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# LEATHERNECK

MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES



## First Battle of FALLUJAH

SgtMaj McMichael:  
Setting the Standard  
For NATO's NCOs

Operation Texas With  
"Sudden Death Echo"

Women Marines:  
On the Edge of Battle





# "SUDDEN DEATH

## Veterans of Operation Texas Recall 38 Years Ago When Hundreds of NVA Erupted From the Ground

By R. R. Keene

Not that much had changed really.

Today, as 38 years ago, only a hot whisper of a breeze dared brave the afternoon Vietnamese sun. The location is the Vinh Tuy Valley about five miles west of National Route 1—somewhere between the Tra Bong River to the north and the city of Quang Ngai to the south. To the west and in the distance are the jungled peaks of the Annam Cordillera.

There are many places of beauty in Vietnam. This is not one of them.

Vinh Tuy is hardly a valley as one normally thinks; the land is more an endless dull patchwork of flat paddies. It is early in the growing season. The dikes guard only young plants parched and waiting for rain that will wash away the dust and water coppices of scrub pines, which shade family cemeteries. There are, in the cane breaks, hamlets—home to stubborn people who always have eked out an existence from a stubborn land.

No, not much has changed, and that was part of the problem. Gary Brown, John Hollars and Ray Wyatt couldn't quite nail down where they had been when the local Viet Cong and North Vietnamese

Regulars opened fired from a village tree line during what was then called Operation Texas. They had gone back with Military Historical Tours and other veterans in May 2004 to revisit unpleasant memories and yet continue to build the bonds of friendship such events often forge.

In March 1966, the American involvement in Indochina had really just started. The men of "Echo" Company, 2d Battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment still were carrying wooden-stocked M14 rifles and wearing sateen utilities. They were lean, confident, competent professionals—a battalion of "Magnificent Bastards" as they liked to call themselves.

They were plenty young, but plenty seasoned too. For the most part they had been together since Hawaii, before hitting Landing Zone White on the Van Tuong peninsula as part of Operation Starlite in August 1965. Then they were Lieutenant Colonel Joseph R. "Bull" Fisher's boys. Everybody in the Marine Corps knew Bull Fisher had the best or had them for breakfast.

Now, they were LtCol Paul X. Kelley's battalion. Kelley had been in reconnais-

sance and had been an exchange officer in Southeast Asia with the Royal Marine commando. Liked and, more importantly, respected, he was considered an up-and-comer.

The Marines in 3d Platoon had their own up-and-comer: First Lieutenant Gary Brown. He was Bull Fisher-trained and had been their platoon commander for 11 months. According to his radio-man, Lance Corporal Randy Kington, 1stLt Brown was "bright, well-organized and a great communicator."

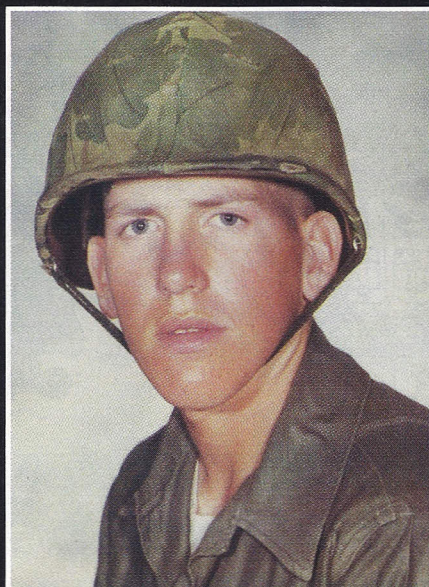
"He was thin, wiry, athletic and well-respected. His boots were always dark, and his utilities usually had a crease even in a combat zone," Kington added. "He led by example. He treated us like he wanted to be treated. We would do anything for that man. The last thing any of us wanted was to disappoint the platoon commander."

Kington and Brown would soon have their lives tied inextricably. And so would the other Marines in the platoon and battalion, albeit all to lesser degrees.

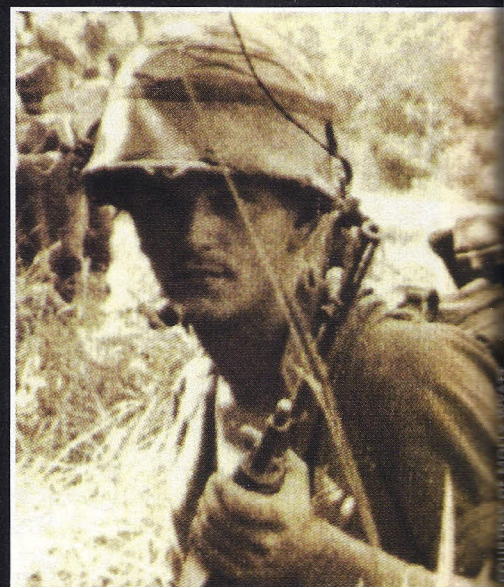
Communist forces suspected to be the 21st Regiment of the North Vietnamese



COURTESY OF RANDY KINGTON



COURTESY OF JOHN HOLLARS



From left: 1stLt Gary Brown was Bull Fisher-trained. Brown commanded the 3d Plt, Sudden Death Echo for 11 months. Marines such as PFC John Hollars and Cpl Ray Wyatt learned to work as a team, from training in Hawaii, to Operation Starlite (the first American offensive of the Vietnam War), to Operation Texas with Sudden Death Echo.



# ECHO"

Although they are much older, their friendship, like vintage wine, has matured. John Hollars, Gary Brown and Ray Wyatt returned to Vietnam to again trek their old battlefields and return to tell other members of Sudden Death Echo what Vietnam is like today. (Photo by R. R. Keene)

Army operating in the Vinh Tuy Valley had been a problem since Operation Utah in early March. The NVA regiment had managed to remain elusive. Best guess was they had probably escaped west into the foothills of the Annam Mountains. P. X. Kelley wasn't so sure. He suggested to his fellow officers, Marines and South Vietnamese who were planning Operation Texas that the enemy "may have done the reverse of the obvious—that they might have moved in an easterly direction ... toward the coastal plain."

Kelley said, "I then suggested the possibility of ... changing [the] axis of advance [from west to east] to the Vinh Tuy Valley ... for a two-battalion sweep eastward to National Route 1." It made sense. Kelley's plan was approved.

While flying back to his battalion, Kelley passed over the hamlet of Phuong Dinh (2) and noted the large open field 1,000 meters to the west. It appeared to be an ideal location for the next day's landing zone (LZ).

Nearly four decades later the Vietnam tourism mini-bus carrying Brown, Hollars, Wyatt and others through the back roads of the Vinh Tuy Valley stopped, and their guide, Tran Ngoc Thanh, asked directions. Nobody seemed to know where Phuong Dinh (2) was or had even heard of it. "Toi khong biet" was the standard response: "I don't know."

When the war ended in 1975, more than 70 percent of Vietnam's current population was not even born. Consequently, it took an older person to interject, "Phuong Dinh? It was renamed after the war. It is now called Tinh Hiep, and it is over there."

It was suddenly obvious, like transparent overlays matching up on a map. Here was where "Sudden Death Echo" had really earned its name. Sudden Death Echo was the company call sign. The 3d Plt commander, 1stLt Brown, was "Echo Three Actual." Being there again sent a chill into one or two of them. They could once more almost feel and hear the events of 21 March 1967:

"My God, I can't believe it! They're erupting from the ground! There are hun-

dreds of them," radioed the UH-1E Huey gunship pilot from Marine Observation Squadron 6, their airborne controller, also flying suppressive fire missions. The Magnificent Bastards of 2/4 had found the 21st NVA Regiment, and Sudden Death Echo was damned near on top of them before even realizing it.

It was 1100 when waves of four UH-34 Seahorse helicopters based about 15 miles north at Chu Lai/Ky Ha bases dropped Echo Co, right where Kelley had told them.

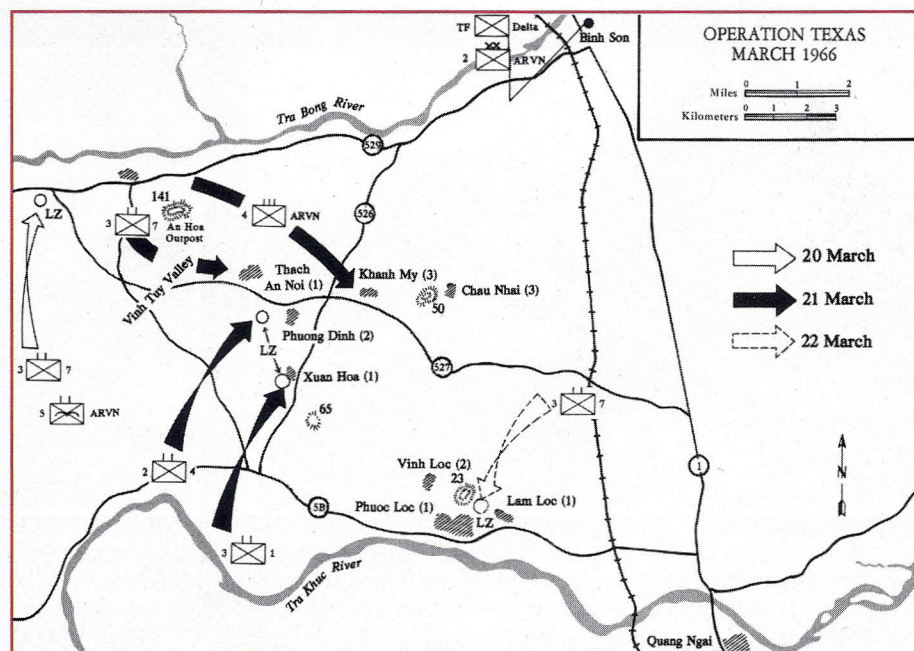
"When we landed, it was a hot LZ, and the company was already taking casualties," recalled former Private First Class and 19-year-old rifleman John Hollars with 2d Squad, 2d Plt. "Sergeant Ted Gray, my squad leader, had us to drop our packs and move forward to help carry the wounded to the rear. I remember running to the front and seeing bullets hitting all around us. The NVA was in the fortified 'ville,' in trenches and in the tree line."

The riflemen of Echo Co were well-drilled Marine infantry who knew their business. Kelley called in artillery all

along the battalion's front. In came 8-inch, 105 and 155 mm rounds from 3d Bn, 11th Marines. It went on for an hour before the infantry advanced with 1st and 3d platoons on line.

The forward fire teams spotted a ditch that could easily conceal the enemy. Nineteen-year-old Kington, who stood 6 feet 2 inches at 190 pounds, making the 15-lb. AN/PRC-25 radio strapped on his back seem small, was working his radio when out of the corner of his eye he caught movement in the trees across the ditch. Others saw it too, and Marines laid well-aimed and well-coordinated fire in that direction. Out went the call for close air support.

Marine A-4D Skyhawk attack jets out of Marine Aircraft Group 12 at Chu Lai







Randy Kington's service as a radioman in combat earned him a belated Bronze Star Medal with combat "V," presented in Naples, Fla., Nov. 12, 2004, by his former platoon commander, now-BGen Gary Brown, USMC (Ret), and his former platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Ed Brummett. Randy's wife, Patty, is—as she has been since they married—standing by her man.

rolled in out of the sun at 250 knots, less than 500 feet above the tree tops, parallel to the leatherneck infantry forward positions—a classic Marine air strike. Two 500-lb. silver canisters slipped from beneath the swept-back wings and tumbled into the trench line. Jellied napalm liquid fire gushed upward wrapped in ugly black smoke, which filled the trench and sucked up the air.

"Crispy critters," commented the Marines admiring the handiwork of the Skyhawk pilots.

In came the Huey gunships to take a look and get a battle damage assessment. That's when they spotted the North Vietnamese, and that's when things changed. *"Oh my God, I can't believe it! They're erupting from the ground. There are hundreds of them!"*

The NVA's and VC's engineering expertise at digging sturdy tunnels had saved them for now.

of explosions were followed by the sound and waves of concussion. Then came the steady thump of a big .51-caliber machine gun, its large bullets visible in their trajectory toward the advancing Marine left flank. Another smaller machine gun fired into the right flank. Through it all was the distinctive pop of AK47 rifle fire from communist soldiers hidden in their spider holes. The Vinh Tuy Valley erupted in firefights. Carefully plotted and well-orchestrated fields of fire ripped into the forward elements of 2/4 and 3d Bn, 7th Marines assaulting Thach An Noi (1) 2,000 meters north.

Frantic calls from everywhere went up overcrowding the radio net.

Hollars said Sgt Gray was hit in the chest and left arm. Their platoon commander, 1stLt Fred Williamson, was hit twice in the stomach and had to be medically evacuated.

Bullets and explosions were going off

everywhere. The battalion and particularly Sudden Death Echo were taking heavy casualties. In came the helicopters. A string of .51-cal. rounds found a Seahorse from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 arriving from an LZ a few meters south near Xuan Hoa (1). It rolled over, crashed, exploded and snuffed out the lives belonging to seven souls of 3d Bn, 1st Marines and three crewmen. The pilot, 1stLt Noah M. Kraft, was thrown clear, but later died of his injuries.

Echo Three Actual directed a Skyhawk on the .51-cal. machine gun and its crew who were reduced to fragments in a burst of 20 mm cannon strafing fire.

Brown's platoon was 35 meters from its objective. In the face of withering fire and explosions, the platoon was starting to bunch up. The highest points of terrain were the paddy dikes. Brown with his radioman got up on one to better view and direct the attack. Two NVA sprang up from separate spider holes and began to fire. The quickness of their platoon commander is still talked about today. Brown shot the soldier on the left. The other soldier shot Brown.

"I ducked down instinctively. One round hit my arm, and three went through my pack," said Brown.

The soldier on the left did get off one shot before he died. It hit Kington in the neck. "The bullet's impact was the hardest hit I had ever taken," Kington said. He fell into the paddy.

Hospitalman Edward Martin, the corps-



LCpl Randy Kington, 1stLt Brown, Hospitalman Third Class Jerry Collins and SSgt Robert Neil waited in an LZ with other members of Sudden Death Echo for helicopters that would ferry them to accomplish administrative assignments necessary to the running of a unit.



HN Edward Martin shook hands with platoon commander 1stLt Gary Brown prior to Operation Texas. Martin would later tell a wounded Brown, "Lieutenant, there are so many men hurt worse than you. I just can't spend anymore time with you." (Photo courtesy of Randy Kington)



man, was harried and nearly overwhelmed with wounded Marines as he conducted his own emergency triage. He saw the lieutenant's arm was badly bleeding and told him to fashion a tourniquet from his belt. He then said, "Lieutenant, there are so many men hurt worse than you. I just can't spend anymore time with you." Brown nodded that he understood.

"Doc" Martin turned his attention to the radioman and asked him if he could move. Kington said he could not move but felt no pain. Corporal Ray Wyatt watched the corpsman and another Marine carry Kington off the dike. He tried to salvage Kington's radio and noted that it had been shot to pieces.

Word came down that Echo's commanding officer was out of the fight, the company "gunny" was dead, the company radioman was dead, and 1stLt Brown, tourniquet and all, was now the company commander.

Brown's platoon was still taking the brunt of communist fire. His platoon sergeant, guide and two rifle squad leaders were down, but the platoon itself was

still combat-effective. He handed what was left of 3d Plt to a corporal named Marwick L. Kemp, whose previous command was a 3.5-inch rocket squad.

Brown told Kemp to continue the attack. And he did with a vengeance. He waded through enemy fire to reorganize his shattered squads, bolstered their fighting spirit and reinforced the cohesiveness of his platoon. Sudden Death Echo, now led by 1stLt Brown, charged forward into the outer edges of the village and tree line.

It was worse in the bamboo than out in the open. The communists had layered their defenses. Three interior perimeters including mutually supporting bunkers and three bands of tactical wire tanglements greeted tattered remnants of Echo Co, whose ammunition was nearly spent.

Brown took stock. It was about 1500 and they'd been at it for four hours. The 1st Plt was no longer effective, and 3d Plt had seven left who could still fight. Second Plt had been effectively checked from the get-go and remained pinned down for the afternoon.

P. X. Kelley ordered Echo to withdraw to a covered position not far from its original line of departure. At the same time, he ordered Delta Co to lay down a heavy base of fire that would take some of the pressure off Echo Co.

Brown realized that a communist counterattack would have little in its way. As if to prove his point, the battalion command group located on a small rise about 50 meters west of the hamlet became caught in a cross fire that killed or wounded 14 Marines. Kelley called for more air strikes. He directed the ordnance in close to his position. It was close enough for the Marines to feel the heat.

Kelley called for his officers. It was time to take stock and discuss their options. They needed to consolidate until they could be resupplied with ammunition and water. There were no reinforcements. During the brief, he made a mental note of Lt Brown's condition. When the meeting finished he called to Brown: "Lieutenant, where do you think you're going?"

Brown remembers intending to say, "Back with my men, sir." But he col-



Marines of Sudden Death Echo got around southern I Corps, from Duc Pho to the south to their base on Hill 69 north of Chu Lai, where they off-loaded boxes of C-rations, 5-gallon cans of water and artillery ammunition from Ky Ha-based helicopters.

COURTESY OF RANDY KINGTON





Ray Wyatt, Gary Brown and John Hollars met a villager who remembered being in Phuong Dinh (2) the day of the Marine attack. The man even had a battle scar to prove it.

lapsed. "I had lost a lot of blood. When I came to, I was in a helicopter headed out."

For the Marines, Operation Texas had become an all-out effort to keep things from coming apart. In what was tantamount to one continuous fire mission, cannoneers of 3/11 fired 1,346 rounds in direct support of 2/4. All available Marine aircraft were diverted south of Chu Lai. Leatherneck F-4 Phantoms joined Skyhawks in 51 air strikes over a village whose name is now largely forgotten even by the Vietnamese.

It was 1800 when helicopters were able to get in with much-needed supplies. By then 2d Bn had consolidated its positions west of Phuong Dinh (2).

Kelley later recalled: "I seriously considered a night attack, but [with] the average company strength down 80 to 90, and pitted against a numerically superior enemy in well dug-in positions, with no reserve battalion to back up, I opted to continue the attack by fire."

The enemy who fought from well-prepared positions and showed a high degree of battle discipline were nonetheless tired and greatly suffering. Under an avalanche of artillery and air strikes, they soon broke contact. That night they vanished and would live to fight another day.

The Marines confirmed 283 communists killed, including one who wore the uniform of a general officer. The next day it was learned that 2d Bn had killed 168 of that number in Phuong Dinh (2). Leathernecks of 2d Plt had been responsible for the deaths of 60.

Marine losses were terrible in number: 99 dead and 212 wounded. The Marine battalion, in spite of being savagely devastated, had remained combat-effective.

"It was basically because our ties were close and our small units were cohesive because of our prewar training together," said Brown.

LtCol P. X. Kelley went on to become the 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps from 1983 to 1987. First Lt Brown was awarded the Silver Star, recovered from his wounds and retired as a brigadier general. His radioman, LCpl King-ton, survived his wounds, but would never walk again. He met a good woman named Patty, married her and went on to write a book, "What a Life: How the Vietnam

War Affected One Marine."

Cpl Kemp later that day directed fire and oversaw the evacuation of the wounded. He personally carried many to safety. He did such a great job that Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, Commanding General, I Marine Amphibious Force, promoted him to staff sergeant. A grateful nation later awarded him the Navy Cross.

Gary Brown, John Hollars and Ray Wyatt scooped up some dirt from the paddies to give to Randy Kington at the next 2/4 reunion. In the village now called Tinh Hiep, Thanh, the tour guide, talked with a thin, older-looking man.

Thanh then explained to the Marines that the man said he had been in the Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam. He was in the village the day of the great fire fight, and he even had a battle scar to prove it. Sure enough smiles were made. All cordially shook hands, and the group headed back to the minivan.

Ray Wyatt then asked what everyone else was thinking, "Do you really think he was there?"

Gary Brown smiled. "Oh, I believe he was there. There were ARVN units on that operation and anything is possible, but there were no ARVNs in that village on that day!"

All three veterans shared a laugh, as old friends are likely to do.



The country was tough, and the men who fought in it were tough too. Marines and "Doc" Collins (foreground) took in the countryside around their combat base in 1965.

COURTESY OF RANDY KINGTON