

Writing on the war

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Bob Bayer has no idea how he ended up with Marine MOS 4312 (public affairs specialist) right out of boot camp at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego in 1967.

“My experience at the time I enlisted was limited to taking a few journalism classes in high school and junior college. Apparently, my name and the need to fill some 4312 billets arrived at Headquarters Marine Corps on the same fateful day.”

Bayer’s first duty station was at the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station in Orange County for on-the-job training in military public affairs, or Informational Services Office in Marine parlance at that time. From there he was supposed to be detailed to Ft. Benjamin Harrison in Indiana to attend the Defense Information School. Instead orders came in for him for Fleet Marine Corps-Pacific.

“Meaning I was on my way to ‘scenic Viet Nam’,” Bayer joked.

Bayer arrived at Da Nang Air Base in a C-130 on a flight out of Okinawa, through which most Marines passed en route to Viet Nam.

Shortly after arriving, he found himself sitting on a bench at the Marine air terminal while waiting to catch a ride to the 1st Marine Division ISO office; he pulled out a copy of Track and Field News.

“The guy next to me sees what I’m reading and strikes up a conversation about being a runner in high school in L.A. It turns out we had competed in some of the same track meets. His name was Wade Early and we’re still in occasional contact.”

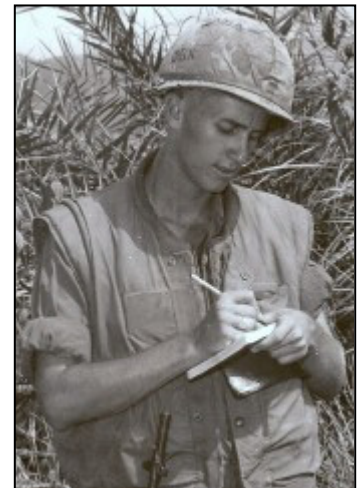
Early was an 0311 (rifleman) with the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment and, when he met Bayer, he had just returned from R&R. He described to Bayer how his platoon had been overrun a few weeks earlier.

“I remember thinking that although we were both 20, he looked a hell of a lot older than me. After he left to catch a ride back to the 3/1, I found a copy of Stars and Stripes. As I was reading it, I came across a list of those who had been killed in action and the name Farrell Hummingbird (KIA, 14 Jan 67). Farrell had been a bunkmate of mine in boot camp.

“I now had lots to think and worry about, and I’d only been on the ground in Viet Nam about an hour and hadn’t even come under fire from the enemy yet.”

Settling in

Once with his unit, Bayer settled into the routine of a Marine Corps combat correspondent. He would get up in the morning with his fellow combat correspondents and trudge up the hill from the hooches



that served as their barracks to the ISO office, a Quonset hut in the 1st Marine Division's headquarters compound on a hillside northwest of the Da Nang Air Base.

Those who were assigned jobs in the office would start their daily tasks, while those who were in from the field would write and file their stories, after which they would eventually be ordered back out in the field to cover an operation or do a specific story. Whenever Bayer was assigned to a particular unit, he would report to the operations office to find out what was happening and see if there were incidents that deserved coverage, or he would talk to various troops in the unit to, in his words, "ferret out stories."

"If it was a battalion embarking on an operation, I would go out with it and look for stories. If we had lots of contact with the enemy, it was easy to come up with them."

Bayer would then either go back to the ISO to write and file, "or I would find a spare typewriter at the battalion's command post, write and then send the stories to the rear on the mail and courier run truck."

Reporting the action

One such story came about the same month he arrived at the 3/1, February 1967. His battalion was operating along the coast south of Da Nang and the Marble Mountains, the infamous clandestine Viet Cong stronghold deep within its cavernous environs, unbeknownst to the Marines who manned a lookout post atop one of the mountains.

"I was on patrol with a squad when we started taking sniper fire from a nearby leper colony. We were ordered not to shoot back because the leper colony was considered a no-fire zone. The VC in the area knew this and would do some sniping at us from the compound."

The squad Bayer was with left the area. Bayer filed a story on this incident, but somewhere up the chain of command the story was killed. He never found out why.

Although there were VC units in the zone in which the 3/1 operated, the area had become fairly pacified, according to Bayer. Even today he speaks highly of the battalion's intelligence staff and how the information gathered would be the impetus for company- or platoon-size sweeps where they would be looking for, "and frequently finding" specific individuals suspected of being Viet Cong.

On one sweep, the unit he was with encountered stronger than anticipated resistance.

"We ended up capturing a half dozen NVA Regulars with their 82mm mortar and ammunition. They told us they'd come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and then worked their way over to the area south of Da Nang. The NVA told us that they had been escorted by local VC units and that their mission was to start hitting targets around the Da Nang Air Base. To my knowledge, this was one of the first elements of what was to be a major thrust into the Da Nang area 1967 by the 2nd NVA Division."

Major battles between the Marines and the 2nd NVA Division occurred starting in April 1967, and continued into 1968.

Wounded

"I went out with the 3/1 on the first day of OPERATION UNION, 21 April, and was wounded," Bayer recalled.

“That day really sticks out in my mind. I flew in with one of two companies from 3/1 that were sent into the Que Son Valley to reinforce a company from 2/1 that had been decimated after running into a large element of the 2nd NVA Division. We were pinned down by heavy fire most of the afternoon and casualties were quickly mounting among the two companies from 3/1.”

Numerous air strikes and a large amount of artillery support eventually helped temporarily thwart the NVA attack on the Marines.

“I was in the process of helping move our dead and wounded from the front lines to positions inside our perimeter late in the afternoon when I spotted a radio operator I knew. I was leaning over to ask if he had seen where I’d left my camera and other gear when there was a ‘BOOM!’ from a mortar round that impacted 10 feet behind him. I got knocked back on my butt from the explosion,” said Bayer, who neither felt immediate pain nor realized he’d been hit.

“I saw the radio operator over in front of me and I jumped up to help him. That’s when I felt warm liquid running down the front of me. I put my hands there and realized it was my own blood.”

Bayer was quickly attended to by a corpsman who checked him over and wrapped a battle dressing about his chin and head. He’d been hit just below the left side of his jaw, and a piece of shrapnel had “sliced down through my neck and lodged under my right collarbone,” Bayer was told by the doctor who operated on him the next day at the 1st Hospital Company hospital in Chu Lai. A number of pin-sized pieces of shrapnel had also pierced his body, particularly in his chest. Shortly after being treated by the corpsman, Bayer passed out from shock and loss of blood.

When he came to, he found himself in a heavily damaged brick building with many others around him likewise being attended to by corpsmen. Wounded or not, that same night he volunteered to man the lines to help guard against NVA probes against the Marines’ perimeter.

“I got my rifle and spent the rest of the night on the line,” Bayer remembered.

He was medivac’d out the next morning.

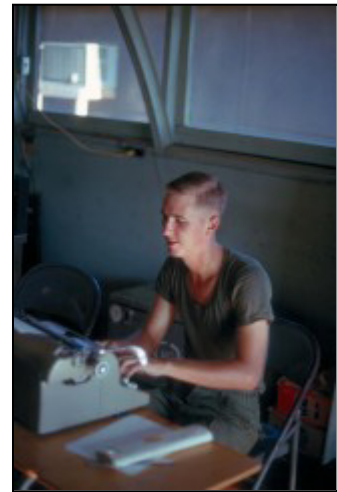
“I believe that the radio operator survived. He was lucky because the radio, which was still on his back when the round hit, absorbed most of the blast from the impacting mortar round. This probably also shielded me from sustaining more serious wounds,” said Bayer, who later received a Purple Heart.

Tear gas

In September 1967, another incident took place, which Bayer will most likely never forget:

A fellow combat correspondent, Gordon Fowler, was with the 5th Marines in the beginning of OPERATION SWIFT, yet another battle in the Que Son Valley between 1st Marine Division and the 2nd NVA Division.

“A few days later, Fowler was back in his hooch late at night describing what happened on Swift. He was normally a laid back Texan, but after the first day of Swift, Gordon was as wired as I’d ever seen him. He described how the unit he was with had been overrun, how there had been NVA all over the place, how the Marines had taken very heavy casualties, how a chaplain, Father Vincent Capadanno,



had been killed while doing heroic deeds (for which he would eventually awarded the Medal of Honor), and how Gordon himself had received shrapnel wounds.”

The next day, Bayer and an ISO newbie named Tom Donlon were ordered out on that same operation. They got to the Que Son Valley about mid afternoon on a resupply chopper. And no sooner had they reported in than an order came down for the company to move out ASAP to help another company that was heavily engaged.

“We could hear the battle in the distance,” Bayer said. “We double timed it over and linked up with them and spent a tense night fighting and getting mortared.”

The next morning Bayer and Donlon went with the company a short distance to retrieve the bodies of about a half dozen Marines who had been killed the day before.

“They were lying out in a rice paddy. But instead of moving out into the open from the cover of the tree line we were in, it was decided to call in Marine jets to drop tear gas in the rice paddy to screen the attempt to get the KIAs. Everyone was told to put on gas masks and soon jets made their bombing runs; we were able to pull the KIAs back to our lines without the NVA being able to see what was going on through the cloud of tear gas. This was the only time in a year and a half in Viet Nam that I saw anything like that,” Bayer said.

VN weirdness

He also encountered the weirdness for which the Viet Nam War was so well known. One night he and other lower-ranked ISO enlisted men (referred to as the Snuffies) were staggering down a hillside from the Thunderbird Club, the enlisted men’s watering hole, to their hooches where they lived when they weren’t out in the field, when the NVA started raining rockets down on the Da Nang Air Base, a couple of miles in the distance.



“We looked up to see bright flashes coming from the air base. It didn’t take us long, even in our somewhat besotted states, to figure out what was happening. Our hooches were situated on pads that had been cut into the hillside, built a couple feet off the ground with plywood floors and sheet metal roofs. You could step off the hillside and onto the roof,” Bayer recalled.

“Someone yells, ‘Let’s get on the roof and watch the fireworks show!’ Another shouts, ‘Grab the beer and the beach chairs!’ A third Snuffie screams out, ‘Get naked!’ So before long, you have about 10 stark-naked Marines sitting on the roof of a hooch in beach chairs and drinking beer while the air base is getting blasted,” Bayer recalls, using the present tense as if the escapade had just happened. “It’s about as surreal a scene as one can envision. And I don’t make this stuff up.”

Press escort

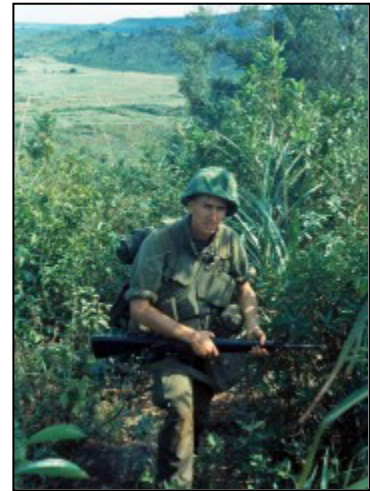
Bayer’s MOS sometimes required him to serve as press escort for the civilian media in Viet Nam, thereby causing him to intermingle with some very well-known and respected reporters and photographers. One of those was UPI photographer Kent Potter, later killed when the ARVN helicopter he was flying in took a round and crashed in Laos during 1971’s OPERATION LAM SON 719, an operation intended to cut off the part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail which wove its way through

Laos, down into Cambodia and on into South Viet Nam. Killed along with Potter were LIFE Magazine photographer extraordinaire, Larry Burrows, the AP's beloved French-Vietnamese photographer, Henri Huet, and Keizaburo Shimamoto, a Japanese freelancer on assignment for Newsweek.

In the summer of 1968, Bayer had escorted Potter out to the scene of OPERATION ALLEN BROOK. They landed in a hot LZ aboard a helicopter that was sent in to evacuate casualties.

“Things were pretty chaotic and there was lots of firing. I told Potter to stay put while I went over to a small command unit nearby to try and get a handle on the situation. When I returned to where Potter had been, he was nowhere to be found. He had taken off toward the tree line about 100 meters away at what seemed to be the focal point of the fighting. The open area surrounding the LZ was a sea of tall elephant grass, and all I could see were the tops of those trees. I worked my way over there and found him after what was probably a half hour,” Bayer recalled.

“By then the fighting had deescalated. Potter already had lots of good shots and wanted to get back to Da Nang to get his film processed. We went back to the LZ. There were a number of casualties who had been moved there. I told Potter we wouldn't be getting on any helicopter out until the WIAs had been flown out.”



The two eventually got out on the helicopter that had been sent in to carry out those killed in action.

Bayer said that after being in Viet Nam a few months “learning the ropes,” and despite the serious wounds he had received in April 1967, he felt he knew how to conduct himself while out in the field and get the stories his job required. “The danger element was always there, but I learned how to deal with it.”

Epilogue

After leaving the Marine Corps in October 1968, Bayer got a degree from California State University at Northridge, then went on to have a career as a journalist in Southern California. He retired in 2009 from the Los Angeles Times, where he worked for 24 years.

Editor's note: Marc Yablonka is a military journalist whose first book, “Distant War: Recollections of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia” was published by Navigator Books. Learn more about Marc and his work at his website www.marcpyablonka.com
