

CAMP PENDELTON, CALIFORNIA

Camp Margarita 5th Marines

1959 – 1962

I spent years in the field at Pendleton but I don't have many photos. What can I say? I have a few of the Main Side area and some snapshots of Oceanside, but few photos of the time I spent at Camp Margarita in the 5th Marines. I could kick myself now because some of the largest live fire exercises I participated in were at Pendleton. Why virtually no photos? I can only chalk this up to youthful ambivalence. With the lack of pictures, some stories might add some color.

At Pendleton most of our activity was with helicopters. One major live fire problem was conducted off the helicopter aircraft carrier U. S. S. Thetis Bay. I found information on this "Operation Big Top" on the Thetis Bay website. There, the Navy confirmed this was the first large-scale night landing of ground forces by carrier based helicopters. The exercise was launched in the early hours of Monday May 9, 1960 when I was with G-2-5-1. This approach was then called a vertical envelopment. Once you were out of the chopper there was another one coming in right on top of you. No need to give the command "Move Out!" You could not have heard it anyway.

One night I remember receiving the command "Fire the FPL" and someone was running up and down launching rifle grenades into the impact area. In the excitement he finally got the trajectory so high that one round fell right in our foxhole. He had been firing HE and WP and this one was luckily blue! This may be the closest I ever came. Even if it had just hit me in the head, "Pot or not", I would have had a big problem.

Another time we were advancing under overhead fire from light 30's when I noticed short rounds hitting the dirt all around me. Having been in machine guns I knew what was happening with the overheated barrels. All we could do was get down and turn our field transport packs to the fire and wait. The word got passed back and they raised the elevation. As we continued to advance we were firing 3.5's at old tank targets when another gunner decided to fire a WP at a 55-gallon drum about 25 yards in front of me. That was another interesting time.

One night I was waiting for the bus back to Margarita when behind me I heard "ROHRER!" There, big as life, was none other than Staff Sergeant Vincent J. Dipano, my Senior Drill Instructor from Parris Island. A Marine NEVER forgets his DI's. What surprised me was he remembered me! "What are you doing here Rohrer?" I am in the 5th Marines and have Orders to Recon when the new guys rotate to the "Rock" next week. "Oh, are you happy about that?" Why? "Well, I am the NCO in charge of all transfer orders for the 1st Marine Division." **What!** After years in the infantry I was ready by 1961 to become the training NCO for Service Company, Headquarters Battalion, 1st Marine Division, "Main Side", Camp Pendleton. My supervisor, Gunnery Sergeant Allman, sat behind me and he had a lot of interesting W.W.II stories.

1. This is what the entrance to the 5th Marine Regiment looked like in 1959 – 1960. The cannon may have been put there by Regimental Commander Colonel Tolson A. Smoak USMC who had served as an artillery officer at the battle of Iwo Jima!
2. Company offices in those days were in a row of Quonset huts behind the messhall. Clearly seen here is F Company and the next hut was our company G/2/5. Our company Commander was then Captain W. E. Cheatem!

3. This is the very first M-14 test team assembled to test the new weapon against the M-1. The fire team leader is Corporal Bill Kuntz and the photo was taken on the Margarita grinder in the spring of 1959! We kept our M-1's and LMG and were not told a lot about the tests we conducted with the "aggressor" company. The scuttlebutt did come back, however that the M-14 was an "ammo hog" and the full auto selector was eventually removed. It was a good weapon and should never have been replaced by the M-16 mouse gun with its .222 round!
4. Just in case any of you had forgotten the basic terrain at Camp Pendleton, I include this one shot courtesy of Bob Counts USMC 1956 – 1959. I remember one night in the pouring Southern California rain carrying two "Jerry Cans" of water to the top of this peak! Hard to do with full equipment and a 3.5. At some points we would literally slide back 25 yards or more at a time on the slick mud, but we got to the top.
5. The Thetis Bay was designated a CVHA-1 attack transport. Her helicopters supplemented landing craft to give the Navy and Marine Corps the flexibility of a vertical assault capability.
6. From her homeport at Long Beach the Thetis Bay was assigned to the Marine Corps at Camp Pendleton to develop these new landing techniques.
7. Choppers lined up preparing for the night assault of "Operation Big Top". Her helicopters carried 1,300 troops and 33 tons of cargo to the objective area. The total operation included more than 20 Navy ships, 60 Marine helicopters, and approximately 15,000 Navy and Marine Corps personnel.
8. I include this photo of the back of my head because it is one of the only field photos I have from Pendleton. It does clearly show my good friend Booker T. Anderson. I have not seen Booker for years but we did connect one time when I lived in Los Angeles. At the time he was with the US Post Office and had his retirement all worked out. With four years of USMC he only needed 16 years with the Post Office for a civil Service retirement. Since our LA meeting was more than 16 years ago, by now he is probably enjoying a relaxed life in SoCal. Photo was courtesy of Steve Niebur.
9. Chow time in the field at Camp Pendleton. I am positive this Pfc.'s name was Snow. He had a scar on the side of his face, visible in this photo. He bunked near me but I forget his first name. Years ago in the building where I worked in Nashville, TN there was a certificate in the elevator signed by the state inspector whose name was Snow. I remembered his first name then and it matched. I was always going to call, but never did. Now I wish I had.
10. This is a good shot of Pfc. Henry Stamm taken at Camp Pendleton. Henry was a nice guy.
11. "Desert to the Sea" was a 150-mile, 5th Marine Regimental forced march from 29 Palms California to Camp Pendleton. I have heard guys in the 5th still count this march in the legends of the 5th Marines! The hike started after a 12-day desert warfare training exercise in the Mojave. Regimental Commander Colonel Tolson A. Smoak led the march, which began March 25 and concluded March 30, 1960. Colonel Smoak stated. "A regiments capability to deploy its' manpower by foot over a long distance and remain in top physical condition, enables them to emerge the victor in combat. It is one of the prime necessities of an infantry regiment." With full equipment, this was not an easy march. One of the things that kept us all going was our much older rugged commander in the lead! He had fought his way across the Pacific and was a Major by the time he participated in the landing and battle of Iwo Jima. Enough said!

12. Boarding ship for one of our amphibious exercises.
13. Coming down the net to a Peter boat. We were all experts by this time.
14. I was an 0351 Anti Tank Assaultman. I never knew how important the 3.5 inch rocket launcher was until I read the book "Korea the Forgotten War". The Marines were unable to stop the NKPA Russian made tanks with the smaller WW11 Bazooka's, and the 3.5 was a turning point in the Korean conflict.
15. Firing the 3.5 was really neat. It did not have a kick, just a push as the rocket went down the tube. It was a recoilless weapon with a significant blast to the rear. The first time we fired they set up an ammo crate about ten yards behind the rocket and when the back blast from the rocket propellant blew it apart it made believes of us all. On a miss fire I never liked putting my hand back there to quarter twist the rocket for electrical contact but I never knew of one to go off during this procedure.
16. Corporal Bill Kuntz outside our 5th Marine Barracks at Margarita. Bill was then, and still is, a good friend of Steve Niebur. Photo was courtesy of Steve Niebur.
17. Me outside our office and barracks at Headquarters Battalion. I really felt "Salty" with E-4 stripes, a hash mark, a Good Conduct Medal and rifle and pistol expert badges. In a few months I would be discharged. As the old saying goes "If I only knew then what I know now"!
18. Me at my desk as Training NCO for Service Company. I was responsible for scheduling all training to keep our Headquarters personnel combat ready. This included periodic qualification with the M-1 rifle and .45 ACP, for those whose MOS specified carrying a sidearm. In the USMC every man (now woman too) is a rifleman. Also, everyone had to pass an annual physical exam and strength and endurance test. Then came the good part. I was also responsible for all Fire Watch, Guard Duty, and parade rosters.

Man if you wanted to be in a parade, Main Side was the place to be. Every time we turned around they needed a parade for someone. For the big ones I would even put myself on the duty list. I can still close my eyes and hear the First Marine Division Band playing Waltzing Matilda and feeling the pride at hearing the command "Eyes Right"! Wow look at that, we still line up with the same precision we had as "Boots" when Drill was a daily activity. One, two, three, four I love the Marine Corps! Check my revisit to CamPen on the top of this web page for photos and story on Margarita, Main Side, and Waltzing Matilda.

19. Gunny Allman was my immediate chain of command and he sat right behind me at Service Company, Headquarters Battalion.
20. Really moving up in the world. As a Cpl. E-4, I got the bunk by the window. Neatly made if I may say so. I still have the laundry bag marked K-92, my laundry number from Bishagawa. The women in the laundry taught me to say "Q Ge Ne". I have no idea how to spell it.
21. My last "Junk on the Bunk" at Pendleton. Hmmm! At this point I was so "Salty" I had a whole set of the small stuff marked and folded in the bottom of my footlocker. I could stand an IG with 15 minutes notice. On Okinawa I remember those all day drills marking, ironing, folding, placing and then sleeping on the floor. After all, we did not want to mess it up. After all Liberty was at stake!