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BILL BRINKMAN

A Marine’s Memories

Brinkman Recalls His Service In The Vietnam War

BY LORETTA SORENSEN
P&D Correspondent

For more than two decades, the U.S. Marine Corps provided ground, air, supply and logistic support in the Vietnam War as part of III Marine Amphibious Force.

While the Marines were initially in Vietnam as advisors, Marine forces grew with the need to protect the key air base at Da Nang. Following the Aug. 2, 1964, Gulf of Tonkin incident, with news reports of “unprovoked attack” against a U.S. destroyer, additional Marines arrived at Da Nang. There they engaged in a counterinsurgency effort with small-scale pacification units. Combined Action Platoons — comprised of U.S. Marines and Vietnamese soldiers — were a novel concept the Marines implemented.

By 1966, nearly 70,000 Marines in Vietnam were carrying out large-scale ground operations against the Viet Cong.

Among those Marines was Yankton’s Bill Brinkman, who enlisted in the Marines that same year.

“I knew I was going to be drafted,” he said. “If I had to go, I wanted to be with the Marines.”

Brinkman’s experiences introduced him to many “firsts” during his 15 months of service. The airplane trip from Minnesota to San Diego, California, to complete his boot camp training is where it all began.

“The training was hell,” Brinkman said. “During peace times, you complete Marine boot camp over 16 weeks. Since we were already at war, they pushed us through in 12 weeks. There was a lot of physical training, including running seven miles every day.”

San Diego’s Marine Recruit Depot was established in July 1914 by USMC Major General Joseph H. Pendleton. The 1966 Marine Corps Recruit Depot guide noted: “He recognized in the harbor and environs of San Diego a strategic point where Marines could be trained for expeditionary duty, and where they could be ready to go aboard ship with all of their stores and equipment for transport to areas in the Pacific where their services might be needed.”

Brinkman and his fellow soldiers in the Third Battalion Platoon 332 worked through three beginning-training phases: initial training at the Depot; rifle range at Edson Range area of Camp Pendleton for thorough training in marksmanship and familiarization with basic weapons; and advanced recruit training at the Depot. Following recruit training at the Depot, the men were assigned to advanced infantry training at Camp Pendleton. After four weeks of individual combat training at Pendleton, they were transferred to shore stations, to Fleet Marine Force units for duty both overseas and within the continental United States, or to schools for specialized training.

“I was sent to bulk-fuel school,” Brinkman said. “I never worked with it much at Da Nang. We were trained how to set up the rubber bladders that were used in the field for fuel tanks. Once I finished that school, I had a few days leave to go back home, then came back for four more weeks of training before I was sent to Vietnam.”

Part of Brinkman’s training included simulated imprisonment in a prisoner-of-war camp. The troops experienced realistic prisoner treatment, eating raw carrots and rice each day.

“They had police dogs, barb wire, everything you’d expect as a prisoner of war,” Brinkman says. “It didn’t take long for me and one of my buddies to start looking for a way to escape.”

Supply trucks going in and out of the camp seemed a viable escape route. Brinkman and his colleague hid behind a shack near the camp gate, quickly taking the opportunity to jump into the empty, exiting supply truck. A few yards outside the gate they leapt from the truck to freedom.

“We found platoon leaders outside the camp who told us we were free to go back to our barracks. We thought they might give us a ride, but we had to walk about seven miles to the barracks. Even so, it beat staying in the prison camp.”

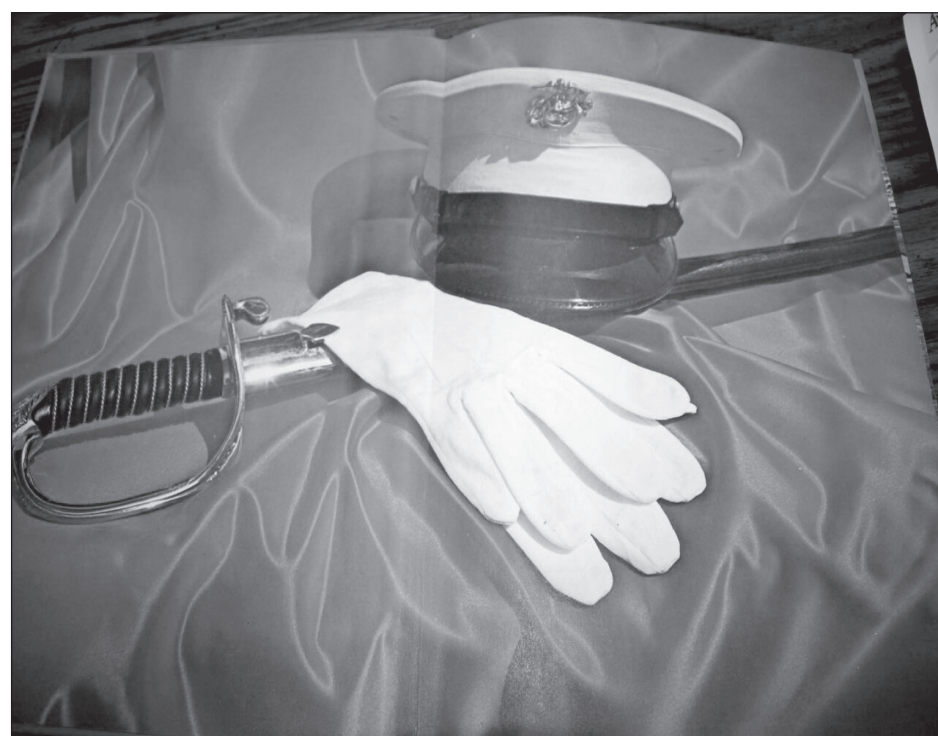
By the time Brinkman and his platoon completed the three-month training, he and his colleagues had distinguished themselves among other Marine recruits.

“I was right off the farm, so the physical training we went through didn’t seem so difficult to me,” Brinkman says. “We completed physical and academic training. Our platoon of about 80 men did such a good job, we were selected as an honor platoon. Out



PHOTOS: LORETTA SORENSEN

Bill Brinkman of Yankton served in the U.S. Marines during the Vietnam War. He’s shown holding a photo of himself from his military days (above), plus he still has mementoes from his time in service to the country.



of our group, I was awarded the Dress Blue Uniform and named the outstanding recruit in our platoon.”

Brinkman has preserved the letter his father Norman received on March 30, 1966, explaining the recognition that his son had received.

“In order that you may have a complete understanding of Private First Class Brinkman’s accomplishment,” the letter reads, “it should be noted that he won this coveted award in competition with 80 men, all of whom entered the Marine Corps and progressed through training with him. From that number and on the recommendation of his drill instructors, the Marine in the platoon who displayed the highest order of skill and professional knowledge in a wide range of basic military subjects was closely examined. After considering the knowledge, conduct, attitude, military bearing, and leadership potential of all the candidates, your son was judged most worthy to receive the Marine Corps Dress Blue uniform.”

“We in the Marine Corps are intensely proud of our Dress Blue Uniform and it is the judgment of those who most closely

observed Private First Class Brinkman here that he will wear it with distinction to the honor of the Corps. We are indeed proud to have a young man of such high caliber in our ranks, and I know his outstanding performance will be a source of great satisfaction to you.”

The letter was signed by P. H. Simpson, Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps Commanding.

Following graduation at the Depot, Brinkman and his platoon were among 5,000 other Marine recruits that boarded a ship and spent the next 30 days traveling to Da Nang.

“(Those) 30 days were miserable,” Brinkman recalled. “We were jammed in the rooms with hammocks to sleep in. We’d get up in the morning, stand in line to eat breakfast, powdered eggs and milk. It was back in line for lunch and try to find something to do in between. A lot of guys were seasick. A couple of guys were so bored they took a quarter and pounded away at it till they made a ring out of it.”

On board the ship, Brinkman had an opportunity to take on Guard Duty for four

hours each night. The duty made it possible for him to sleep during the day in much less crowded bunks and garnered him a place at the front of the meal lines.

Once he arrived in Da Nang, Brinkman stayed at the airport there for a short time, then was sent to Marble Mountain. It was one of five mountains located south of Da Nang. They stretched from the coast inland or westward. All had cave entrances and numerous tunnels. Most of the villagers were jewelers, working with marble from the mountain. A monastery sat at the mountain’s base.

North of the mountains, on the ocean side was Brinkman’s Marine Helicopter base, MAG 16. The 5th UMMC Comm. Battalion was also there. It was here that Brinkman spent most of his 12-month deployment. Regular daily patrols took him back and forth from the rear of the war zone to more remote and front-line areas.

“Most of the time, we patrolled in the daytime,” Brinkman said. “A few times, we were out at night. I was fortunate to have served there when the war was just beginning. Fighting conditions weren’t so bad yet, but even then there wasn’t anywhere there that you felt safe.”

One of Brinkman’s vivid memories of his Vietnam stint is of U.S. airplanes dropping napalm on nearby targets. While it was clear the intense destruction of the bombs wasn’t meant for the base, the close proximity of the action was unsettling.

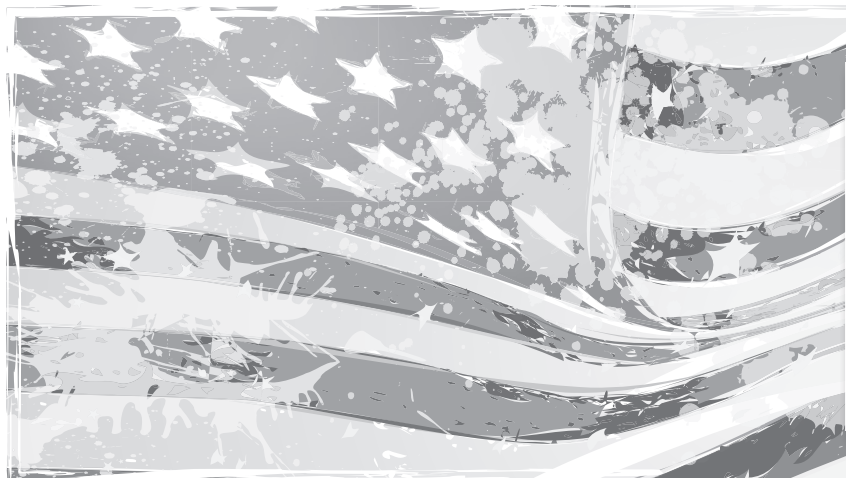
“You’d think to yourself, ‘I sure hope they’re on target,’” he said. “When we were on patrol, I always carried eight magazines, 160 rounds with me. One time, I was down to just half a magazine and we were still fighting. I started wondering that day what I could do if I ran out of ammunition. Fortunately, the enemy troops disappeared before my ammo was completely gone. Suddenly disappearing was something they often did.”

Difficulty in recognizing the enemy wasn’t at its peak when Brinkman served. However, he had first-hand experience with the danger that defending a divided country posed.

“We had a Vietnamese barber who cut hair every day,” Brinkman remembers. “We didn’t give it much thought. You expect to trust your barber. But one night, a patrol shot armed insurgents right outside the camp fence. The barber was among them.”


Booby traps were common enemy tactics. Brinkman learned to watch for pits that hid a

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We remember the men and women who have so honorably served this country throughout history. We remember their courage, their selflessness and their dedication. We remember the hardship, the suffering and the sacrifice they endured. On today and every day, we remember with respect, those who have fought to defend our democratic ideals and secure our freedoms. With deep gratitude, we salute our country's brave and honorable veterans. Thank you.

It is our honor to salute the heroes, past and present, of our Armed Forces. Their dedication to our country and to the defense of freedom will never be forgotten. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you.



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