

OPERATION "NATHAN HALE"



UNITED STATES MARINE CORP 1966 Vietnam

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In the late spring of 1966, the entire special landing force was attached to the Army First Air Cavalry Division to support Operation Nathan Hale. Our platoon was under the command of the Marine Battalion Commander, so we had no real contact with the army brass. We captured a North Vietnam army captain, who up to that time, was the highest ranking prisoner captured by marine forces in Vietnam. This could have been the source of intelligence that made this operation a success.

We were on a routine reconnaissance patrol and set up on a hill overlooking a small river. The weather was exceptionally hot, and on the third day into the patrol, we were extremely thirsty. We had been out of water for some time, so the patrol leader, Staff Sergeant Donaldson, picked a detail of men to get water for us from the river. Sergeant Barber would be the leader, then myself, and one other marine. We left our packs, took all the canteens and went down to the river to fill them up. We took only our rifles, a spare magazine, and a few grenades. We found a pool of water behind some very large rocks where we could fill the canteens. Then we started back up the hill to rejoin the patrol.

Half way up the hill, we heard M-14 rifle fire from above, a little to our left. The first thought we had was that the patrol was wiped out and the Viet Cong were shooting at us with our own rifles. But after a few seconds, Staff Sergeant Donaldson called down to us to turn around and look where

they were shooting. We saw where tracers were hitting and noticed several pajama-clad men shooting. They had good cover from the fire coming from our men on the top of the hill, but we had a better view of them. When we opened up on the VC in the black pajamas, they withdrew and ran downhill towards the river.

Apparently, they were setting up to ambush us. As we zigzagged our way up the hill, we would have made a good target for the waiting Viet Cong. If our men on top of the hill had waited a few minutes longer, we would have crossed directly in front of the waiting ambush team. The Viet Cong had us outnumbered, so it would have been a simple matter for them to finish us off. We wouldn't have had a chance. They didn't know we were part of a much larger patrol that was up the hill, so the surprise was on them. The rest of our patrol assaulted down the hill, chasing the pajama-clad VC all the way to the river. We lost sight of the Viet Cong when they got to the rocks at the river bank. They got away across the river. As we approached the bottom of the hill near the river's edge, they opened up on us from concealed bunkers on the other side of the water.

Larry Lohman and I were the first ones to arrive at the rocks by the river. He was thirsty, so I showed him where we had filled the canteens earlier.

“He was firing like he was on the rifle range, standing up straight, taking aim, and squeezing the shots off.”

There was a nice pool of water behind a giant boulder, a safe spot to get a good long drink. I stood behind a boulder to return fire. Larry scooped up a quick drink from a small pool in front of the rocks with his hand, and then the next thing I knew, he was standing completely exposed in the open, returning the fire towards the Viet Cong who were across the river. He was firing like he was on the rifle range, standing up straight, taking aim, and squeezing the shots off.

The Viet Cong were shooting from the bunkers. They could not see me very well, but Larry was standing out in the open, as if he was daring them to hit him. He emptied a magazine, then said he needed that drink real bad. He put his rifle down and went to the pool behind the rock for a longer drink. He got down on the ground and put his head in the water. Now I was the only one returning their fire. I was putting out a good volume of fire directed at the bunkers from my spot behind a rock, and that got their attention. They returned the fire towards me from several different locations, but their marksmanship wasn't the best and they never hit me.

We would gain fire superiority in a short time, but initially, there were only a couple of us engaged against them and they had the upper hand. As they were shooting at me, a ricochet hit next to Larry's face while he was getting his drink. He was behind a very large rock and was well concealed by the rocks, so they could not even see him, yet he got a bullet about an inch from his face. A ricochet can be as deadly as a direct hit by a bullet that is already mangled. Larry was thirsty, but he had a very focused mind; he wanted a drink and wasn't going to let a little thing like a stray bullet landing next to his face stop him from his drink. He finished drinking, then rolled over and grabbed his rifle. I asked him if he needed any help and he said I had already done enough, and if I really wanted to help, I could move to a different spot and draw fire for someone else. He said he was through listening to me; he couldn't take any more of my "safe" spots. He said if he was going to be killed by some VC, he sure didn't need any help from me.



LCPL, George Dillon,
Force Recon, Vietnam 1966

It didn't take long for us to be in control of the situation once we had more of our men on line with their M-14s. The survivors across the river only wanted to get away. They'd had enough of our accurate fire power. There were several Viet Cong who didn't make it to the bunkers; we could see a couple of the bodies. One of the VC who was badly wounded and close to the river's edge wanted to surrender.

I was the closest one to the river's edge, so I hollered for the wounded VC to come back across the river and we would not shoot him. We would take care of him and give him medical aid. I tried to coach him to surrender and cross back over the river. Larry gave me covering fire while I convinced the wounded VC to come to our side. All this time, Larry was acting like he was still back on the rifle range. He was out in the open again; he said he could see better that way. Besides, the Viet Cong were lousy shots and couldn't hit anything that they were aiming at anyway.

“With all the bullets flying around, it sounded like my head was in a hornet's nest...”

He was standing straight up, firing in the offhand position, squeezing the shots off like he was on the 200 yard slow-fire line back at Parris Island. During this time, I was somehow able to convince the wounded VC he should surrender so we could give him medical aid. He crawled to the river and came our way.

As the wounded VC got to within a few feet of the river's bank on our side (and he was in water up to his chest) it didn't look like he would make it. I grabbed a hold of a tree branch and leaned out over the water to get close to him. I extended my rifle to him, muzzle first, so he could grab it and I could pull him to safety. I could see he was in really bad shape; a good portion of his face had been shot away. I actually almost felt sorry for this guy, half his face was now gone and he had to grab the business end of a rifle to pull himself to safety. He put both his hands on the rifle barrel and was looking straight at the bore, my finger was on the trigger and he had to trust me to pull him to the shore. I pulled him to the bank, and when he went to climb up out of the river, he didn't have the strength. He lost his grip and fell back into the water.

Larry could see that this guy was in trouble and about to drown, so he jumped into the river to help him and then got him to the shore and up on the bank. It seems the Viet Cong in the bunkers really wanted to kill this man who was trying to surrender; his former friends wanted to be sure he didn't talk to us. Larry was holding him up and called for me to come over to help him. Since Larry quit providing his covering fire, the Viet Cong in the bunkers were becoming brave. They came up from their holes and started to pour a heavy volume of fire our way. There were bullets hitting everywhere around us. With all the bullets flying around, it sounded like my head was in a hornet's nest; there were bullets snapping and cracking everywhere. When high-velocity rifle bullets are only inches away from your face, they make an impression that can never be forgotten. Initially, there were only about six Viet Cong who tried to ambush us, but when they reached the bunkers, more began to appear. It seemed there was no end to these guys. Apparently, these bunkers were built on top of an underground tunnel complex and they were able to get reinforcements quickly. We now had about twenty of

the Viet Cong firing at us. They really wanted to send their former friend to meet his ancestors and if they could take a couple of the hated Marines with him, that would be even better.

Larry yelled for me to hurry. He said that the VC were really aiming for our prisoner and we better watch out or they might hit one of us. Just as I got to them and grabbed the arm of the prisoner, Larry gave out a kind of a yelp and said now he was really pissed off. The damn VC just shot him in the leg. I asked him if he needed any help and he said it's only a minor wound, but now they were going to pay. He told me to take care of our prisoner and he would take care of everything else. He went behind a rock and put a dressing on his leg and then came back and started to return fire towards the VC again. He said, "Now it's pay back time!" I got our prisoner into a relatively safe area, out of the line of fire, and asked him if he could understand any English. He jabbered something in Vietnamese, so I assumed he couldn't. The next step would be to get his clothes off and check for concealed weapons. I took out my k-bar knife to cut the rope that was holding his pajama pants up, and as I put the knife under the rope, he blurted out, "Don't cut it off, I'll talk."

I cut the rope and the rest of his clothes off so he was completely naked and then Ed Archer came over and started to put dressings on his wounds to stop the bleeding. There is no doubt that Ed's quick action saved this man's life and gave us a prisoner that supplied valuable intelligence. The prisoner wasn't talking about me cutting his clothes off; he assumed I was going to mutilate him like they mutilated Marines when they captured them. This was a common practice; it didn't matter to them if the Marine was dead or alive; they only wanted to maim him. Apparently, he thought we did the same thing.

The water had washed most of the blood off of him and we could now see he had his eye shot out, one elbow almost completely shot off, and several bullet creases across his back. He was weak from loss of blood, but we didn't have a corpsman with us and really couldn't do any more for him. We were in a protected area behind some large rocks, so we took some pictures of him with a small camera I had

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in my pocket. At this time, the patrol was still engaged in a limited firefight with those in the bunkers across the river. Staff Sergeant Donaldson called someone on the radio and got a couple of choppers to hit the bunkers. After the bunkers were neutralized and the remaining VC went underground into their tunnels, the chopper came in to pick up Larry to take him to the aid station for treatment.

Larry was our only wounded. We captured one prisoner, probably killed several and wounded a few and put the fear of God in the rest. Larry became quite a celebrity, as he was the first Marine to be wounded by rifle fire in a fire fight during that operation. All of the wounded on this operation so far had been the result of the notorious booby traps that everyone had heard of. In the early part of the war, while fighting the Viet Cong, the majority of the casualties were caused by an unseen enemy using booby traps. In fact, most of the troops in Vietnam had never been in a fire fight or even seen a real enemy soldier. This would change later when several divisions of the North Vietnamese Regular Army came down across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to engage the Marines.

Larry walked to the medevac chopper on his own, he said he didn't need any help. He was one tough soldier. Larry was one of the bravest men I knew. He didn't know the meaning of the word fear.

We then moved to meet up with a South Vietnamese Army unit that was nearby to give them our prisoner like we were instructed by battalion headquarters. The South Vietnamese troops didn't have any love for this wounded man and as soon as they had custody of the prisoner, they threw him down on the ground and started to beat and kick him. This was not good! Staff Sergeant Donaldson put a stop to this real quick. I don't think this injured prisoner would have survived long enough to supply his intelligence that made the operation a success if it had not been for Staff Sergeant Donaldson. He owed his life initially to Larry, but now Ed Archer and Staff Sergeant Donaldson were also responsible for him being alive. One thing was for sure, this guy never would have returned the favor.



Wounded VC sitting on the ground without clothing, Vietnam 1966

If I could have changed one thing about my life after the Marine corps, it would be the way I treated my wife, and I would have spent more time with my daughter when she was a little girl. Of course, these things can't be changed, so we have to make the best we can with what we've got. The one worldly possession that I am the most proud of is my Force Recon ring. There are not very many of these rings in existence today and I wear mine with pride.

My Duty As I Saw It
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Semper Fidelis