

TO THE COLORS



By Bill Palmer

Part I

Charlie Hettling is and always has been a farm boy, but he also is and always will be a Marine. “I was born at home around Taunton,” he began, “The doctor came out to the farm site where I was born.”

Charlie’s folks expected he and his two brothers and two sisters would do their share of chores. The Hettlings raised grain, pigs, cattle, chickens, and sheep, so there were plenty of chores. “Before you went to school or when you got home from school you had certain things to get done and that was your job,” Charlie remembered.

He attended first through fifth grade at the local, one-room country school.

“They called it District 79 — one-half mile from our place,” he recalled.

Charlie has nothing but positive memories of his country school.

He said, “You always felt at home or welcomed when you were there.”

Charlie’s best memories were the special things the teacher did with them.

“The teacher pitched and umpired softball games between us kids,” he remembered, “Every spring we’d get to have a picnic — we’d go to the river fishing and have hot dogs and pop.”

Moving to the Minneota Public Schools was a major change.

“It was the difference between night and day between country school and town school,” he explained, “At the town school if the teacher left it all turned to chaos.”

Charlie graduated from Minneota High School in 1961 and began raising hogs with his dad. He also worked part-time for a chicken operation for \$1/hour. Charlie added, “Pretty soon they wanted me to drive truck for them, [picking up eggs in the country.]”

The escalating war in Vietnam loomed in the background, though, as the military draft took as many as twelve to fifteen young men from Lyon County every month. Charlie’s boss asked him to give plenty of notice when Charlie’s draft number was coming up.

“I went down to the courthouse and got the number every month and they were going pretty fast,” Charlie recalled.

He gave notice to his employer and was soon out of work. A counselor at the unemployment office asked Charlie to consider joining the Marines. Charlie agreed to speak with his son, a Marine recruiter in Sioux Falls.

“I wasn’t even home and the phone was ringing,” Charlie recalled with a laugh, “It was either enlist or wait to be drafted, so I enlisted.” He continued, “We went to Sioux Falls and then they flew us to MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot) in California.”

It was March of 1965 — the same month the U.S. sent its first combat unit into Vietnam.

Charlie’s first encounter with Marine Drill Instructors at the Recruit Depot in San Diego was not encouraging.

“I thought the world had come to an end,” he said. He continued, laughing, “[They were] yelling at everybody — we couldn’t do anything right — nothing was done fast enough.”

Life as a Marine recruit in the 12-week Boot Camp was a big adjustment.

“They usually got you up at four in the morning,” Charlie explained, “we’d dress and shave and then we’d all go running out and they’d march you down to chow.”

Strict discipline continued through meals with no talking.

It even extended to when they had finished eating and were waiting for the rest to finish.

“We had little red notebooks,” Charlie recalled, “and you had to be reading that — you couldn’t just stand there.”

The notebooks informed the recruits about Marine Corps history, rank structure, and other information.

The recruits attended classes in the M-14 rifle, military objectives, the M-60 machine gun, swimming, and other subjects.

They also ran obstacle courses, marched endlessly, and practiced for the physical fitness test.

Boot Camp graduation was a big deal.

They wore summer dress uniforms and listened to their commanding general talk about all they had accomplished.

“We felt proud,” Charlie remembered.

The new Marines attended four weeks advanced training at Camp Pendleton, California.

“It was more infantry tactics,” Charlie explained, “everything was basically outdoors.” They followed a brutal training pace.

“You didn’t get much sleep there,” he remembered, “A lot of times we didn’t even get in until midnight.”

The Marine Corps assigned Charlie to the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment at Camp Pendleton.

“We didn’t know it, but they were getting us ready for Vietnam,” Charlie said.

Charlie attended Mechanics School at Camp Pendleton.

Shortly afterward his battalion convoyed to the Long Beach Naval Station where a troopship waited for them.

“We brought all our vehicles and all our equipment with us,” Charlie explained, “It took us a few days to load it on the ship because we had to load them on and anchor them down.”

“I had never been on a ship,” Charlie recalled, “Oh, did I get seasick!”

Their troopship stopped in Hawaii and then continued across the Pacific to Okinawa where the battalion attended jungle warfare training camp.

The men of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines left Okinawa in April 1966, headed for Vietnam.

Charlie's Gunnery Sergeant, a combat veteran, gathered his platoon together as they neared Vietnam.

He told them they were going into combat and that they would see things that would make them want to behave like savages.

He told them they had to fight those urges.

He encouraged them to do small things every day to remain civilized, like shaving even when it was difficult.

Charlie said quietly, "That was one of the best pieces of advice I got because things happened that you couldn't even believe until you got over there."

Vietnam waited for the young Marines in the darkness across the water.