TO THE COLORS

By Bill Palmer

Part II

Charlie Hettling (right) completed Marine Corps boot camp and was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines at Camp Pendleton, California.
He trained as an infantryman and wheeled vehicle mechanic.
He brought those skills with him when his battalion loaded on a troop ship in Long Beach, California. Their destination was Vietnam by way of a jungle warfare training camp in Okinawa.

Charlie's unit left Okinawa in April 1966, headed for Vietnam.
"About 2:30 a.m. we landed [at Chu Lai]," he recalled,
"We went over the side of the ship and down the landing nets and into the landing craft."
"When we got ashore I could see it was chaos — we weren't even under fire and it was chaos."

Charlie did not locate his platoon until later that afternoon. His unit moved out from Chu Lai a couple days later to a base camp on Hill 69.
"Basically, after Hill 69 it was nothing because we were the farthest ones out," he explained.
The road ended at their camp. A Vietnamese village was about a quarter mile away; jungle-covered mountains in the opposite direction; and rice paddies on the other sides.
Charlie remembered being scared when he arrived.
"We didn't know if we should look up over the berm at night; we thought VC were all over," he recalled, "There was a battery of artillery — 105's — there on the

hill and they were going all night, shooting
and I didn't know what that was."
"After about a week you got acclimated a little and understood what was going on," Charlie

explained, “once you understood, it doesn’t scare you as much.”
Charlie detailed his responsibilities at Hill 69, “It was mainly patrols, operations, guard duty and LPs (listening posts) and taking care of your gear — always taking care of your gear.”
Beyond Charlie’s individual gear like his rifle and field equipment, he was also responsible for servicing small utility vehicles the Marines called “Mules.”
These cargo and weapons carriers had such a low profile an operator could fold the steering wheel down and operate it while laying down.
The Marines of 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines at Hill 69 lived in tents with plywood floors and constructed bunker and fighting positions around the perimeter of their base.
“Some were just a hole in the ground,” Charlie explained, “and some were quite nice-sized, fairly roomy inside with sandbags all around and a roof on top with sandbags.”
The Marines had company in their tents — four-legged company.
“There were rats all over the place,” Charlie remembered and told about a night when two ran right across his face.
“After that I would tuck myself in like a mummy all around because I didn’t want any rat to crawl up the blankets.”
Misery in Vietnam came in many forms other than rats.
Charlie described serving on a listening post. “You are supposed to observe this trail or this area,” he began. “You have to go out after dark so they wouldn’t see you go out.
“Most of the time we’d have two up and two down — two sleeping and two watching.”
He added, “If it was raining, the night was long, especially if you got wet and you got cold, you just could not get warm no matter what you did.”
When the rains ended and the hot sun dried up the mud, the dust was another constant companion.
“Base camp had a helipad that was off to the side,” Charlie explained, “When the choppers would come in there’d be dust all over the place ... it was like a windstorm of dust.”
Charlie’s Vietnam service involved a lot of uncertainty.
He explained this by saying, “It wasn’t like there was something hot going on all the time, it was just once in awhile, but that once in awhile made you think you had to be ready all the time.”
Besides the LP’s, combat duties for the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines included guarding the base perimeter and going out on combat operations that might last anywhere from three days to two weeks.
Charlie described these operations by saying, “They weren’t just routine (patrols) , they were like a special push through a certain area where you knew there were a lot of VC or NVA (North Vietnamese Army) forces.”
Perimeter guard duties were more routine. “There’d usually be three of us,” Charlie ex-plained, “You’d go out there usually just before dark ... some nights it was pretty boring — other nights it got kinda hectic.”
The quiet nights on guard permitted the men time to talk quietly.
Charlie remembered, “You could talk a little ... about back home and what you were going to do back home.”
Charlie found some beauty in those quiet nights.
“When I had my watch I had time to think,” he recalled, “Sometimes it (looked) so peaceful out there you wondered how in the world can there be a war going on here?”
Around Thanksgiving of 1966 Charlie’s battalion moved to a new base at An Hoa.
“It was the monsoon,” Charlie remembered, “Everything was under water and muddy.”

The challenges of life at An Hoa were just beginning.