my HST [helicopter support team] man waved the 'bird' away. (Two of the priority medevacs [medical evacuations] had been stretcher-bearers and had remained aboard. The remaining four



Mortar crews got to be very proficient. From the knoll of Hill 881S, targets of opportunity were quickly spotted, registered and greeted, as in this case with 60 mm mortar rounds. Enemy response also was quick, meaning Marine gun crews never strayed far from their bunkers.

and one permanent routine medevac could wait for the next helicopter to arrive at the hill.)

"Just as the helicopter began to move away from the hillside, a couple of rounds from another burst of .51s went through the Plexiglas above the pilot's head. I didn't call.

"Figured he knew about that! The bird limped away, down toward Khe Sanh, black smoke trailing from the right engine.

" 'Swift, India. Thanks.'

" 'India, Swift. Welcome, Anytime.'

"He meant it too! Damnedest feat of pure guts, superb airmanship I'd ever seen! And so it went for 77 days."

As hills around Khe Sanh go, 881S stands out. Any activity, especially that involving helicopters, was noted by everyone in the area. To make matters worse, landing zones tended to be crowded.

Approximately 20 to 30 Marines were forced to work exposed to fire during helicopter operations. "Given volume and accuracy of mortars," Dabney wrote, "we often took more casualties, sometimes multiple."

According to Dabney, "As incoming got more frequent and more accurate ... helos picking loads up were at greater risk, and loads themselves were often

damaged by shrapnel. We figured out that the NVA tended to leave mortar tubes registered wherever they'd fired the last round, so we switched zones often."

Dabney says "Super Gaggles," a unique logistical support tactic devised by the First Marine Aircraft Wing, contributed to the survival of his Marines and the accomplishment of their mission.

"We grunts had a problem, but the zoomies came up with the solution. It was brilliant! In the first four weeks of battle, six birds were downed on Hill 881S alone, along with a bunch of WIA [wounded in action] aircrews (I don't know how many, since they reported casualties separately). We lost 100 plus KIA [killed in action] or WIA getting them in and out. In the seven weeks after Super Gaggles started, zero birds were downed (although a few were hit by antiaircraft fire), and we had perhaps 20 WIA and zero KIA during resupply. Wow!"

Super Gaggles operations, according to Dabney, required the Marines to register all their mortars on known or suspected AA sites. "At about 10 minutes prior [to helicopter resupply missions, the Marines on 881S would] fire all mortars with white phosphorus (WP) rounds on NVA AA sites. Four A-4s

[Skyhawk attack jets] would then attack mortar-marked sites with Zuni rockets. Two more would then drop delay cluster bomb units (CBUs) and high-drag 250-pound bombs in valleys north and south of the hill. Then they would drop napalm along both sides of the hill about 75 to 100 meters out to discourage NVA who would lie on their backs and fire up into the bellies of birds with their AK47s." Finally, two more would lay a WP smokescreen on either side of the hill.

This gave Marines on 881S about two minutes in which helicopters could "land, deliver, pick up [and] get out. What amazed us was that it always worked, even the first time.

"My guess, based on knowledge of Hill 881S casualties both before and after Super Gaggles, is that it saved 150 to 200 casualties and perhaps half a dozen birds."

A special bond developed between the Marines on Hill 881S and the aircrews of HMM-364 and HMM-262, who were the primary source of resupply and only link with the outside world. Dabney said his Marines "knew the Purple Foxes and other helo folks also cared."

Aircrews tried on one occasion to get in several gallons of ice cream. It took awhile and Marines waited until dark because of enemy fire to retrieve the supplies from the landing zones. By then most of the ice cream had melted and the containers were punctured with shrapnel, indicating the aircrews took fire trying to deliver their gift. Although Dabney's Marines didn't get to enjoy the treat, they appreciated the thought. "More than once we watched a crewman lean out a window to toss a bundle of magazines into the zone. We loved them, especially *Playboy*."

"During the 77-day siege, we never called for a 'routine' medical evacuation. For us to subject the CH-46 crews to unnecessary exposure was not an option."

When Dabney recalled the bravery of the helicopter crewmen, he also remembered the Shore Party Marines serving as HST. "I have always thought of them as my HSTs. They did, as a matter of routine, what would have, in any other circumstances, been deserving of many heroic awards. I do not recall any medevac, resupply or external load hook-up where the zone was not 'hot.'

"The antiaircraft rounds were always



Life in the trenches was less than glamorous and pretty basic. Sleep was a luxury, cleanliness impossible, chow resembled pet food in an olive-drab can, but the chance to chatter and “shoot the s---” among Marines was always welcome.

whipping by and the 120 mm mortar rounds were often ‘on the way,’ and they knew it, yet they did their duty till the bird was gone, then ran like hell and dove into the nearest hole. (I often thought that the way they stood, with their backs to the NVA guns as they guided the helos in, was a superb gesture of disdain.)”

“Nevertheless, Colonel Dabney’s indomitable spirit was truly an inspiration to his troops. He organized his defenses with masterful skill and his preplanned fires shattered every enemy probe on his positions.”

Dabney recalled the reality. “Our time spent on the hill always seemed a bit surreal, as if we were TAD [temporary additional duty] on another planet.

“I had no rank insignia (not a good idea to wear around NVA), hadn’t bathed or shaved in three months. My flak jacket was so worn the plates were

falling off, and my trousers were so rotten they’d split at the crotch. I was indecent.”

Dabney needed some way for the troops to identify him from a distance, so he didn’t wear the camouflage cover on his helmet. “Figured that if I needed camouflage on my helmet, we were all in deep *kimchi*. We were all a bit scrawny [and] couldn’t have passed the PFT if our lives depended on it (PFTs didn’t exist then, anyway), but we could hit the deck and roll faster than any other Marines still alive.”

It was a hill that was constantly slammed with ordnance and an always-looming threat that an enemy massed in force would, with fixed bayonets, come across the wire. In the meantime the Marines kept busy “ducking rounds, running CAS [close air support], working birds in daytime, pulling in loads, improving defenses and standing 100

percent watch from midnight till dawn ‘cuz that’s when NVA was likely to attack. Troops did most of their sleeping in daytime. It not only kept them under cover, but saved water and thus birds, since they weren’t working in the heat of the day.

“It took a full external load per day just to get us enough water to drink, cook and clean wounds. I took some heat for troops not shaving, not much. No way was I going to ask the Purple Foxes to take those risks so we could look pretty.”

Some smart-thinking artilleryman at Dong Ha came up with the idea of filling 155 mm howitzer canisters with water. The canisters were strong and were not likely to burst if dropped. “If rounds hit nearby, we’d lose a few, but most would still be full when we went out after dark to clear zones (too dangerous to clear them in daytime).”



Under fire and under siege for 77 days, the Marines on Hill 881S never lost their spirit, their professionalism or their sense of humor in the face of enormous adversity. These were "citizen-soldiers," American Marines any commander would be proud of.

One of Dabney's corpsmen suggested using empty canisters for excrement. "Fill 'em up, screw the top down tight, and pitch them off the hill. That way we didn't have to go through the hassle of getting diesel fuel up and burning excrement cans every day. Wasn't long before another Marine suggested that the last man to use the 'commode' before it was completely full be required to place a grenade, spoon down and pin pulled, into the canister on top of the excrement, screw the top down tight and pitch it off the hill, which was steep. The canister would bounce a good distance down. Every once in a while, late at night, we'd hear an explosion and screams from down below."

When the morale took a drop, one private first class wrote a letter to his pastor back home. It started "Operation We Care," which resulted in an abundance of "We Care" packages arriving at 881S. "We also received gin

and vodka in plastic baby bottles. A note from one donor, a Korea veteran, said he remembered what a little 'joy juice' could mean to front-line troops, and that he'd used plastic baby bottles because they wouldn't break with rough handling. I recall one load of incoming mail; several days' worth, where letters and packages were riddled with shrapnel and soaked with whiskey from a broken bottle in one of the 'We Care' packages. (Chocolate chip cookies soaked in bourbon weren't that bad.)

"There was a deli in Wantagh, N.Y., that sent us neat packages including whole salamis, other smoked meat and 'joy juice.' " Dabney explained the "juice" wasn't a problem because "with 250 to 400 men, even large packages had only enough for about one sip per man. Morale did improve because troops realized folks back home cared."

Morale-boosting events weren't limited to actions by the people back home.

It started in February and continued every day. "Three Marines would race from the bunker to a 15-foot radio antenna. Two of them would raise our nation's colors, then stand at attention, while the third sounded a rusty rendition of the 'Call to Colors' with a battered bugle. We were never without volunteers for this ceremony. They were proud of themselves and our flag and were willing to get shot at to raise it.

"At night this process was reversed as we retired the colors. Often the retired flag was folded, packed and shipped to the family of a Marine slain on the hill. We had a substantial stockpile of flags sent to us by people all over the country."

"He also devised an early warning system whereby NVA artillery and [rockets firing] from the west were immediately reported by lookouts to the Khe Sanh Combat Base, giving exposed personnel a few life saving seconds to take

cover, saving countless lives, and facilitating the targeting of enemy firing positions.”

Riflemen burrowed in on the crest of Hill 881S could, through eyes blood-shot and raw from dirt and fatigue, see and hear North Vietnamese artillery and rockets coming up from the hills and valleys of Laos and the Demilitarized Zone. The big artillery rounds going over sounded like squirrels running through dry leaves.

It is an eerie emotion watching large artillery rounds flying overhead. There is awe and much fascination that such large objects can be hurled so far and so accurately. There is death, not some apocalyptic horseman, but the real knowledge that death is riding a rocket and that lives may in seconds end for men who are remarkably like you and only want to live and do their duty.

“For what it is worth, the folks in the Khe Sanh COC [combat operations center] never realized how the NVA artillery was emplaced and employed,” Dabney would later comment. Hill 881S had been chosen as a regimental outpost for sound tactical reasons. From the hill, Marines could observe the NVA gunners shoot off their rockets, usually in sheaves of 50 firing simultaneously from several sites toward Khe Sanh. This permitted Dabney’s Marines to give the main base about a 10-second warning to sound the alarm and for the Marines there to take cover. While unable to suppress the rockets because of their sheer volume, Dabney’s Marines could and did take countermeasures. Dabney had noted the NVA regularly used the same sites over and over, so he employed his mortars and 106 recoilless rifles against them “at night” while they were setting up, sometimes producing secondary explosions.

“Colonel Dabney repeatedly set an incredible example of calm courage under fire, gallantly exposing himself at the center of every action without concern for his own safety. Colonel Dabney contributed decisively to ultimate victory in the Battle of Khe Sanh, [which] ranks among the most heroic stands of any American force in history.”

In the end, Khe Sanh and its surrounding outposts were no Dien Bien Phu or even the Alamo. The North Vietnamese, pummeled by artillery and air power, abandoned their siege. Khe Sanh had earned its own place in American history.

“By his valiant combat leadership,



They gave as good as they got. This 105 mm howitzer crew loaded a high explosive round into the breech for delivery on a preplanned target. Shrapnel from incoming rounds kept the howitzer’s tires flat.

exceptional bravery, and selfless devotion to duty, Colonel Dabney reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

“For the President, /s/ Gordon R. England, Secretary of the Navy”

Thirty-seven years later, Dabney watched VMI’s brigade of cadets pass in review before him. Lieutenant General H. P. “Pete” Osman, Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, who as a company grade officer had served with Dabney when he was a major, presented the Navy Cross, saying, “Well-deserved if maybe a couple years late.”

LtGen Osman also said that Dabney is a positive man who “still sees the glass as half full.”

Dabney stood to address those who had traveled or been mustered to honor him. He introduced the VMI cadets to 37 fellow Marines who had served with him on Hill 881S. As they stood up in Jackson Memorial Hall (named for Civil War Confederate LtGen Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson), Dabney said of his men: “These are the citizen-soldiers of the ’60s who fought against the same general [Vo Nguyen Giap] who overwhelmed the French at Dien Bien Phu. And [it is these men] who, by enduring, triumphed. It has been the

greatest honor of my life to have served with these men in battle.”

The cadets of VMI, a school that embodies military discipline and the tradition of the citizen-soldier, and has for more than 173 years graduated some of the nation’s best military officers of whom Dabney is one, listened. “Many of you will lead the citizen-soldiers of this nation in Iraq and Afghanistan. You will find them, as I did, awesome in their courage and determination.”

Later they all talked long into the night and heard of other men such as Second Lieutenant Thomas D. Brindley, Corporal Charles W. Bryan, 2dLt Michael H. Thomas, who earned Navy Crosses and Cpl Terry L. Smith, who earned the Silver Star, all posthumously on Hill 881S, all “awesome in their courage and determination.”

Editor’s note: Col Dabney’s actual battle descriptions are from the Purple Foxes’ Web site: The Warriors of Hill 881S, www.hmm-364.org/warriors.html.

Hill 881S will be a featured attraction when The National Museum of the Marine Corps opens in November 2006 outside of Quantico, Va. Visitors will be treated to an “immersion experience” when they step off the rear ramp of a helicopter and onto a reconstructed exhibition of Hill 881S.

