Part III —Final Chapter

Minneota’s Charlie Hettling remembered being scared upon arrival at his new home in the fiel

d, but soon learned how to live and survive as a combat Marine.

Around Thanksgiving of 1966 Charlie’s regiment moved to a new base further south at An Hoa, inland from the huge U.S. base at Danang. An Hoa posed special challenges to the Marines from the beginning.

“It was the monsoon,” Charlie remembered, “Everything was under water and muddy — nothing got through unless it was by air.”

He added, “Beans, bullets, and bandages was all you got — the first convoy that came through at An Hoa was about March.” An Hoa was only semi-developed.

The men built bunkers, living areas, and workshops.

“We built a little place to work on the Mules (low-slung, motorized cargo and weapons carriers),” Charlie recalled, “We scrounged metal that we saw laying around and two by fours — it was enough to get by so that you’re out of the rain if it rained hard.”

The landscape around An Hoa was more rugged than at Hill 69 with jungle-covered hills all around. The weather at An Hoa was also less forgiving than at Hill 69.

“You were wet all the time there,” Charlie remembered, “A foot and a half above your head it looked like clouds and just solid — you could feel the mist hit you.”

The overcast posed problems during the monsoon when the roads were impassable.

“There were a couple of times the ceiling was so bad they couldn’t fly anything,” Charlie explained, “We were getting pretty low [on supplies] and a couple times it was only a cheese sandwich for chow.”

Finally, enemy activity was more common at An Hoa than at Hill 69. “We found out later that was the VC supply route to Danang,” Charlie recalled, “Danang was a real lucrative target because of all the aircraft and all the choppers.”

“They wouldn’t really attack us much, but we kept running into them,” he said. “Something was always happening there – mortars and snipers.”

The near-constant enemy contact required the men to be on constant alert.

“You’re never safe,” Charlie explained, “You never, ever knew, so you always had to be ready.”

Charlie regularly participated in convoy security and mine-sweeping security missions as well as manning nighttime listening posts outside the camp.

When the weather allowed convoys the Marines first had to sweep the main road for mines.

“Nothing could come in on the road until we had swept the road every morning for mines,” Charlie explained.

The battalion deployed a platoon of Marines in two groups about a quarter of a mile to either side of the road while the minesweepers slowly worked their way down the road.

“We’d go to Liberty Bridge and Danang would meet us there — about half way, so about noon they could start sending convoys.”
Supply convoys to An Hoa led to smaller convoys from An Hoa to remote sub-bases. Charlie often led security details for these small convoys. He and his men carried their new M-16 assault rifles, grenades, and the platoon’s M-60 machine gun on these missions.
“It was pretty rugged around there – roads through the hills – this side would be straight down and that side would be up with jungle all over.” He added, “You’re winding around all over so you couldn’t see ahead of you ... it was always prime areas for ambush.”
“If you had feelings you couldn’t survive over there, so you had to sort of pull your feelings away,” he explained.
Charlie’s year-long tour of duty ended in April 1967.
“I went over as a unit, but went home as an individual,” he recalled. He caught a helicopter to Danang and then boarded a commercial airliner for the flight home.