# MY DUTY AS I SAW IT

## UNITED STATES MARINE CORP

## 1966 Vietnam

**By: George Thomas Dillon U.S.M.C. (Ret)**

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This story is 100% true as I remembered things and I spent over two years on research digging for the facts and then spent several years writing and rewriting. I contacted some of my old buddies to get their input but found out their memories wasn't much better then mine. This isn't meant to be a historical record about combat heroes, it's just a story about some Marines and how we were back in the 1960's. As with any life experiences time has a way of playing games with our memories. Many people who see the same thing may recall the details differently, that is to be expected. If the facts in this story could be completely checked out. I believe this story would be proven to be extremely accurate. It may be hard to believe some parts but that's the way they happened. I was there for most of the stories and I saw these things and were part of many of them. I have tried to be accurate in every detail and checked all the facts when I could. However we all have very selective memories and we tend to remember only the good and to forget the bad. In this story there are parts of my life that I am not really proud of and I have decided to also include some of these "not so good" parts also along with the other parts of my life to give a more complete picture of how things really were. " My Duty as I saw it"

George Dillion U.S.M.C.
Operations Hastings
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In July we became involved in operation "Hastings", which was the biggest Marine operation in the war as of 1966. We had been operating just below the DMZ in the Northern " I Corps", (pronounced 'eye core'), the mountainous area around Dong Ha since being assigned "in country" about the middle of June. We were part of Recon Group Bravo that was assigned the mission of obtaining confirmation to verify the reports of large North Vietnam Army regulars units that were infiltrating into South Vietnam across the Demilitarized Zone from their bases in the North. This was in the Marine sector, the worst terrain in all of Vietnam, rugged jungle territory, steep mountains, with thick brush and heavily forested. A lot of people think of Vietnam as mostly level rice patties with some jungles and rolling hills, this was as far from that description as possible. This was rugged jungle with steep mountains covered with thick underbrush and large trees.

This was perfect terrain for the North Vietnamese to ambush the Marines, this was their backyard and we knew it. This area was loaded with North Vietnamese regulars, they would come down across the DMZ all the time, this was their second home and they knew every inch of it. Every patrol made contact with the enemy and most took some casualties. However we did proved conclusively that there were several different divisions of the North Vietnamese Army in the area. Operation Hastings was officially launched on July 7, 1966

based on the intelligence that was provided by Recon group Bravo. My final patrol was on July 23, 1966 and was a classical screw up. Everything that could go wrong did. It was about 0800 in the morning, give or take an hour or so, I was the point man of our five man patrol and we were going up a very steep hill in the DMZ, the Demilitarized Zone. This is the section that separated North Vietnam from South Vietnam, on the other side of the hill would be the Ben Hai river that separated these two parts of the country.

We were ambushed while going up a hill and Corpsman Mike LaPorte and myself were wounded when the patrol surprised a company of North Vietnamese regulars who were entrenched at the top. The original patrol started out with a total of 6 men, we had a new 2 nd Lieutenant who was on his first patrol, he was a replacement officer and was along only as an observer, he wasn't suppose to do anything except watch and learn. He came along to learn how to run a patrol and had no command authority, it was thought that the experienced men would protect him while he developed his jungle skills. The actual patrol leader was Sergeant Bill Barber, a NCO who had several years in the company and was an experienced patrol leader. We had a Navy Corpsman, Second Class Mike LaPorte, and we also had the radioman Ed Archer, my self and another member whose name I can't remember.

Corpsman Mike LaPorte became somewhat infamous later on during his tour with the 1st Force Recon Company. It was during a combat parachute jump at night into enemy territory when he came up missing in action. He did not have much experience at parachuting and the wind carried him away from the main group. He was from San Diego, California and he was a surfer. He looked like a surfer, he was tanned, blond and muscular and he was a nice guy. He must have made some enemies somewhere on the way because there are those who claim he defected and joined the North Vietnam Communist Army that night. These idiots say even with his limited knowledge of parachuting he was able to steer his parachute away from the main body of the team to where his Commie friends were waiting for him. This was on a jump from about 600 or 700 feet at night, there is only enough time to look up, check your canopy, check your gear and get ready for a landing. There isn't even enough time to deploy a reserve chute if the main chute were to have a malfunction, this is a quick trip from the plane to the ground. That's the purpose of a combat jump, as little time in the air as possible. That way there is less chance of discovery and less chance of the team being dispersed by the winds. That's one reason I don't buy into the theory of him being able to steer his parachute away from the main group to the waiting North Vietnamese. Besides, he would not have any way of knowing where these people were hiding, he couldn't find them if he wanted to. All the other men in the team were experienced jumpers and they could control their chutes, I believe Mike became confused in the night loaded with all his gear and he was only concerned with getting down to the ground. They say this about Mike because it was later discovered that prior to joining Force Recon he had secretly married a Vietnamese woman and they had a child. Also he got his affairs in order prior to the jump and he packed a large amount of medical supplies to take with him. They claim he only put his affairs in order specifically because he knew he would never be returning and took all the

medical supplies for his wife's friends in the North. I never got to know Mike very well, except to say he saved my life and my gut feeling about him is he was no turncoat, no traitor. He put his affairs in order the same as everyone who had doubts about coming back did, I know I did and I knew others who did the same thing. He took a large amount of medical supplies because he was on a patrol where he saw casualties with no possibility of immediate re-supply. His team made the jump in an area that had heavy bomb damage and many of the trees were blasted off at the top. He could have been impaled on one of these trees. He could have been captured or killed on that parachute jump, I'd bet my last dollar he didn't defect, I'm sure he would die fighting first.

I had recently heard that there is a memorial wall at the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md. where all Naval men who are listed as missing in action in the Vietnam War are honored and Navy Corpsman Mike La Porte's name is conspicuously absent. If this is true, he indeed has enemies and this is not right and there should be a movement to right this wrong. My personal feelings are that the idiots that are saying Mike defected are the same ones that actually secretly admire the North Vietnamese.

My last patrol was really screwed up, at the pre-patrol briefing, we were told there would not be any friendly forces in our area of operation and there were not any large enemy forces either. We were to go into the area for several days, another routine patrol. We had started out with a full team of six men and we landed just before the break of dawn, but our radio operator, Ed Archer, broke his ankle during the initial insertion in the dark and had to be med-evacked on the same chopper that had brought us out. This bad "omen" should have given us a clue that things were not going right for us that day. When we found out the chopper landed us in the wrong area and no where near the coordinates that we had plotted on the map, we should have suspected things were going wrong. Then the new Lieutenant, who was on his first patrol and only along as an observer and really had no command authority, changed our mission, this should have definitely told us this would be a bad day.

The chopper landed in the middle of a small valley between several hills. We though we saw what looked like the outline of a number of shelters on the side of one of the hills. We suspected these were Viet Cong shelters and was about to call for fire support from the gun ships that had just left. We had a closer look and then someone noticed the shelters could have been made of ponchos and looked like they might be Marine type huts. As it got lighter and we could see better, when the dawn came it came quick, this was confirmed and we somehow established radio contact. This group consisted of a Marine Infantry Battalion, (possibly from the 4 th Marines), and they were set up on three hills around us.

We went up the hill to meet with the Commanding Officer as it was now daylight and we knew we were not anywhere near the AO, (area of operation), we were supposed to be in. We met with the Battalion CO, a Major and he showed us an impressive display of weaponry he said they had previously captured. He said we were about 5 miles from the area we were supposed to be at and since it would not be possible for us to complete our original mission he could use us to help on his operation. He told the Lieutenant as senior member of the team he should attach the team to support his Battalion. He put the Lieutenant in charge of the team and assigned us the task to go to the top of the next hill and keep a watch on the river, (in the middle of the Demilitarized Zone). Of course the Lieutenant was quick to agree, he wanted to impress the Major. The Major told us not to worry as they went over that hill the previous day and assured us that there was

not a living thing left anywhere on that hill, not even a snake. I was the point man and even though we were assured there were no one on that hill, we went up trying to be quiet. The hill was very steep with many small rocks and thick vegetation, perfect ambush territory. It was difficult to climb without making any noise, and as we neared the top I remember hearing loud Vietnamese voices and whistles. Immediately after that there were several machine guns firing and some explosions, (grenades or mortars), and much rifle firing. They must have thought we were the lead elements of the Battalion they were probably observing the last few days. I say this because if they even suspected there was only five of us they wouldn't have wasted all that firepower.

They probably had this Battalion under surveillance for the last several days and were getting ready to attack them with mortars and we spoiled the plan. I believe this because they cut loose with everything they had, machineguns, rifles, grenades and mortars. The only thing that saved us was the steep terrain, heavy underbrush and rocky ground. If they suspected there was only five of us all they had to do was wait a little longer and we would have walked into their waiting arms and became five valuable prisoners. Because the terrain was steep with dense underbrush they could not clearly see us and most of the firing was wild and over our heads. Being point man I was the closest to the North Vietnamese position and was shot in the initial burst of fire, the Doc must have been hit about the same time with shrapnel that took off part of his ear and destroyed the radio he had in his pack. The radio being in his back pack probably saved his life, it acted like body armor and prevented the shrapnel from penetrating into his back. After the initial burst of fire from the N V A who were dug in on top of the hill they could no longer see us as we fell back down the hill a ways. They also couldn't hear us because of all the explosions and gunfire, they were just firing wildly.

Corpsman are supposed to be non-combatants but Mike was carrying our only radio and he was loaded for bear. He started the patrol carrying the extra back-up radio in his pack, however when our primary radioman, Ed Archer broke his ankle during the initial insertion in the dark several hours earlier the Doc now became our radio operator. The Doc had his 45 pistol that was to be used for his self-defense, but he also carried a rifle with a full load of ammo and hand grenades. He knew he was part of a small team and he said he wanted to pull his own weight. He said if we got into trouble he would be an extra rifleman first and Corpsman second. He was carrying a pack with about 80 pounds of gear just like the rest of the team, I don't understand how any rational person could doubt his loyalty and even think of him as a traitor.

After I was shot I remember floating in mid air and seemed to stay suspended up there for a long time. I knew I was hit but there was no pain at all. I was flying through the air thinking I was dead and now on my way going to heaven. I thought, this isn't so bad after all, it's not anything like I thought dying would be. I then hit the ground downhill a ways from where I was shot. When I hit the ground I knew I wasn't dead as my leg hurt real bad. I knew both legs were injured but only the left one was hurting, my right leg hardly hurt at all. As soon as I opened my eyes I saw the thick blood, (looked like Jell-O), this was mixed with white bone splinters and the entire mess was on the part of my rifle that I had next to my face. I knew this was serious even though there was no pain from the head wound. Almost immediately, the corpsman Doc LaPorte was kneeling over me with a dressing, he was trying to stop the bleeding and he was telling me I had a minor scalp wound, similar to the one he had. I told him I knew this wound was critical and to stop bullshitting me I knew I was going to die. Doc told me the wound was serious but not critical, he told me to try to stay awake and he would get me to the aid station and they would fix me up. He said this wound would send me back to the states for some easy duty. He said I had to keep a positive attitude and trust in God and we should be able to get out of here okay. Doc La Porte's had a good part of his ear hanging down and almost torn off and he was bleeding quite a bit from a cut on the side of his head but that didn't concern him at the time as he continued to try to keep my spirits up and to get a bandage on me. He told me how lucky I was to have a Corpsman right next to me when I was wounded, he said if I could stay awake until we get on the chopper he would fix me up and stay with me and he could guarantee that I would make it. He told me to knock off any thoughts about dying because it wasn't going to happen on his watch.

While the Doc was at my side putting a dressing around my head and trying to reassure me that my wound wasn't critical his wound was bleeding severely so Sergeant Bill Barber was trying to put a dressing around the Doc's head.

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Bill finally got the Doc patched up some what and then he helped put a dressing on my leg and we all started to get out of there. This only took a few seconds, they weren't the classroom type applied bandages but they worked. There is no doubt that the actions of Doc Mike LaPorte and his assistant Sergeant Bill Barber saved my life that day.

After they patched me up and had a bandage around my head and leg we started down the hill as fast as we could. The Lieutenant was yelling for us to drop our packs and get out of there fast. I felt couldn't control my bodily functions and was worried about making a mess in my pants and have it running down my legs. I yelled back to the Lieutenant that I would catch up in a minute and then stopped to take care of business. I dropped my trousers and squatted down as I wasn't about to be embarrassed by a load of shit in my pants when I got to the Battalion Aid Station, and I certainly wasn't going to leave my pack either as I had a lot of ammo in it, I would carry my pack out with me. The Doc who stayed with me said he would carry my pack if I couldn't.

I normally carried about 200 rounds of M-14 ammo, that's ten full 20 round magazines and six grenades along with my chow a claymore mine, several small plastic anti-personal mines some C-4 explosive and a spare radio battery in my pack along with extra water. Most of the extra magazines and grenades would be in the pouches on the outside of the pack where we could get to them quickly if needed. The chow and extra water would be inside the pack as well as the claymore mine, battery and other things that wouldn't need to be immediately available.

I would have 2 concussion type grenades, these would be used to capture a prisoner, we could stun them but not necessarily kill them. I always had a red smoke grenade, to mark the enemy position and a green smoke grenade to mark our position as well as 2 white phosphorus or "willy peter" grenades. These "willy peter" grenades could also act as smoke grenades and give us cover when we had to withdraw and they would also be deadly if they were detonated near someone. When the phosphorous got on something it burned and stuck like glue and could not be put out, the Viet Cong were terrified of it. They were also terrified of tracer bullets for some reason so we would normally load every other round with a tracer. Tracers are usually used to mark a target and the down side of using tracers are they also mark your position for the enemy. However, because the Vietnamese people were so terrified of these tracers we accepted this risk for the shock value they provided. There would also be another four 20 round M-14 magazines on my belt with four more grenades, these would be the anti-personal type.

We all ran down the hill and jumped into some old foxholes at the bottom in a little clearing. Our only radio was shot up, Doc had it in his pack, must have caught some of the same shrapnel that ripped off the Doc's ear. Normally we carried two radios for a patrol, however Ed Archer had the primary radio and he went back with a broken ankle on the same chopper that brought us in. Since we didn't have a radio that worked, someone threw a smoke grenade to get the attention of the Infantry Battalion that we knew was on the hill behind us. We were lucky, apparently the Infantry Battalion was watching us through binoculars and could guess what was going on.

They figured out what happened and called for a chopper to make an emergency extraction for us. They also called for artillery and jet air support to hit the top of the hill. The chopper came in fast as we were still receiving sporadic mortar fire, even if the North Vietnamese could not see us they could guess about where we were. Although I had just run about 500 yards when I tried to stand up my leg gave away and the pain was incredible. It's hard to believe what we are capable of and what punishment the human body can absorb until the adrenaline starts pumping and we do what we have to do to survive.