

VIETNAM

# The Battle for Mike's Hill And How, 38 Years Later, a Corpsman Sent Spirits to Their Rest





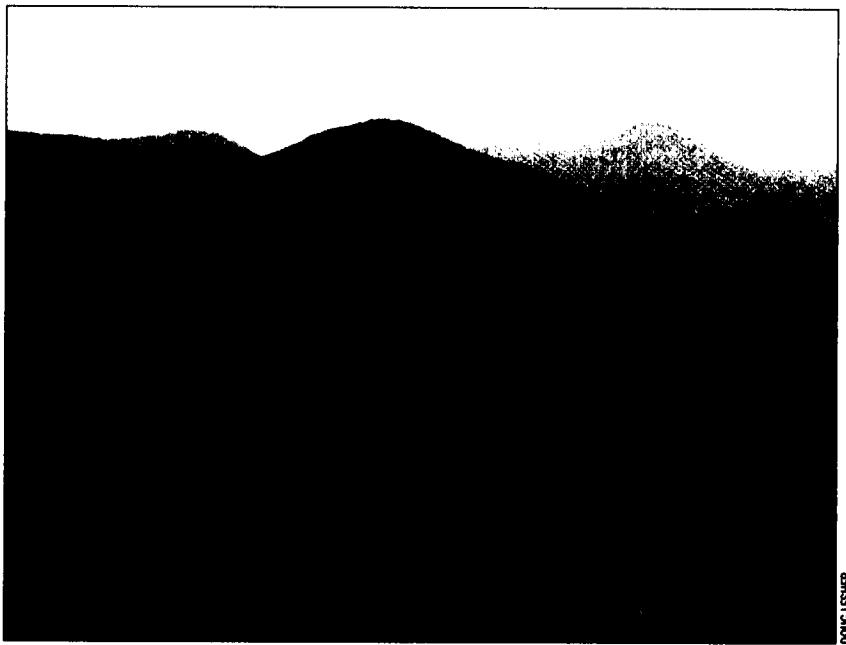
"Doc" was a true believer. For "grunt" corpsmen, their world is all about sacrifice.

By R. R. Keene

**D**ouglas "Doc" Lesher has, for 38 years, carried a lot of excess baggage. War affects everyone differently. Why? Who knows, but damn, it just does!

It was May 2, 2006, and Doc stood in the back of the Vietnam Tourism bus, studying the picture he'd taken nearly four decades earlier and trying to match it with the landscape that was passing outside. The photo was taken on the morning of Jan. 27, 1968, and shows the hills and a brown scar representing a curve in the dirt road that was Route 9. It was about where that curve appears in the photo that in May 2006 Doc realized the bus had passed "Mike's Hill," which in his picture was the hill with one lone tree.

It was Doc's turn. He'd patiently waited as each member of the Military Historical Tours' Return to Vietnam excursion had revisited places in history where they were a part of the Vietnam War. The anticipation had strung Doc tighter in the



DOC LESHER

Doc Lesher photographed Mike's Hill (above) the morning after the fighting in 1968. There is only one discernable tree on the hill. In 2006, Doc, with five others going through the gate (opposite page), returned to the base of Mike's Hill to remember those who perished.

last few days than all the previous years after the fight at Mike's Hill. It had stretched his lean frame and nervous air of anticipation to the limit. If anything was going to happen, it had to happen now.

In 1968, Doc was a corpsman with Company I, 3d Battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment. He was a "true believer." When corpsmen have served with Marines in combat, neither Marines nor corpsmen think of themselves as anything but fellow Marines. The major difference is that for "grunt" corpsmen, their world is all about sacrifice. "Corpsman up!"

Back home and back then the average price for gas was 34 cents a gallon, a new home went for \$40,000, and the average annual income was \$6,355, unless you were, say, a hospital corpsman third class in and around "Leatherneck Square." Then you got \$190.20 a month, \$65 a month combat pay, plus a few other monetary "bennies." In Vietnam the Corps ensured every Military Payment Certificate was earned.

In case you don't remember, 1968 was a defining year if you were a Marine or corpsman in country. Almost right from the get-go, all hell broke loose. This was the year the North Vietnamese Army put the leatherneck bastion at Khe Sanh under siege. It also was the year the NVA raised its flag over the Citadel at Hue, surrounded Quang Tri, attacked the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and blew up the bomb dumps at Da Nang and Chu Lai.



COURTESY OF DOUG LESHER

**At age 19, Doc, serving with I/3/4, was no rookie corpsman. He had plenty of time in the bush when the fight for Mike's Hill erupted bloody and ferociously in the last days of January 1968.**

Consequently, it was easy to overlook a fight in Northern I Corps at a hill just off Route 9 between Cam Lo and Camp Carroll with no name, until the Marines gave it one. That is unless the fight involved you.

It didn't take a military genius to realize that the main lifeline for leathernecks in Northern I Corps was Route 9, winding west from Dong Ha to the Khe Sanh escarpment and the Laotian border. Keeping it open ensured supplies, communica-

tions and security to combat bases, firebases and outposts.

On Jan. 24, elements of the NVA's 320th Division ambushed a Marine "Rough Rider" convoy headed west to Camp Carroll. There were casualties and calls for help. A reactionary force was sent to the rescue. It, too, was ambushed. Eight were dead and 44 wounded. Then leatherneck helicopters brought in "Mike" Co, 3/4, which took up positions on a hill overlooking Route 9 just 2,000 meters south of the Cam Lo River.

On Jan. 25, dawn broke quiet. Mike Co's 3d Platoon under Second Lieutenant John S. Luffen dug in. Captain Raymond W. Kalm led the rest of the company to the site of the ambushes and began a sweep of the road littered with bloodstained vehicles and weapons.

Another ambush. Units of the 320th NVA Div, including the 64th NVA Regiment with its "fresh draftees," directed automatic weapons fire at the Mike Co Marines not only from nearby ambush positions but also from hills just within maximum effective firing range for the NVA gunners. This one killed two more Marines. Kalm's command joined Luffen's platoon on what was now dubbed "Mike's Hill."

It was the morning of Jan. 26 that the determined NVA force blew the bridge over a small wash on Route 9.

That brought in the rest of 3d Bn, whose orders were in effect to "secure Route 9, to deny enemy access to the bridges and culverts, to patrol 375 meters north and south of Route 9, occupying the high ground on either side of the route as necessary."

It was about to get deadly serious. The listening post at the foot of Mike's Hill had just set in when they reported hearing the enemy talking all around them. The listening post pulled back, and the ambush squad loaded and locked.

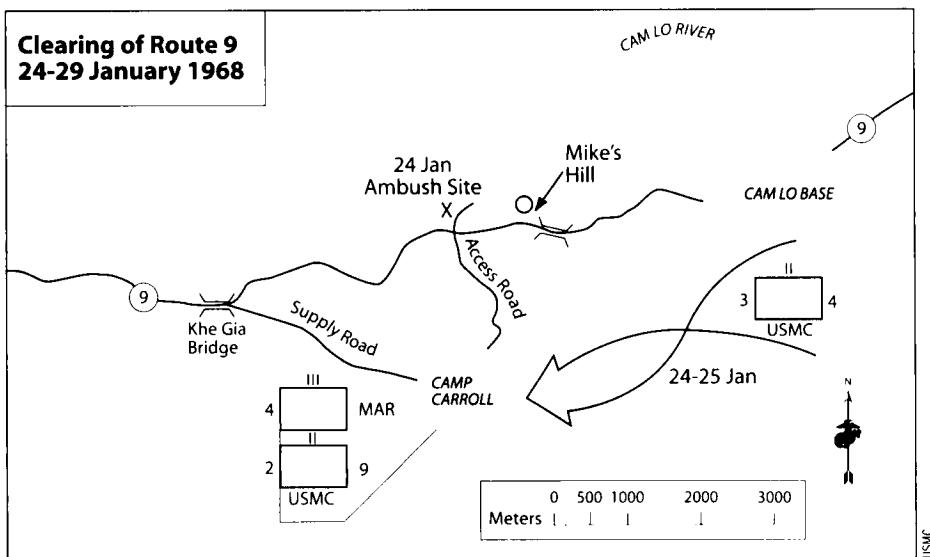
It was about 0500 on Jan. 27. The "fresh draftees" of the 64th gave themselves away with their constant talking. They had no idea how close they were to Mike Co until they "butted heads."

Then, according to one Marine, "It was automatic machine-gun fire from then on. It was terrible."

The whole battalion was in a fight that lasted from the 26th to the 27th. Mike's Hill was the site of a "wild melee." Charging up the hill, the NVA cut loose with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons fire. The Marines returned in kind, putting steel on targets. When they ran out of bullets, they threw grenades.

"It was every man for himself," said the Marine. "You could still work as a team somewhat, but as far as a coordi-

**"We went into an L-shaped ambush. ... We had two killed in the first minutes and another six or seven wounded. We broke it by going 'hey diddle, diddle, right up the middle.' " —Doc Lesher**



nated formal thing, all that gets wiped away. The thicker the battle the more informal, and it was very thick." Nonetheless, 23 NVA bodies littered the hillside and three were tied up as prisoners while Mike Co watched for helicopters bringing more ammunition.

The morning of the 26th, India Co advanced westward along Route 9. Doc Lesher came in atop an Ontos, hanging on to one of the six externally mounted 106 mm recoilless rifles.

At 19, Lesher was no longer a boot corpsman fresh out of field med school. In country since August 1967, he'd seen his share of firefights, patched up a number of good Marines, and loaded a few into helicopters for "routine medevac."

He was combat loaded, with pouches and bandoleers of medical supplies and extra rounds of ammunition for the infantry.

"If we get into it," shouted the Ontos driver to those riding atop his vehicle, "get off my Ontos so I can get out!" It started an argument between the driver and one of Doc's machine-gunners.

"It was just about then we got into it," remembered Doc. "Everybody wanted off the Ontos anyhow because Marines don't fight well riding on armor."

Rounds were bouncing off of the Ontos, impacting in trees and dirt. Explosions rattled the landscape among the Marines.

"We went into an L-shaped ambush. They were shooting .51-caliber machine guns, AK47s, rocket-propelled grenades, 82 mm mortars, and 57 mm and 75 mm recoilless rifles. I believe we had two killed in the first minutes and another six or seven wounded. We broke it by going 'hey diddle, diddle, right up the middle.'

"They were shooting from the side of Dong Ha Mountain over the top of a hill so that we couldn't get any fire directed at them.

"You know, if you are in combat, you are fighting for your friends. You don't think much about God and country and could care less about apple pie."

Three of Doc's friends were the machine-gun team of Corporals Michael P. Stergio, Henry Hill and Tom McGrath, and Stergio was wounded.

Doc said, "I kept yelling, 'Sterg, do you need morphine? Anybody here?'"

Doc looked around and spotted "a group of guys bunched up. I yelled, 'One heat tab will get you all!'"

They started to spread out as Doc moved away. That's when he heard the impact of a mortar round. "I turned and it was just a bloody mess. They were all wounded. But I don't recall any of them as being killed."

Capt John L. Prichard's India Co kept



During Doc's tour, members of I/3/4, shown in photos here, were a seasoned infantry unit. Marines and corpsmen were used to the rugged terrain, ranging from heavy foliage to swift, flood-swollen streams, associated with Northern I Corps. But it was a dry wash west of Leatherneck Square's Cam Lo base, just before Camp Carroll, that challenged and killed a number of India, Lima and Mike Company Marines. (Photos courtesy of Doug Lesher)



advancing, trying to link up with Lima Co. Prichard had no choice but to send his men across open ground interspersed with brush. NVA 82 mm mortar crews saw them as targets of opportunity and lobbed in their explosive projectiles.

The Marines got their Ontos up and firing at close quarters. Flame belched from the back of one of the 106 recoilless rifles. Directly in front, Doc recalled:

"There was a tree with an NVA soldier pinned to it. An Ontos hit him with a beehive round. I bet you can still dig flechettes from that tree today."

It was obvious there would be little if any quarter given by either side. This kept Doc Lesher busy and forced him to focus. "If the Marines told me to do something, I did it. If somebody shoved me to the ground, I went down because I



were great, but Marines could get a helicopter there, in most cases, before you could get a battle dressing tied on.

"It was 'OK, you're hit. Here comes the helicopter and you'll be at 3d Med Battalion in 10 minutes. Don't worry.'

"It wasn't just us. Our guys were helo-lifted out," said Doc, who recalled the NVA had no such requiem. "After the fight, B-52s arc-lighted the avenues of retreat north of the Cam Lo River. I remember the jelled bodies of North Vietnamese soldiers. We could see pieces of them in the trees or twisted and churned up."

"At the end of the fight, after we got the helicopters, I just broke down. I could not mentally absorb it. I would have preferred being killed or wounded to having to watch all of that killing and wounding.

"We were loading up the 'birds' with bodies. This one young guy, a corpsman, a new guy, was the last one we carried out. I went over to a stump and sat down and cried and cried uncontrollably. Then I had a new gunnery sergeant screaming at me, and we were running another sweep."

It had been costly. The battalion had lost 21 Marines with 62 wounded. India Co temporarily ceased to exist as a fighting unit. They were able to count 131 NVA soldiers lying where they fell and quickly consigned them to a mass grave at the foot of Mike's Hill. They did manage to take six prisoners.

It was over, but not for Doc. He had his last firefight on Aug. 16, 1968. Then, he caught the big silver bird back to the States. But it was not over for Doc. He had had no injuries, no Purple Hearts. It was not over for Doc. He lived with the dead who remained with him always and everywhere.

He cannot accept the fact that today although some Americans are still willing to serve, many not only do not serve but also see service to one's country as trivial and meaningless. He calls them out as cowards. Most Marines think Doc is a little too high strung, but none find fault in his logic. They understand Doc's emotions. They also know that many Americans don't want to hear it. It scares them. Thus they shun people like Doc.

No, it definitely is not over for Doc, and it has affected everything. His speech, although articulate and distinctly pronounced, also carries the same heavy profanity and dark humor used by Marines in Vietnam. It seems odd coming from a 57-year-old man who says: "I'm still a f----- bush corpsman."

"For years I thought I was just one screwed-up guy. You go from job to job. You have relationships that you can't work out. I wonder why is it that the peo-

**Older, but no less a corpsman of Marines, Doc Lesher made his offerings in May 2006 to the spirits of the men who died on and at the base of Mike's Hill. Vietnam Tourism guide Tran Ngoc Thanh assisted Doc in the ceremony.**

knew they knew something I didn't. If somebody said, 'We got a lot of wounded, get out there!' I went.

"There were tons of wounded; however, everybody was so hopped up on adrenaline that the only Marines I came up on who weren't fighting were dead. You run up to this guy thinking you can do something and he's dead. You run up to the next guy, he takes a few gasps and he's gone. You run up to another one, he's already gone. You just go and go and go."

He recalled coming up on one Marine who was telling others, "Yeah! I just charged a machine-gun nest. They'd of killed me, but their gun jammed and they *chu hoi*-ed [surrendered] to me. I said, 'Chu hoi my a--!'"

Doc paused: "You know that survivor's guilt and all that stuff that goes with being a jungle jumpin' corpsman? Up to then my whole tour, as far as casualties and treating them, had been a few at a time. We'd go out and there'd be a couple wounded, a few killed. It was by ones and twos. Then all of a sudden, we've got nine killed in action in just my company."

As the initial shock of battle waned, so did the rush of adrenaline experienced by wounded Marines. They were still alive, but wounded, bleeding and now in pain.

"We had 31 medevacs in two days," said Doc. "I finished up with blood up to my elbows. You patched them up as best you could and got them to medevac helicopters. We went back and forth. I've been told there were six guys left in 1st Platoon."

And they weren't just statistics. Doc



R. R. KEENE

was a close friend to several. In the days of fighting for Mike's Hill, he lost a fellow corpsman and friend, Hospitalman Ralph D. Wheeler III, 22, of Trafford, Pa. Marines included: Lance Corporal Paul Christmas, 22, of Newark, N.J.; Private First Class Emmitt Galloway, 22, of New York City; and PFC Christian A. Langford, 21, of Oshkosh, Wis. He also lost his company "gunny" and "skipper": Gunnery Sergeant Michael A. Mikitus, 34, of Lakewood, Ohio, and Capt Prichard, 29, of Oklahoma City.

"By the night of the 27th, we were chewed to s--- and bleeding." He and other corpsmen in the company became in essence "glorified stretcher bearers."

"It wasn't that we weren't good, we

"I could not mentally absorb it. I would have preferred being killed or wounded to having to watch all of that killing and wounding." —Doc Lesher

ple around me have wives and family and careers? It's just one screwup after another."

He started going for counseling at the Veterans Administration in the late 1970s. It has been off and on with limited success. "When I came back in 1968 I remember saying: 'Who can I trust now?' Everybody I can trust is either dead, wounded or rotated home."

Perhaps a trip back to Vietnam would help. His counselor said it seemed like a good idea.

That's how Doc Lesher came to be standing on the bus that was now turning around and heading back on Route 9 toward what had once been Mike's Hill.

"Everything is so changed," he said. "It is green and beautiful."

"There's the wash," he said with excitement. "It's still recognizable, where my platoon came in."

That he found the site was not unusual. A few days earlier, however, something unexpected did occur at the Army Museum in Hanoi. Lesher was stopped by a woman who spoke English and whose father had asked her what the term "Doc" stenciled on his skivvy shirt meant. Lesher explained what he had done in Vietnam and where he was during the war. The woman's father said in 1968 he had been a doctor and was conscripted into the army serving with the 64th Regiment in the Cam Lo area.

"There could have been confusion in the translation. But it was possible and amazing," said Lesher.

He tells the bus driver where to stop and then walks with fellow travelers across the paved road and looks at Mike's Hill in the distance covered in dense jungle trees. At the base of the hill stands a modern Southeast Asian-style two-story home. It seems somewhat out of place on this stretch of Route 9.

Mr. Tran Ngoc Thanh, the Vietnam Tourism guide, finds the woman of the house, who oddly enough speaks English well. He explains, she nods and leads everyone to her backyard. She leads them to a "spirit house," which is a shrine commonly found outside Buddhist residences and places of business.

If anything is going to happen, it will happen here and now.

Thanh is too young to remember much of the war, but he's been guiding for Military Historical Tours for nearly 10 years

and knows how returning affects many veterans. He knows how it has affected Doc. At the shrine he breaks out candles and incense, or joss sticks. The dead, American and Vietnamese, have never really left, he explains. They will today. They need things for their journey. Because they were fighting men, they want water to replenish their canteens, rice to eat, cigarettes to smoke, a little vodka to sustain them. It is all placed at the spirit house.

Thanh has brought artificial currency, both dollars and Vietnamese dong, for them to pay their way on their journey. There also are paper boots and uniforms to replace those they died in. Doc also has brought a streamer that reads "U.S. Marines" so all will know whom the Americans are.

Thanh sprinkles the water and vodka around the perimeter of the shrine. He lights the candles, hands the incense to Doc and nods. Doc is visibly shaking with emotion. Everyone else tries to stifle their emotions by sucking in air or by grabbing their jaws with their palms covering their mouths.

Doc says, "We are standing on sacred ground. What can you do but say, 'Hey guys, I am never going to forget you.'"

He talks of love for his fellow Marines and fellow man. He raises the incense and sobs. As Thanh translates, the Vietnamese woman and her attendants quietly shed tears.

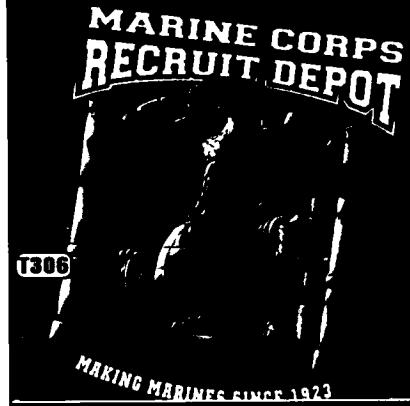
Doc looks at the Marines who made the trip with him and who have come to understand him. He tells them, "You asked me when am I going to get over this? A corpsman gets over his loses about five minutes after he dies. That's a corpsman, and that's the way it is."

The Marines, in spite of their efforts otherwise, also weep—partly because it is incredibly painful to watch one of their own in tears and because they each have to deal with their own ghosts from that war.

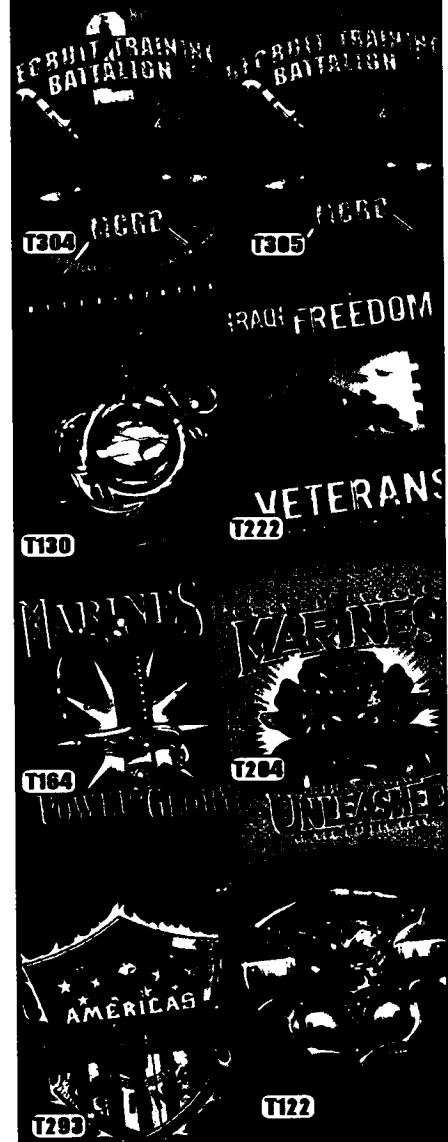
Thanh puts all the offerings into a pile and tells Doc, "Burn it. Burn it all now." As Doc sets it all aflame, the smoke rises and wafts toward Mike's Hill. Maybe somewhere they are eating the rice, drinking the vodka, smoking and laughing as men do when a fight is over.

Each of us prays that somewhere they are. We pray for Doc Lesher too.

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