

Chaplain Stan Beach

Mutter's Ridge and a legacy of servant leadership

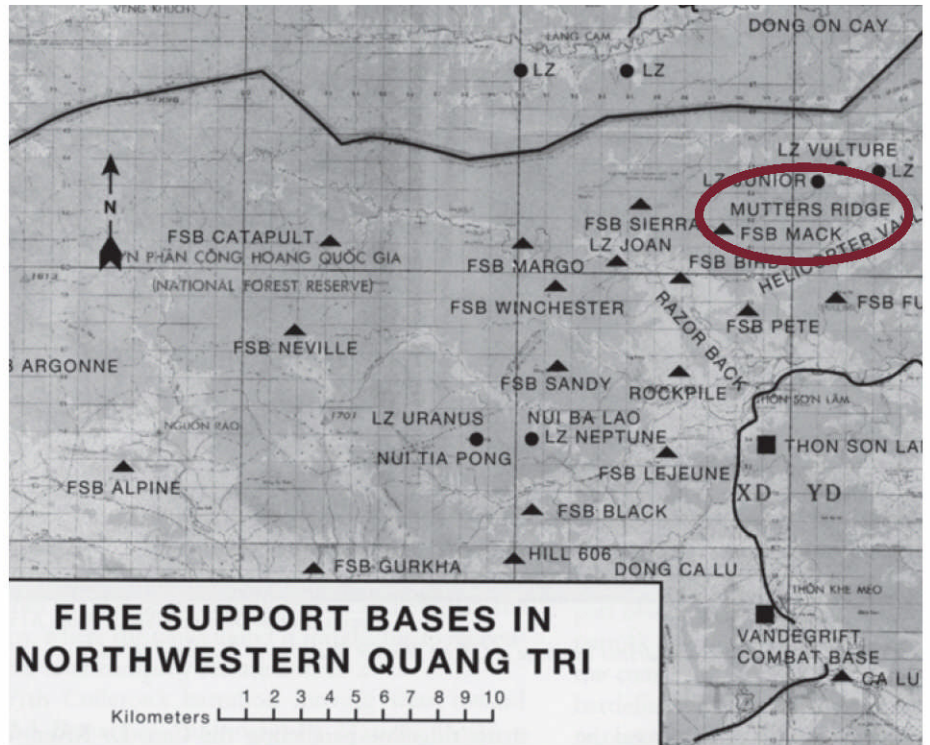
by CDR Scott Cauble, CHC, USN

Larry Burrows' harrowing photo of GySgt Jeremiah Purdie "reaching out" for wounded Sgt Larry Mitchell captures the essence of the 1966 Vietnam battle on Hills 400, 461, and 484, known to the Marines of 3d Bn, 4th Marines (3/4) as Mutter's Ridge. In September and October, as an element of Operation PRAIRIE, the Marines of the Thundering Third were inserted south of the Demilitarized Zone in Quang Tri Province to stop the continuing infiltration of the communist People's Army of Vietnam.

During this battle, many Marines from 3/4 were casualties. In the midst of the carnage, a 31-year-old Navy chaplain, LT Stanley J. Beach, was serving “his Marines.” Chaplain Beach’s ministry on Mutter’s Ridge, his personal endurance during severe hardship, his perseverance after being wounded, and his continuing servant leadership is a story worth telling and an example to follow.

Beach enlisted as a Sailor in 1953 and entered the Chaplain Corps in 1960. Upon graduating from the Navy Chaplain School in August, he reported to active duty in June 1961 at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, NC, followed by a ship tour in Newport, RI, and shore duty at Naval Air Station Twin Cities in Minneapolis, MN. With Vietnam escalating in 1965, and with casualties increasing, he was frequently called upon to help notify the families of fallen or wounded service members. It was then that he determined to serve with the Marines on the front lines.

In late 1965, he received notification that he was nominated for orders to the Naval Station at the South Pole. Resolute on serving with the Marines in Vietnam, Chaplain Beach contacted the Chief of Chaplain's office with a



Mutter's Ridge. (Jack Shulemson, et al., *The Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968, History and Museums Division*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997).)

request to go to Vietnam. However because RADM Jim Kelly, the Chief of Chaplains, was visiting the troops in Vietnam, Beach's request would have to wait. Returning from his overseas trip with a new awareness of the war, RADM Kelly approved Chaplain Beach's request, notifying him on 6 January 1966 of his orders to the 3d Marine Division. After quickly relocating his wife and two small children to Michigan to be near family, Beach

reported to Camp Pendleton, CA, in February for training.

It was at Camp Pendleton that Beach would share a room and develop a friendship with Chaplain LT Vince Capodanno. Though from different backgrounds, these colleagues were united in their love for God and desire to serve Marines. Remembering their time together at Camp Pendleton, Beach later wrote,

>CDR Cauble is a Chaplain currently serving with the USS Nimitz, homeported in Bremerton, WA. The thoughts and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, U.S. Navy, or the Navy Chaplain Corps.

In the evenings we had some time to share ideas together. One very profitable discussion we had was Vince sharing his insights on the topic of solitude. He argued that there is a difference between simply experiencing loneliness versus proactively using moments of alone time for beneficial solitude with the Lord. I came to appreciate the reminders of the precious times of solitude by focusing on the spiritual realities—which were equally real and precious to Vince. It became a more beneficial way to regard and use the times when missing my wife and two children.

During their training at Camp Pendleton, desiring to be better prepared for war, Beach and Capodanno attended Field Medical Service School. This training in combat first aid proved to be of utmost importance in Vietnam.

On the night before their departure from Camp Pendleton, Beach and Capodanno were joined by colleague LCDR Bill Garrity for a meal at the Officer's Club. Like the final Passover meal between Jesus and his disciples, the trio lightheartedly referred to their final time together as the “last supper,” never realizing how prophetic their words would be. Father Garrity, assigned to the aircraft carrier USS *Oriskany*, died off the coast of Vietnam on 27 October 1966 with 43 of his shipmates. On 4 September 1967, Father Capodanno was killed in action with 3/5 during Operation SWIFT and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Chaplain Beach would be the only member of this trio to return home from Vietnam, but



Marines prep Chaplain Beach for medevac. (Photo courtesy Naval Chaplain Center and Archives.)

ity of Da Nang. During this time, the CO, 9th Motor Transport Battalion, asked him to build a chapel. With some architectural background, Beach seized the initiative and, with four other Marines, appropriated resources and built the chapel. Beach wrote,

The entire command got enthusiastically involved. I don't know where the wood came from but it was the usual 'hardback' tent construction with a permanent roof. Guys worked nights to build pews, the pulpit, and an altar. A medical NCO was on a trip to Okinawa and bought a cross, a PA system, and ceramic tiles. The center piece of bricks was bargained for from a Vietnamese village leader.

and future Assistant Commandant; Chaplain Frank Garrett, III MAF and future Chief of Chaplains; and Beach's mentor, Chaplain John Craven, FMF Pacific Chaplain, prior enlisted Marine, and veteran chaplain of Iwo Jima and Chosin Reservoir, attended the chapel dedication in July 1966.

Soon after, Chaplain Beach was assigned to 3/4 and joined the battalion at Phu Bai. Former 3/4 Marine Jimmy Griffin later recollected Beach's ministry to the men:

I thought about a night in late August or early September on the white sand plains around Phu Bai, when that annoying sniper kept 'binging and pinging' at us. You came to a corner position when we settled in that night and talked to some of us. You were making the rounds. You provided a simple reminder that the whole world wasn't a sniper and some conversations should not include fear.

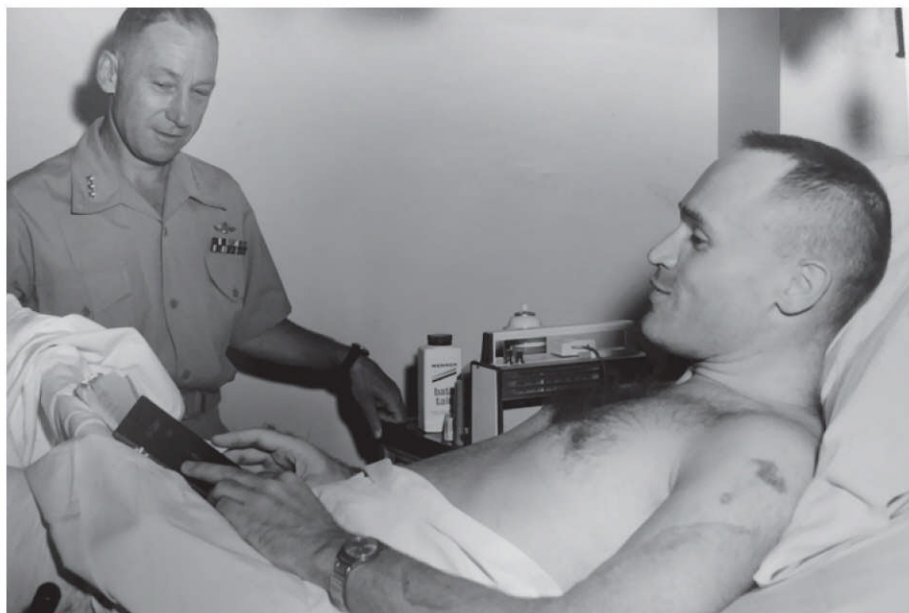
After Phu Bai, the battalion went north to Mutter's Ridge. This was an intense fight with incoming mortars, so heavy that logistical air support was diminished. At one point in late September, Kilo Company went without food and water for three days. A letter penned to Beach by Col Roger Ryman, (USMC, [Ret]), who was then the Lima Company Commander, provided light on the operation and reflected on the

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his journey through the war was full of traumatic events and dynamic ministry.

From 12 April until 2 August 1966, while waiting to be assigned to an infantry battalion, Beach made good use of his time by visiting units in the vicin-

Equipped with an organ and seating for 50, it was designated the Happy Valley Chapel. Recognizing the tremendous impact the chapel would have on the war-weary Marines, LtGen Lew Walt, CG, III Marine Amphibious Forces



LtGen Victor H. Krulak, CG FMFPAC, visits Chaplain Beach, Christmas, 1966. (Photo courtesy Naval Chaplain Center and Archives.)

Chaplain's ministry of presence.

I recall the displacement north to establish what was then called the Artillery Plateau with two rifle companies and elements of artillery from the 3/4 Marines. The going was rough but you were there for everyone. We all needed you in our own way. Your constant presence among the units and in the landing zones was inspiring. In the LZs, I especially recall you reassuring and praying with the wounded as well as welcoming the replacements. You were the right man in the right place for all of us.

The fighting was relentless on Mutter's Ridge, and even embedded reporters took note of Beach's actions. *Stars and Stripes* photojournalist Kim Ki Sam recorded, "I had only one canteen of water when we started Monday and that ran out about noon Tuesday. We couldn't get any food or water but the chaplain gave me a little can of apricots even though he didn't have any food for himself." On 28 September, at 0843, an artillery mission was called in and a "short round" landed in the battalion command post where Chaplain Beach had just sat down to rest and read his Bible. He remembers that with the impact, everything got quiet, and he was surprisingly at peace. However, when he tried to move, his leg would not cooper-

ate. It was then that the corpsmen and Marines moved him to a safer location and radioed for a medevac. Awaiting the helicopter at the LZ, they were mortared again, but this time PFC Jim Riley and HM3 Bruce Williams covered Beach with their own bodies. Riley later wrote, "When he was finally evacuated, I wouldn't have given you a dime for his recovery."

Chaplain Beach was airlifted to the USS *Repose*, a hospital ship off the coast of Vietnam, where he received emergency surgery for his injuries. While recovering at Tripler Army Hospital in Hawaii, he received many visitors, including Dr. Billy Graham, Chaplain John Craven, and LtGen Victor Krulak, the CG, FMF PAC, who presented him with the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V," which reads as follows:

Continuously exposed to the withering enemy fire, LT Beach courageously administered aid and comfort to the wounded. Exhibiting daring initiative, he heroically carried several casualties to the rear for immediate medical attention and further evacuation. His fearless example and decisive actions under fire were an inspiration to all who observed him.

Beach would also receive a typewritten letter from his old friend LT Vince Capodanno, then serving with 1/7 in

Vietnam. Dated 4 November 1966, he wrote, "Dear Stan, you have been in my prayers continuously since I heard about your injury and I have been waiting for a time when I could sit down and write you a long letter." His next paragraph expressed their mutual faith that God would work even this debilitating injury for the good of others. He noted,

Aside from the pain involved, there are all the other factors involved and when I realized all this, I realized, too, that the Lord has chosen someone who not only can bear it but someone who is going to turn it all into spiritual richness ... a spiritual richness that will be of benefit to many for the blessings needed in this life and for Salvation itself.

Chaplain Beach would recover and complete a 27-year career in the Chaplain Corps, holding many important billets in his illustrious service including the Chaplain of the Coast Guard and the Director of the Navy Chaplains School. Though he retired from active duty in 1987, he continues to serve Marines and influence chaplains with his vast experience, wisdom, and depth of character. In 2007, Chaplain Beach received the David E. White Leadership Award from the Military Officers Association of America for his many contributions to the field of chaplaincy. In 2012, the Navy recognized Beach as a "living legend" and designated the building that houses the Naval Chaplaincy School and Center as "Stanley J. Beach Hall." On that special day, members of the 3d Bn, 4th Marines Association—for whom Chaplain Beach serves as their chaplain—were present. Roger Kimble, president of the association wrote, "The absolute love and admiration we have for him is boundless. He is 'our Chaplain' and we are very proud of that fact. We are all honored to be 'his Marines.'" Father Capodanno's prayer that Beach's wounding would prove to be "of benefit to many for the blessings needed in this life" continues to be answered through the life and legacy of Chaplain Stan Beach.



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