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With Everything in Tatters

AFTER THE TET OFFENSIVE of 1968 was more-or-less stanch'd, calls for radical change began roiling U.S. assessments of the war in Vietnam. Our leaders, civilian and military, took a new look at where things were headed, the largest question of all was, "Is it "winnable?" Right behind that was: Why should Americans be the ones dying? More than any of the other services, the Army and Marines (who were doing most of this dying) had to take stock of themselves and their missions. At that point, there were 550,000 American troops in-country, with these two outfits far out in front in that total.

While politicians debated the fraught circumstances over the next few months, the war itself trundled on. No one was calling it a stalemate yet, least of all the blooded combat troops themselves, but during this time not much changed on the ground. It was still the same old search-and-destroy strategy in and around the villes, but with more mission scrutiny, the press corps having tripled since Tet. The obsession for occupying large, far-flung firebases miles from any support began diminishing too. In fact, that's how I found myself in early April of that year landing in the most famous of all these: Khe Sanh.



As soon as I landed in country, I got assigned to a unit and was immediately choppered from Da Nang up to Phu Bai along with a bunch of other newbies. After two days of processing, they sent me out to an artillery outfit, Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. Headquarters basically meant fire direction, as opposed to working on the guns. From there, it was a hop aboard a C-130 up to Khe Sanh, especially scary for me, "still shitting stateside shit," as the saying went then. All I could think of during the flight was the news of the place over the prior three months. The so-called Siege had never left the headlines until suddenly the surrounding North Vietnamese troops slipped away. No one knew where, though it was hilly, heavily forested country all around with only one humble dirt road, Route 9, leading in. North Vietnam was just a few clicks to the north and their taciturn ally Laos even less distance to the west. Everyone assumed these troops were still close at hand – out there somewhere, just biding their time before the next onslaught.

Khe Sanh itself was a mile-long, red-dirt scar of a place, created a few years before by seabees bulldozing the jungle to create what then seemed to be a great way to reduce enemy infiltration. As we flew over, it seemed even more remote and foreboding than the news photos showed: nothing but blowing dust, the expanse a scatter of dirt-grey, sandbagged bunkers. Closer to the ground, I could see troops scampering from one place to another. The hundreds of shell holes didn't exactly tamp down my fears. Also, in evidence was plenty of heavy armament: groupings of 105 and 155 howitzers and even eight-inchers, all contained in large circles of sandbags; tanks scattered around the entire perimeter. Most scary, though, was the fact (well-covered by the news) of the place's isolation within a circle of high, green hills, basically Allegheny-sized mountains heavy with thick vegetation that ran right up to the very perimeter of the massive base.

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Once we touched down on the dusty dirt strip, the crew jumped to, offloading the cargo into the arms of several supply types with pallets and beat-up forklifts at the ready. I was told to head for some forlorn sandbag bunkers about fifty meters off to the side, and not just head but hurry. Apparently, I was the only new guy aboard since the rest of our party didn't seem to need this advice. At any rate, I got there as fast as my legs, the brand-new M-16 I was toting, and the bulky, fifty-pound seabag would let me. By the time I ducked inside the closest of the ratty bunkers, the C-130 was already taxiing for lift-off; obviously, the crew wasn't up for spending any more time there than they had to.



View of the Khe Sanh perimeter near the airstrip

Incoming!!!!



I didn't see anyone else around, so I sat, and then sat some more, smoking cigarette after raspy cigarette (Camels, of course, the Corps's fave because of their harshness). Eventually, a guy from 1/11 showed up, a corporal on foot, who told me to follow him; where we were headed was about a quarter mile to the west. His filthy utilities, I noticed, seemed a lot more red than the camo-greens I had on. He didn't offer any help with my gear, so I stumbled along among the rusting barrels and loose piles of ammo-wrapping until we got to another forlorn bunker whose top reached about to my waist. A flight of seven or eight dirt stairs headed down into darkness. I was home, it seemed, and about to get schooled in how the "real" Corps actually functioned in war.



Our FDC crew consisted of about twenty enlisted and five officers or staff NCOs, broken up into three eight-hour watches held deep underground in the FDC bunker – a sizable one built by engineers for the 26th Marines before and during the Siege. Our job was to receive fire missions over the radio, sent by forward observers high atop the surrounding hills, or grunts on patrol in one of the valleys, or Recon types hiding out God knew where; analyze and process these many-times fraught requests emanating from so-called Indian Country; work up the gun data; and then convey specific commands to whichever one(s) of the many artillery batteries we designated.

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All of us had been specially trained stateside in month-long Marine schools. The specific requirements for the FDC MOS were actually pretty steep and included knowledge of high-school-level trigonometry as well as superior scores in general on the required military tests. I'd long forgotten about these exams since we took them right at the beginning of boot camp when we were still stunned by beatings and general harassment from the DIs. Our FDC school came later, after several weeks of infantry training, and was convened at Camp Pendleton with classes of maybe a dozen swinging dicks (time-honored USMC sexualized jargon), very small compared to the howitzer-training groups. (These hard-working guys were often called "gun dummies" another frequent Marine Corps insult.)

Immediately after "graduation," I was sent to so-called staging for Vietnam. "Every Marine is a rifleman" is one of the Corps's favorite maxims, and staging turned out to be a brutal, one-month affair (but useful since I'd forgotten everything taught to us in Infantry Training Regiment right after boot camp). Staging featured 4:00 a.m. wakeups and ten-mile morning hikes with full gear and obsolete M-1's not seen since Korea. Amazingly, these things still fired, though very loosely. This regimen stripped us of any delusions of escaping Vietnam. Following that, right when Tet was brewing, instead of gracing The Nam with my presence, for some reason I got sent instead for a three-month stint at the army language school in Monterey; someone thought with my extensive background with Latin I might be able to pick up Vietnamese.



Once I'd settled in at Khe Sanh and was getting to know my new colleagues, I found that the prior three months of the Tet Offensive had sundered the routines of the whole 1/11 outfit (true, of course, for virtually every other military unit as well). The guns, the forward observers (FO's in the vernacular), and fire direction had been on the run from one place to the next trying to support whatever carnage First Marine Regiment and their supporting artillery might run into. It was this unit that relieved the ill-fated 26th Marines, who, during Tet, had been decimated in the fights at both Khe Sanh and Hue and didn't completely function again as a unit until years later.

The huge base was the closest together the 1st Marine Division had been in a while, and there were a lot of so-called "cherries" (like me) among us. Within a short time, just as we were all getting used to the place with its underground accommodations, we discovered two bad apples in our midst, ones we all (i.e., newbies and anyone under E-4) decided we had to do something about. Fortunately, these problem types weren't our kinsmen or even low-level NCOs, but rather lifers feeling their oats – two of our definite superiors who, from their lofty perspective, constituted the hand of the law.

The worst one was an officer who lorded it over us in the underground artillery fire-direction bunker where we all did daily eight-hour shifts (or more). Prepotenza was his name, Captain Prepotenza, and he was second-in-command in our unit (though we all called him Captain Midnight, the name of a goofy character in a '60s tv sci-fi). Worse, Prepotenza actually lived in this very bunker, back in some tunnel. No one ever got to see his dirt-walled apartment except when he'd summon some poor newby to

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police up his messes and carry out his filthy trash. This disgusting chore meant his victim had to haul the load up the dozen or so dirt stairs into the treacherous outside where he'd immediately be exposed to the highly frequent incoming (or our own airbursts): head-down, ducking from bunker to bunker all the way to the shit-heap that served as the base dump. And then back again.

"Who's going to be my Gunga Din today," Prepotenza would call out smugly as he emerged from his dark hole into the busy room that functioned as the brain center of any and all artillery rounds being fired by the dozens of batteries on our red-dirt plateau. To be honest, only a couple of us snuffies even knew what he was referring to by that title, Gunga Din, and how degrading it was. After all, this was the Marine Corps we're talking about, its enlistees not necessarily known for their years of schooling, or for that matter, reading skills going much beyond passing a driver's license test. Looking back, I'm sure Prepotenza counted on this fact; it was just one more way he could flaunt both his lofty college BA and his captainship.

He had an equivalent routine for his laundry, not that his got as musty as ours did, since he didn't, of course, join us at digging in the red dirt to keep our own lousy bunkers from caving in (as well as any other low-down chores our non-coms could dream up). On clear days with a minimum of incoming, we were required, among other gross tasks, to spread out our filthy utilities on the corroding sandbags that functioned as our roofs, water them down from the full 40-pound jerry cans we'd had to lug from the far-away spring, and then beat them with stones until the red grime began separating itself (at least partially) from the green fabric. No, on his own self-appointed laundry day, Prepotenza's utilities would find their way to some new guy not yet adept enough to sidestep such servitude.

Looking back, I realize the good captain had to walk softly in his ego-aggrandizement operation. His status was somewhat iffy as something of a new guy himself, a situation that went both ways, up and down. Thus, his chosen menservants always turned out to be relative newbies themselves; he apparently realized the reaction wouldn't be good if he tried picking on an old salt. So, at any given time during a daytime FDC watch, he might pop out of his tunnel with his bulging regulation-green laundry bag, head up the dirt stairs, and locate the nearest innocent-looking "shit-bird" for "special duty." He'd carefully choose his times for these assaults, making sure the watch officer he'd have to pass by wasn't Major Sifranski, our CO, who did his own laundry like the rest of us (and would have devoured Prepotenza whole had he caught him at this). And, presto-change-o, some Pfc. would suddenly find himself pounding bona fide captain's duds on top of a bunker. The worst part was, he wasn't even thankful (or generous, say with an extra buck or two) about such servitude. Instead, out would come the Gunga Din remark and off he'd go, back to his private bunker, probably, we surmised, to congratulate himself on another successful conquest.

Oh yes, and just to add to things, you should know that Prepotenza sported a creepy little black mustache he'd fashioned into a slight handlebar, despite the fact that the Corps (or at least our small part of it) forbade

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such embellishments. And, oh, was he proud of this fuzzy caterpillar, constantly twisting the ends upward, then combing the rest down with his busy fingers! The only thing he didn't do is wax it. I'm sure he knew the Major – who himself had a small stache and let us grow similar ones (and who didn't seem to like Prepotenza all that much) – wouldn't suffer such dandification gladly.



Our other big problem was Gunnery Sergeant Weldon, who had been something of a late arrival to Khe Sanh, showing up a couple of weeks after the rest of us. He bunked with two other staff NCOs who had their own sandbagged hole in the ground. We pretty much got along with these guys, even to the point of socialization and occasional card playing. It was through them, in fact, that the info leaked out that Wellborn, who sported an enormous beer gut, had been in the Corps 27 years by this point (WWII!!!!) and was busted more than once in the process of getting to this point. What we could tell on our own was that he was an atrocious drunk, given the sudden uptick in empty beer cans and occasional empty liquor bottles outside the NCO bunker. (Note: post-siege, alcohol became more-or-less available again even in far-flung, end-of-the-road spots like Khe Sanh; of course, for us snuffies it was beer only – gross, hot Ballentines and only two per man at that – rationed out to its lucky recipients by rank.)

Wellborn, an unpleasant person in general, was especially nasty when drinking. He was prone to refer to us lowlifes as “you lazy sons-of-bitches” when addressing a larger group, or “pieces of shit” if there were only one or two of us – insults that quickly earned him the moniker “Khe Sanh Fats,” (the film *The Hustler* being reasonably current). He toted around his sizeable alderman, of course, but was also unpleasantly jowly and gifted with unsightly fields of broken veins in his face. Even though Fats was long-time artilleryman, he wasn't assigned any watches in the big bunker (we all assumed the officers didn't want listen to his foul mouth up close), and during these periods, assuming he was awake, he'd really get tanked up and start spouting absurd commands at us as we came off watch.



Our FDC crew outside on a nice, sunny day (i.e., when the guns were up and firing)

It was into this shaky regime that I'd found myself walking on the day the C-130

dropped me off at the airstrip. My equals ran the gamut from newbies to old salts, all with ranks of corporal or less. I'd done a three-month stint

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in Monterey at the language school before shipping out, so I arrived as a lance corporal with time-in-grade toward corporal, actually outranking a good number of my blooded peers (during beer calls, I'd show off my mastery of Vietnamese, and even French profanities). Such rank gained me no privileges with the lifers; in fact, the opposite, if anything. Propotenza instantly hated me – mainly, I think, because I'd been to college – and put me at the top of his flunky list; probably Wellborn did too, though not with the same sense of malice, his mind having deteriorated to the point he probably didn't know he was alive half the time. ("You ain't worth a shit to me no how!" were his final words to me after I'd engineered a transfer to a firing battery a few weeks later.)

For some reason, Wellborn and Propotenza both brought out my defiant side, starting right away. With Wellborn, the feeling was deeply visceral. Maybe he reminded me of some of the sloppy alcoholics I'd watched my father pal around with; maybe it was just me and my innate oppositionality. One day, he chose to lord it over us about picking up trash (the entire plateau was an immense red plain of blowing detritus by then), ordering us to police the elusive debris. I made a crack to the effect that it wasn't our job. He threatened me with so-called office hours, a kind of kangaroo court with no set rules. I could smell the whiskey on his breath as he bellied up and told me what a useless piece of shit I was, then put me on dangerous nighttime perimeter watch "for the duration."

With Propotenza, it was the Gunga Din crack, repeated over and over; I came to detest his slimy sense of satisfaction each time he used it. Beyond this, though, I found him personally disgusting, something about his sense of superiority, the servitude he insisted on. Looking back now, I've decided that all my thoughts about him were right on: He was truly a tyrant who fancied himself the smartest person in any room, as long as that room consisted of USMC enlisted men, people he had absolute power over.

Inevitably, I got into a verbal tussle with him, refusing to carry out his trash one day; I told him in front of the entire watch crew that "we weren't required to perform personal servitude for superiors or officers" and that "I'd looked it up" (the second a lie, naturally). Propotenza exploded, of course (there being no other officers or staff NCOs in the room), and made threats about insubordination, but in the end there wasn't a lot he could do except make my life even harder. All I can remember thinking was: "Whatta you gonna do, send me to Vietnam?" One of the mantras we used to keep ourselves sane. No way was I about to say it out loud, but it worked to calm me in that moment.



We closed up shop at Khe Sanh two weeks later. The base was abandoned, and we spent our final days caving in bunkers and burning trash until the place was nothing but an enormous strip of smoking red dust. I don't think I ever saw Propotenza again. My "attitude" soon got me sent out into the bush to a firing battery for the duration of my tour, and I actually did some good there. Turns out one of our duties was OJT for green South Vietnamese cannon-cockers in the making, so the Monterey language study came in handy. I even got a Naval Commendation for it. At some point, the scuttlebutt had it that Headquarters had cut Wellborn loose, where to I never heard.