

From George Einhorn

Guest Column: A Marine Named Archie

Editor's Note: This is a personal recollection by Richard W. Williams, an enlisted Marine Corps infantryman who served in Vietnam in 1969, posted in the 1st Marine Division site at Grunts.net, a military history website. It has been slightly edited for grammar.

By Richard W. Williams

I was a grunt in India Company 3/5 in 1969. But, this is not war story. This is a story about the Espirit de Corps of the 1st Marine Division.

I lived in Boca Raton, Florida. Prior to joining the Marines in 1968, I learned that there was a Marine who lived close by my home. I knocked on his door and his wife answered. I merely said I was considering joining the Marines and I understood her husband was a former Marine. I was hoping he'd let me ask him a few questions about what to expect. As any good Marine's wife she let me in and introduced me to her husband, "Archie."

Archie was quite old. However, he sat in his winged-back chair with a quiet repose. In spite of his failing eyesight, he fixed me with a steady gaze, politely smiled and simply said, "Welcome aboard." We talked the afternoon away.

Archie patiently answered my questions about the Marine Corps, Parris Island and careers in the Corps. All he related to me about his exploits in the Marines was that he loved the Corps and every minute he had served in it. As the late afternoon sun dipped on the horizon, I bid him farewell and promised I would return to see him after I finished Boot Camp.

I kept my promise and visited him nearly every day I was back from Parris Island. He and his wife were gracious hosts. As I sat and learned from Archie, his wife would serve us brandy in the afternoon to go with the cigar Archie enjoyed only once a day. I felt extremely bonded with Archie for sharing his ritual with me.

As my leave drew to a close and I prepared to go to Vietnam, Archie's and my conversations drew deadly serious. He gave me tip after tip on how to fight and even how to win campaigns. As an enlisted snuffie, I didn't think the High Command would be interested in my opinions on running a campaign but I listened in utter fascination to Archie's knowledge.

He told me what to expect in war and what not to fear. After his brandy one evening he said, "Don't worry if you are ready for the task of war. Because no sane man is ever ready. There is only one thing that makes a good warrior and that is a man who cares for his fellow man. That is why the Marines do so well at making war. We respect each other. We'd rather die than to let down our comrades. You see, there are many reasons a young man marches off to war - patriotism, duty, honor, adventure; but only one reason he actually fights once he is in a war. He fights for the men next to him. Marines don't endure the hell of combat for any lofty principles.

Marines fight because each Marine acknowledges the loftiest principle of all: he acknowledges and accepts the responsibility of being his brother's keeper. That's why you will fight. You are a Marine and you will protect your unit at all cost."

Archie asked me to write and keep him abreast to what I experienced in Vietnam. He gave me his address. I thanked him and promised I would write as soon as I landed and found out what my FPO address would be. Without looking at it, I folded the paper and put his address in my wallet and marched off to war.

Naturally, I lost his address. However, I sent a letter to him through my father letting him know I landed and providing him with my FPO. I had been in Vietnam less than a month when I got a response from Archie. He simply asked me to tell him how we were conducting the war, what were my impressions.

The name on the return address was General Archer A. Vandegrift, USMC (Ret.).

My friend, Archie, was the former CO of the 1st Marine Division ("Guadalcanal General"). He had won the Medal of Honor at Guadalcanal and later became Commandant of the Marine Corps. At PI, we had learned all about General Vandegrift. But being as dumb as a box of rocks, I never really remembered "Archie's-" last name until his letter arrived. I just remembered it was "Van" something.

I sat down in the sweaty jungle rot and stench and began what would be a long series of letters from one snuffie to the ex-Commandant and the most famous CO of my Marine Division. I started it out simply, Dear General Vandegrift,

Vietnam is like a large island where the enemy has kept a seaway open. The enemy also has a secret weapon. The seaway is the Ho Chi Minh trail. The secret weapon is their ability to use re-supply themselves using technologies that existed since the stone age. We ignore the seaway, leaving it open and try to use high technology to cause collateral damage to their stone-age production capacity.

It's like dropping firecrackers on ants. So the enemy will continually be re-supplied. And we will continually be re-supplied. That means this fight will go on until one side or the other tires of it. On the ground, your Marines are just that, Marines. We are doing just what you predicted, fighting for the guy next to us. Other than that, it don't mean nothing but, what does mean something is that for all those months you never let on who you were. It was just two Marines, no rank. That's why I serve, because of men like you who have made the Marine Corps something worthy to fight for.

Semper Fidelis

The General wrote back and agreed that an enemy must be denied re-supply. A war of attrition is less costly to a Third World country than it is to a high-tech country. He said that the bombing and blockading of Haiphong Harbor and an end run up the Ho Chi Minh trail coupled with a staggered attack due north would end this war in a few months. But, without a Pearl Harbor, the American people don't have a heart for war. That was America's greatest strength, he said. We

only like to fight when we are mad. And, when we are mad we fight like no other civilization in the history of the world.

This story isn't about famous people I have known. I was then and am now nobody, just a simple grunt. But, the most famous CO of the 1st Marine Division would sit down and talk to a lowly private just shows what the Marine Corps is made of.

It shows that the Corps' motto, Semper Fidelis, is more than mere words. It is a way of life.