

Twenty years after their Vietnam experience, fate plays a role in bringing together a former marine lieutenant and one of the men he could not forget.

The Reunion

By William L. Buchanan

December 1966, as a 24-year-old marine lieutenant, I led my plato on in an attack against Viet Cong positions along the sandy banks of the Thu Bon River in Quang Nam Province, South Vietnam. While Second Squad maneuvered to a better firing position, one of my riflemen, a 19-year-old private first class, was struck in the chest by an enemy bullet and thrown to the ground.

In time, the storm of fire from mortars, automatic weapons and a 50-calibre machine gun slackened enough to call a medical evacuation for the private and several other wounded marines. As we quickly loaded the wounded aboard a "Huey" helicopter, for the fire fight was picking up again, the private turned his bloodied face to me and said, "I'm really sorry about this, lieutenant." Then, like a bloated insect, the helicopter lifted off and beat its way into the sullen monsoon sky toward Danang and safety.

Firefights and pitched battles raged across the flooded rice paddies and swollen rivers surrounding An Hoa combat base through Christmas of 1966 and the Tet holiday and into January 1967 when, unexpectedly, the private appeared among us once again. Surgery had taken most of one lung but he looked surprisingly fit, though gaunt. He had returned to combat when he had a guaranteed ticket home. I walked back to my command bunker that afternoon shaking my head, full of admiration for that kind of courage and determination.

In April 1967, I tore the last page off my short timer's calendar, packed my sea bag and footlocker and started a circuitous journey back to the world. I served another year as a battalion staff officer with the 1st Marine Division in Camp Pendleton, California, then returned to civilian life. A year later I went to work for the federal government, got married, moved to the East Coast, then to the Midwest, and finally back to San Francisco. I had tucked memories of Vietnam away, calling them forth rarely. I felt reluctant to share them with family, friends, even my wife for fear I would be burdening them, dredging up a chapter of our history best forgotten. Even belated attempts to honor Vietnam veterans with a memorial, a statue here and there, a parade of greying vets led by General William C. Westmoreland failed to spark a desire to discuss the experience. With time, the names faded. But the faces such as that of the wounded private had become an indelible part of my memory along with an admiration for the unbelievable spirit of the young marines in my command and a lingering sadness at the wastefulness of it all.

March 1987, provoked by a movie portrayal of Vietnam veterans as dope addicts, murderers and rapists, I wrote a dissenting opinion that the *San Francisco Chronicle* published. Several days later, I opened a letter from a Captain (now Major) John Bates, USMC. Captain Bates had read my article and thought I had been his platoon commander in Vietnam. Could we get together and discuss it?

The next day I called him at his office in San Bruno, a few miles south of San Francisco. As Bates talked, describing himself, an image of the wounded private began to form in my mind. Could this be the

same man, the one who had apologized for getting hit? I was struck by the improbability of circumstances linking together like this. And something in Bates voice signalled a sense of urgency with a hint of incredulity.

When I entered his office, Bates walked around his desk and shook hands warmly, thus picking up a thread of experience dropped for 20 trips around the sun, for 7300 dawns. His tailored wool shirt held a sheaf of ribbons, including the Purple Heart with two Gold Stars.

At 40, Bates stood lean and erect, tanned and sinewy, with the spare look of a long distance runner. His meticulous grooming, military bearing and observance of protocol bespoke solid experience and quiet competence.

Over lunch, Bates' story unfolded, and I learned the reason for his astonishment at my published letter. After I left Vietnam in April 1967, he remained with the platoon. In June 1967, Bates' new platoon commander assembled his marines and announced with regret that their former platoon commander, 1st. Lieutenant William L. Buchanan, USMC, had been killed in the crash of a CH -46 helicopter off the North Carolina coast. Bates and several other marines in the platoon mourned the lost lieutenant.

Bates was wounded twice more, once from grenade fragments in the knee, once in the foot. In November 1967 the Marine Corps sent Bates home, his duty fulfilled many times over. For four months, he taught infantry tactics to young marines at the sprawling Camp Pendleton Marine Base near Oceanside, California. Every time one of his marines lagged or faltered, Bates would remind him, "If I can do it with one lung, you can do it with two."

Then one morning his senior non commissioned officer dropped a bombshell for which Bates' combat training had not prepared him: separation orders because of his physical disability. Bates was devastated. Dejected and demoralized, he returned to his home in Arkansas, registered for classes at Central Arkansas University and eventually obtained two graduate degrees. But the desire to be a marine would not be quenched.

One day he walked into the local Marine Corps recruiting office and pleaded his case once again. The officer in charge challenged him, "If you can beat me in the physical fitness test, we'll help you with your application." Bates did not beat the captain, but came close enough to gain his support for a petition to be reinstated. Soon he was on his way to Quantico, Virginia for officer candidate School, then The Basic School. He served in Okinawa and Francisco, then settled in for a tour of duty as inspector/instructor at the Reserve Training Center in San Bruno, California.

Since his reinstatement into the marines, Bates had taken up long distance running and had attained some celebrity for his achievements in the sport. In 1986, he set a personal record for running 146 miles in 63 hours from Badwater, California, 282 feet below sea level, to the frosty summit of Mount Whitney, 14,494 feet above sea level. He had completed all 140.6 miles of the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii and the gruelling endurance test over the Sierra Nevada crest called the Western States 100. Amazingly, at 40, Bates still averaged 80 miles of running a week while keeping his reserve training command in top shape.



That evening over dinner with my wife, I described my meeting with Bates and my surprise at the unexpected flow of emotion over a war I considered done and forgotten; how much I had discovered about my feelings for the marines I had served with and how much it meant to me to meet once again a man who had prevailed against the odds and had built an exemplary life. I talked into the night, amazing my wife with introspection, prompting her at one point to lean over and hug me tearfully, observing that this incident had shown her a side of me she never knew existed. It revealed, she said, a caring, emotional core that belied the “programmed” exterior -a taciturn, controlled demeanor so familiar to her in 18 years of marriage.

Stirred by the almost metaphysical implications of our reunion and unable to sleep, I rummaged through faded notes, sketches, commanders summaries of field action, maps, photos, letters, tapes, anything that would tie 1967 to 1987 and further define the marines exemplified by Bates. An artifact appeared: my platoon commander's notebook written in 1966 and 1967. There among the lists of supplies, operations orders, duty assignments and map coordinates was a notation that filled most of the page in faded, rain smeared ink:

"A fallen warrior lying on still disputed sand, stained red from a twice-wounded lung, raised his bloodied face and made apology for his condition and for letting me, his lieutenant, down so miserably in his first battle. Selflessness, sacrifice, courage are weak words to describe the stuff such men are made of."

So there they were in black and white, the words I could not say at the time to Bates or those other marines who served me and their country so well in Vietnam, words choked by immaturity, by the protocol of command and the circumstances of combat. My reunion with Bates had released a flood of memories about a war that few really wanted to hear about. For the first time, I'd had the opportunity to sit down with someone who had travelled the same ground. We met and talked frequently tracing in finer detail experiences that had faded from my memory. The spectre of failure and rejection evoked by Hollywood fantasy, revisionist television history and public apathy withdrew into the darkened wings and was replaced by a sense that our convictions and comradeship had endured through those experiences.

Finally, fate had presented a chance to properly commend a living member of my platoon. But what of the others, scattered like leaves across the twisting paths of time? I felt drawn toward that final statement in black granite, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. a focal point of bitterness and remembrance. There I would find the names that had faded so long ago in my mind, the

names etched indelibly into the wall: Sgt. Dawson, LCpl Draper, PFC Greeves, LCpl Hoppe , Corpsman
Salisbury, Cpl, Schuler, PFC Weneese.

I would stand before them in the gathering dusk and tell them silently, "Well done."

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