

The Four Gates To Hell

By Dick Culver

xtreme Northern I Corps was hotter than the hinges of Hades in late June /July 1967, and the veterans of the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment were looking forward to backloading onto our new amphibious shipping. Assigned to Special Landing Force Bravo, a sort of super Sparrowhawk unit, our modus operandi was to bore small holes in the South China Sea off the Vietnamese Coast waiting to reinforce any unit that might need assistance. We were one of two reinforced Battalion Landing Teams that acted as a floating reserve for the Marines in Vietnam - a sort of predecessor of the modern MEUs.



While the uninformed were convinced that we had a cushy job with hot chow and comfortable sleeping arrangements, alas, the actuality of the situation never matched the perception. It sounded good, but... Out of a nine month period on the SLF we spent only 12 days aboard ship. Once assigned to the SLF, while technically still a part of the 3rd Regiment, we came under the operational control of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade with its headquarters on Okinawa. Anytime we were sent out as a firefighting brigade, to either Marine Division, the 9th MAB seemed hell bent on offering our services to either Division (following the initial emergency), usually for a period of 30 or more days. Now no self-respecting Marine Division would turn down the services of a "fresh, well rested reinforced Battalion Landing Team," of course, so our days were thrill packed, and eventful, offering lots of sun and outdoor air. We had no permanent base camp, meaning no "slop chute" (Marine for beer hall), and virtually no hot chow. U.S. Naval Shipping has been "dry" since the turn of the last century due to the efforts of Carrie Nation and her Saloon Smashers... This revolting situation designed to make the Navy and its minions into plaster saints, made for an extremely bleak and uncomfortable existence, punctuated with moments of great excitement. Don't forget, unlike a normal unit conducting a sweep, when they called for us the situation was already hot. At the end of our nine months of exile, we had accumulated over 800 casualties. The 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines wasn't exactly the poster child for the life insurance companies.

Having been assigned to the SLF in April of 1967, 2/3 had participated in a number of major operations... Beacon Star (April), the Khe Sanh Hill fights (April/May), Operation Hickory on the Ben Hai River, then pushing southward to Cam Lo and Dong Ha in late May as part of Operation Prairie and Cimarron. We backloaded onto new amphibious assault shipping, the USS Tripoli, on the 11th of June. We had hardly stowed our gear and we were off again, this time to the 1st Division Area in the Pagoda Valley Area as a part of Operation Beacon Torch. Beacon Torch was terminated on the 2nd of July, and we were brought back aboard the Tripoli for a much needed shower, a change of Jungle Utilities and the first hot meal in two weeks. We were ready for an uneventful cruise on a brand new ship with a little slack and a chance to write some letters home... The best laid plans of mice and Marines often go awry.

We dumped our filthy gear, got a shower (the Navy didn't cotton to foul smelling Marines in their chow hall), chowed down and contemplated our good fortune of a couple of days rest. Our idyllic mental image was shattered early the following morning (3 July) by a message ordering us to standby to be landed in the vicinity of the Cua Viet River near Dong Ha in support of 3rd Marine Division units heavily engaged northeast of Con Thien. Our first day out of the field became a frantic scramble to rearm, distribute grenades, mortar rounds, and small arms ammunition, scrounge up makeshift rods to clear jammed M16s and sketchy briefings based on cryptic messages received from the 3rd Marine Division. Rifles and machine guns received a thorough going over. The inevitable letter to the homefolks was penned, and those so inclined attended religious services and made their peace with God.

The waiting and anticipation was the hard part, but that ended at 0200 on the morning of the 4th. By 0700 we were rotoring our way back to our old stomping grounds near the 8" self-propelled artillery battery at Cam Lo. The plan called for 2/3 to sweep an area known as Leatherneck Square north to the Marine Enclave at Con Thien. Scuttlebutt from those in the know indicated that this did not bode well.



**Hotel 2/3 loading the CH-46s, morning of 4 July 1967
LPH-10 USS Tripoli Moose Beard Photo**

Con Thien was NOT a nice place. Known to the Marines in Northern I Corps as "The V-Ring", it sat within easy reach of the NVA Artillery located just across the Ben Hai River. To orient those not familiar with the geography of the Vietnamese DMZ, the Ben Hai acted as the dividing line between North and South Vietnam. I had learned to hate high angle fire weapons while sitting on the south side of Freedom Bridge (spanning the Ben Hai) during Operation Hickory in May. When our "birddog" artillery spotter plane left to refuel, the NVA used the battalion radio antennae for aiming stakes, dropping approximately 185 rounds of mixed calibers of heavy artillery on our collective fannies shortly after our landing. Crouching in a half dug hole in rock hard dirt, I silently cursed the artillery gods and their ugly handmaidens, the mortar fairies. As the old saying goes, I understand the round with my name one it, but the "to whom it may concern" stuff is scary as hell. High angle fire falls into the latter category. The residents of Con Thien lived with this threat constantly.

Con Thien is a miserable little series of 3 hill masses, two of which were continually manned by a Marine Battalion to deny it to the NVA. The ARVINs held the 3rd hill with the enthusiasm of a slug and were not well regarded by the Marines. Anyone who held Con Thien, however, could look down the entire strip to our 8" batteries at Cam Lo and control the area using the artillery batteries on the NVA side of the Ben Hai. In short, it made a heck of a good FO position. This would then have allowed the NVA free run on the south side of the Ben Hai River and made Cam Lo untenable. This, of course, we could not allow to happen. The actual assigned battalion position at Con Thien was only large enough to accommodate two of the four rifle companies that comprised a Marine Battalion without

drawing constant bombardment from the NVA batteries. The other two rifle companies had to establish constantly moving patrol bases around the "V-Ring" to monitor the movement of any NVA attempts to infiltrate the area. If the screening companies were lax in their patrol and ambush techniques, the NVA would take advantage of the sloppiness. Slipups would allow the bad guys to mass and launch an attack to take the coveted high ground. Needless to say, being assigned as the "duty battalion" to occupy and defend the "V-Ring" was not a favorite assignment. The patrolling companies were rotated with the two occupying the lines, but there were no days off.

The "dust up" that followed started as a perceived NVA ambush of a platoon of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, but turned out to be more... MUCH more... Bravo Company of the 1st Battalion of the Ninth Marine Regiment was about to receive the unenviable but appropriate sobriquet of "The Walking Dead¹".

What had been initially thought to be a simple ambush was later reported and recorded in the 3rd Marine Division record books as a well-coordinated attack on the Marines of B/1/9 by 5 NVA battalions with supporting artillery. Needless to say, Bravo Company was in deep kimshee... The NVA had essentially embraced the hapless Marine Platoon in what can only be described as a "boxer's clinch," thus denying them the ability to employ supporting arms without killing their own people. For whatever reason, the radios seemed to have "bullet magnets" in them on that fateful day, and a number of radios were rendered "hors d combat", not by snipers, but in large part by bad luck (shell fragments, etc.). The fighting was so fierce that it was like blundering into a nest of fire ants. Counter-ambush techniques only revealed a seemingly limitless depth to the NVA positions. The situation was much like "Brer Rabbit and the Tarbaby"... The patrol had "caught the squirrel", but turning him loose proved to be damned near impossible. A simple platoon patrol was not equipped to take on a major attack by multiple battalions... the lack of radio communication simply compounded the problem. Alpha Company, sent to relieve Bravo, ran into the same ant hill of NVA. While Alpha and Bravo weren't losing the battle, they sure as hell weren't winning, either.

The plight of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment got the attention of those in control of the Special Landing Forces, and ended the dreams of the 2nd Bn. 3rd Marines for a few days off the lines. The landing of our CH 46s at the Cam Lo Artillery position on the morning of the 4th (close by Highway 561) brought back memories of earlier campaigns. After all the hustle, we assembled and sat down to await further orders to move north to relieve our brothers in arms. A hot sun and lack of meaningful activity began to wear on everyone's nerves. We had heard all sorts of scuttlebutt, such as Bravo 1/9 had been shot all to hell (not too far from the truth) and that we were to go in and help recover the bodies (this unwelcome task mercifully fell to others; I was not looking forward to that one). No, it turns out that we were to close the back door to the fight that came to be known as "Operation Buffalo", and sweep northward from Cam Lo to Con Thien. The word of the Bravo 1/9s "Last Stand" began to filter down. We were not amused as many of us had friends in the 9th Regiment. I had once served as the XO of Golf 2/9 and felt a certain affection for my old outfit. At least it would seem that we were gonna get a chance to even some scores.

Assigned to head north towards Con Thien, flanked by Echo Company under Capt. Bob Bogard, I was more than a little surprised to hear the roar of heavy machinery

approaching our jump off position from the south. Two M48 tanks with Marine Corps markings lumbered up behind us. Somewhat unprepared for the arrival of unsolicited armor, I went back to see what the official word was. Sitting in the lead tank was a familiar face, that of an old friend, Staff Sergeant Max Falligan. Max was an old Distinguished Pistol shooter and compatriot from our days on the Marine Corps Pistol Team.

Max was leading a section of two M48s from Alpha Company of the 3rd Tank Battalion and had already put in nine months in and out of Con Thien. I was especially glad to see him, as he was the most unflappable guy I knew. Our pre-war experiences had led me to think of Max as a guy with a ready smile and a seemingly bottomless supply of jokes to keep everyone smiling. While I had never seen him in combat before, I hoped his ability to fight was as skillful as his ability to keep everyone amused. Still, there was something about Max that led me to believe that he was real fighting man, and he had survived 9 months in and around the "V-Ring" commanding a section of tanks. Better yet, he knew the terrain like the back of his hand. Max's ability and prowess as a warrior were to be a godsend in the next few days.



**M48s moving north toward the Ben Hai River,
July 1967
3rd Marine Division Photo**

We used Max and his iron forts to put canister rounds into likely looking ambush spots and essentially blasted our way northward towards Con Thien, taking out suspicious vegetation along the way. The kids loved the use of extreme recon by fire, and began to "see" things that may or may not have been there just to watch their tank buddies at work.

Moving northward we stopped about 3 clicks short of Con Thien for the night. We put out our LPs and ambushes and settled in. The tanks complicated things a bit, as the steep terrain in some areas of our axis of advance caused the tanks to grind their treads making the vegetation slimy and more than a little slick. Marines following in trace of the tanks did a lot of slipping and sliding scaling the rolling hill masses "slimed" by the tanks. The kids still seemed content to have the iron monsters along and the tankers and the infantry troops began to form a bond. We put a strong perimeter around the M48s and waited until dawn.

Moving northward on the morning of the 5th of July we continued along our assigned axis, blasting our way northward. We moved into position just south of an old Cathedral known to all in Northern I Corps as "The Four Gates to Hell Church".

Prior to securing the perimeter for the night I sent a platoon sized patrol with both tanks down into the shallow valley to take a look at the old Cathedral and surrounding terrain. We did a rather thorough but rapid search of the area, yielding nothing of note. The

2nd Platoon Commander, Lt. Carl Zander, a conscientious and capable platoon commander marked the area for a more thorough search in the morning. Zander and his platoon returned to the CP along with Max Falligan and his brace of M48s. No one could quite shake the feeling that we were being watched during our mini-sweep of the churchyard.

As we started securing the perimeter for the night, a strange rumbling noise came from our left flank. All hands alerted and the rocket gunners assumed firing positions. Two more M48 Tanks rumbled into our position. It seems that Bob Bogard of Echo Company was not a tank lover because in the words of the WWII Bill Mauldin cartoon, "moving foxholes attract attention." Bob had worked a deal with our Battalion CO, Moose Beard,² to get *shet* of his two M48s by sending "those damned tanks" over to Hotel Company³... A call to "The Moose" verified the assignment of the second pair of M48s to Hotel Company.. Hummm, Hotel was becoming a veritable fortress, and I couldn't have been happier.

I discussed the Four Gates to Hell Church with Max since he had been operating in the area for about 9 months.

"Hey Max, what's the word on the old church down there?"

"Well Skipper, it's some sort of National Landmark and no one's allowed to touch the damned thing!"

"But Max, doesn't it supply a really first class FO position for the Zip mortars?"

"You bet Skipper, but every time we try to take it down, the 3rd Marine Division puts the kibosh on the idea! The Area Commander won't let us touch the damned thing"

"Even if we're getting Marines killed because of it?"

"Yep, doesn't seem to make much difference, the Church is a protected landmark!"

Something in me rebelled at allowing Marines to be killed to preserve an abandoned building and I figured I'd pursue the topic the following day. In actual fact, we did better than that, but that's the rest of the story.

Come the dawn of 6 July we sent our patrol, consisting of Lt. Zander's 2nd Platoon and Max Falligan's section of M48s, back down in the valley to check out the Four Gates to Hell. It didn't take long to get results. The sudden incursion of the Marines into the churchyard brought forth a fusillade of AK-47 and 60mm mortar fire, and a mad scurrying of NVA in the area around the Cathedral. Lt. Zander's platoon deployed following the initial hail of hostile fire. Zander's M79s, 3.5" Rockets and M60s were working and his riflemen were picking individual targets.

Max's tanks immediately swung into action. The 90mm guns were using canister and the 50 caliber Ma Duce cupola guns to add to the NVA's discomfort. It was hotter than hell that morning, and the tanks were driving unbuttoned (hatches open). Max's tank was just going over a rice paddy hummock with the bow of the tank still in the air when three RPG-2

rockets found their mark. The first rocket hit the driver's open hatch, severely wounding the driver and knocking out the electrical system in the tank. The second round hit the boogie wheel in the suspension of the tank and the third ricocheted off the top of the tank turret literally blowing Max out of the turret. Max as unflappable as ever, aviator sunshades still in place, simply climbed back into the turret and started traversing the thing by hand, aided no doubt in this instance by a healthy flow of adrenaline. He managed to get off something like 57 rounds of 90mm before either the gun jammed or they ran out of ammo. Now traversing an M48 tank turret with the electrical systems gone is an amazing feat, but Max was a determined man. With his 90mm out of action, Max unlimbered a Mossberg sawed off pump shotgun along with an M14 bandolier stuffed full of 12 gauge fléchette ammunition he kept stashed in the turret. In a cold rage over the fate of his beloved tank and his wounded driver, Max was taking out his extreme displeasure on the NVA. After having fired all the fléchette ammo with the shotgun, Max borrowed a rifle from one of Zander's 3.5" Rocket Gunners and shot an NVA out of the church steeple. The NVA was apparently intent on calling in mortar fire on the platoon, something we didn't need at that moment in time.

As the hate and discontent exploded in the church yard, I was still on the high ground with my second section of tanks. Zander's radio narration was fascinating, but it became obvious that we had a chance to surprise the arrogant little @\$\$holes by bringing in a little surprise cavalry. The NVA obviously knew that we had a rifle company reinforced with a section of tanks, but I seriously doubted that they had seen the second pair of tanks pull in at dusk. We mounted out to smash these guys like a bug. While we were heading down the hill, the tanks raced ahead and came around the corner into the main battle area. One of the real surprises for "Ho Chi Minh's finest" was that one of the tanks was a "flame tank", better known as a "Zippo". It soon became obvious that the dinks wanted nothing to do with this fire breathing monster and were in such a panic that they were running into one another to get away from its fiery breath. Zander's platoon along with the relief force was helping the fleeing NVA along their way with well aimed rifle fire. The bodies of 16 NVA bespoke of the effectiveness of the fight at the Four Gates to Hell. The ambushers had been ambushed - how sweet it was! Now it was time to clean up the mess.

As Max was supervising the hooking up of his ailing M 48 to one of the other tanks, the NVA gave us a parting gift, 15 rounds of pre-registered mortar fire that was quickly silenced by our counter battery stuff, but not before 13 of my men had caught themselves a souvenir in the form of a mortar fragment. I was in a foul mood. Once Max, sunshades still in place, had supervised the dragging of his injured tank back to the company perimeter, I rounded him up for another talk.

"Max, do you remember our conversation last night?"

"Yes sir I do Skipper!"

"How long have these little @\$\$holes been using the church steeple for an FO position?"

"As long as I can remember Skipper, and I've been up here for 9 months. The guy I replaced told me about it. Everyone I know wants to get rid of it, but no one seems to have the b@++\$ to do it! It's a National Landmark, and the Area Commander won't let

us touch it! The result is that it stands there on a day to day basis serving as the perfect FO position for the NVA!"

I stood there for several minutes weighing Max's observations and comments. The question was, what in the hell could they do to me if I simply did the deed and asked later? Wait a minute, maybe there's a better way -

I decided to try a different tack...

"Hey Max, are you currently attached to me?"

"Why yes sir, those were my instructions and understanding..."

"And I am a part of the Special Landing Force which technically belongs to the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, right?"

"Yes sir, that's the way it was explained to me!"

"That means that I don't technically fall under the Area Commander, is that right?"

Max is beginning to see where the conversation is going and starts to warm to the subject.

"Max, since you currently belong to me, if I gave you an order, would you obey it?"

"Sir, your wish is my command!"

"In other words Max, if I told you to take down that damned steeple, would you do it?"

"Skipper, you bet your sweet @\$ \$ I would!"

My next stop was to clear this thing with the Moose. I wasn't particularly worried as the one thing the Moose hated was red tape.

"Gray Rebel⁴ Six Actual,⁵ this is Hotel Six Actual"

"This is Six Actual, send your traffic"

I had to be cagey about this, and the quickest way to get caught was to advertise what I had in mind.

"Gray Rebel Six, I've got a structure up here that has been used for an NVA FO position that I am in a position to take out with some 90mm, am I cleared to do so?"

"Well Hotel Six, I have no objections, go ahead and take it down, how are ya' gonna' do it?"

"With 90mm HE if it's OK, the tanks think they can do a good job of it. This one's been a pain in their fanny for several months and they'd like nothing more than to fix it to where no more Marines are killed because of it"

Now Moose knew where we'd been fighting all morning and knew what I had in mind, but neither of us said anything out loud. If he didn't know SPECIFICALLY what the target was, he'd have plausible deniability, and I could claim ignorance of local regulations. The plan was coming together.

While I definitely wanted that "Marine Killing" FO steeple out of the way, the history buff in me was bothering me a bit. I didn't specifically want to destroy the Four Gates to Hell Cathedral, but then I didn't want my Marines killed because of an administrative agreement. If the Vietnamese (either North or South) didn't want the church injured, all they had to do is NOT use it to help kill my people. The die was cast...

"Gray Rebel Six, Hotel Six again."

"Send your traffic Hotel."

"Gray Rebel, can the Battalion. Air Officer frag⁶ me a couple of birds to remove anything of value from the 'soon to be former' FO position?"

"Hold on Hotel, the choppers will be there in the next three zero!"

We sent a platoon down to the Four Gates to Hell and removed the artifacts and vestments still in place from a long departed congregation and clergy. Everything of value was carefully packed and prepared for its ride to Division Headquarters, following a suitable delay of course, to give our plan a chance to come together, before word leaked to someone who would be required to make a political decision.

One young Hispanic Marine from Los Angeles wanted to ship the artifacts back to his own Parish. Talking him out of taking a large Crucifix was a real challenge; even though his motives were pure, it would not have done our cause any good if we were caught "looting" the Cathedral... The Catholic Chaplain finally got the lad settled down, but I'm convinced that he considered it part of the spoils of war.

Now it was up to Max.

"Max, it's all yours, do you think you can do the job?"

"Skipper, it's as good as (blown) down as long as we don't run out of HE⁷."

Max and his armor plated companions began to systematically take the steeple down. He was well on his way to reducing the entire thing to a pile of stones when the supply of HE ran out except for a couple of rounds kept back just in case. We had enough canister left to fend off the Indians in case of trouble that night, and it was now time for phase two of the plan.

I got my Artillery Forward Observer, Lt. Mike Madsen, up for a conference. Now Mike had been watching with rapt attention throughout the entire process and knew what I was gonna' suggest. Before I even got the entire phrase out, he was on the hook to the 8" Battery at Cam Lo. Soon we had some VERY large projectiles working over what Max had

left. Eight-inch rounds are truly awesome and these were no exception. The battery at Cam Lo had a registration on the pesky FO position, but hadn't had a chance to use it due to regulations – now the gloves were off! The destruction was awe inspiring. Now to phase three!

It turns out that the Battalion Air Officer was chafing for a chance to use a couple of Phantoms in the fray, and who was I to frustrate his desires. Two hundred and fifty pound bombs are in a class by themselves, and soon the former Forward Observer's position was more suitable for a gravel pit.

The Four Gates to Hell had killed its last Marine...

While the Operation Buffalo continued for several days after the Four Gates to Hell became history, the thing was winding down. The NVA's withdrawal from the area around Con Thien left some nasty booby traps and departing sniper fire, leaving the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines free to participate in such subsequent operations as Hickory II, Kingfisher and Bear Chain to name a few. We were not to get back to the USS Tripoli for many days. It had truly become "Day on, Stay on" for what became known as the "Rent-a Battalion"... Those of us who eventually finished the tour on the SLF in November of 1967 were truly survivors.

As a side note, I ran into Max Falligan again in the summer of 1977. At the time I was the Operations Officer of MTU at Quantico and we were firing the Inter-Service Pistol Match in Nashville, Tennessee. Max had retired from the Corps and was dressed rather nattily in a suit, a far cry from the last time I had seen him. He was working as a detective for a law enforcement outfit near Nashville. Being an old Marine Corps pistol shooter, he came over to see some of his old compatriots. I asked him if he had ever gotten the Silver Star I had written him up for. He expressed surprise and had never seen the paperwork or heard of the award. Max had gotten his third purple heart the day of the Four Gates to Hell battle, and had been sent back to Okinawa.

I have always suspected that Max's platoon commander (the leader of the second section of tanks with us during the battle) put the kibosh on Max's citation. The lieutenant, who shall remain unnamed, was an old mustang who was not exactly a shrinking violet. Following the shootout in the church yard, the lieutenant gave me a small piece of paper with his name, rank, serial number and organization on it for possible consideration for a decoration. Somewhat disgusted with the blatant self-aggrandizement, I simply threw it away. The lieutenant pulled out with his two tanks shortly thereafter, but we escorted Max back to his initial withdrawal point with our thanks.

ROC

End Notes:

¹ As the Vietnam War wore on, the entire 9th Marine Regiment came to claim the title of "The Walking Dead", but to the participants of early July 1967, Bravo and Alpha Companies of the 1st Battalion, 9th Regiment were the only legitimate claimants to the title. It could well be expanded to include the entire 1st Battalion in early July 1967, as many elements participated, but the 2nd and 3rd Battalions were not truly privy to the title in the same sense as Bravo and Alpha 1/9.

² Our Battalion Commander, Major "Moose Beard", a former Corporal in WWII, and a professional football player prior to Korea, was (if nothing else) a BIG man. Going well over 6 ft. and I suspect topping at least 240 lbs, his nickname was well earned. His legs were so large that the issue laces that came with a set of jungle boots would not go through the top two laces of his boots. The Moose was a bit disdainful of the hierarchy, having been passed over for Lt. Colonel several times. He did not sweat taking the brass to task, and was not particularly careful to pick his spot to do so. Although there were a number of Lt. Colonels waiting in line for an Infantry Battalion, the Moose's competence put him ahead of his supposed seniors when it came to combat leadership. While he was a competent SOB, he was at the same time sarcastic and irritating. A high nasal twang simply made the sarcasm more biting. While I would have followed him anywhere, it was a definite love hate relationship. No one would have ever recommended him for service with the Diplomatic Corps. Major Beard was eventually given a temporary promotion and "The Moose" retired as he should, as a Lt. Colonel of Marines.

³ To put this in its proper perspective, Bob Bogard and Echo Company were pushing through more dense terrain than Hotel Company, and the M48s were slowing his progress. Transferring the tanks to Hotel made eminent sense tactically – however, Bob's loss was our gain, and one that I would greatly appreciate in the days to come.

⁴ Our Battalion call sign on the SLF in 1967 was "Gray Rebel", a call sign that would be terribly Politically Incorrect in this day and time.

⁵ "Actual" meant you were talking to the REAL person (i.e. the Commanding Officer) as opposed to the CO's radio operator.

⁶ "(to) frag" (a verb), meant to send a chopper using a "fragmented order" (from its original mission) diverting a "bird" to perform an interim mission.

⁷ HE stands for "High Explosive", one of the many types of ordnance available to tank crewmen.