

A Burial at Sea

Remembrances of a casualty notification officer

by LtCol George Goodson, USMC(Ret)

In my 78th year, the events of my life appear to me, from time to time, as a series of vignettes. Some were significant, some were trivial, and some were violent. War is the seminal event in the life of everyone who has endured it. Though I fought in Korea and the Dominican Republic, Vietnam was my war. Forty years have now passed, but I still think about the days when those of us in the Special Operations Group fought larger infiltrating elements of the North Vietnamese Army in Laos. When I think of my 18 months as a casualty notification officer, the vignettes are of disbelief, overwhelming grief, reluctant acceptance, and the solemnity of military funerals.

>LtCol Goodson enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1951 and was trained as a demolitions specialist. He was commissioned in 1952, serving in Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam before retiring in 1974. LtCol Goodson is currently a Senior Military Transition Consultant, Career Beginnings, Inc.

Return

I returned to the United States in late 1967 after 18 months in Vietnam. I landed at Los Angeles International Airport, visited the widow of a friend, flew to Indianapolis, picked up my wife and children, visited her family,

and drove to Norfolk. I rented a house, enrolled my children in their 5th or 6th new school, bought a second car, and moved for the 13th or 14th time. I was as tight as a drum!

A week or two later, I put on a uniform and drove the 10 miles to Little Creek, VA. I hesitated before entering my new office. Appearance is important to Marines. I was no longer, if ever, a poster Marine. At 5 feet 9 inches I weighed 128 pounds—37 pounds below my normal weight. My uniforms fit ludicrously, my skin was yellow from antimalaria medication, there were bags beneath my eyes, and I'm sure I had a twitch or two.

I took a deep breath, straightened my shoulders, and walked into the office. A



Bugler playing "Taps" at Arlington National Cemetery. Some Marines prefer burial at sea. Before the ceremony is the tough task of notifying the family. (Photo by GySgt Kent Flora.)

gunnery sergeant, his nameplate said Jolley, stood and announced, "Attention! Officer on deck!" I nodded and said, "As you were." Everyone pretended to go back to work while watching me closely. Their professional futures were now in my hands. "Sgt Jolley, I'm LtCol Goodson. Here are my orders." Jolley responded, "Welcome aboard, Colonel. We've been expecting you." We shook hands. Jolley looked at my ribbons. "How long were you there, Colonel?"

"Eighteen months this time."

"You must be a slow learner, Colonel."

Everyone laughed. Jolley introduced me to the office crew. I shook hands with each and said appropriate things. All wore Vietnam ribbons. Jolley said, "I know that you and the sergeant major are old friends. I'll take you to your office and bring him in."

"No, let's just go to his office." Jolley nodded, hesitated, and lowered his voice. "Colonel, the sergeant major has been in this job over 2 years. He's packed pretty tight." I nodded.

Jolley led me to the sergeant major's office. He knocked, and we entered. SgtMaj Walt Jones smiled broadly, stood, extended his hand, and we shook. "Hey, Colonel, good to see you again. Congratulations! I saw your name on the promotion list." I shook his hand and then we embraced. "Hello Walt, how are you, and how's Joan?" Jolley raised an eyebrow, walked out, and closed the door quietly. I sat and we talked about mutual friends. Finally Walt said, "Bobby T. was killed."

"Yeah, I know."

"How's Betty holding up?"

"I saw her in Oceanside. She's doing as well as can be expected. She and the kids are going home to North Carolina soon." Walt looked at me with tears in his eyes. "Bobby was the son I never had. George, I've been in the Marine Corps since 1939. I was in the Pacific 36 months, Korea 14 months, and Vietnam for 12 months. Now I come here to bury these kids. I can't do that anymore! I'm retiring."

I was astonished! I'd known Walt since 1952 when I was a second lieu-

tenant and he was a gunnery sergeant. Today we'd say he was my mentor. He'd always been a rock. Now I felt like the father of this 57-year-old man.

"OK, Walt. If that's what you really want, put your letter in. I'll endorse it favorably and do what I can to push it through Headquarters Marine Corps."

A few weeks later, the sergeant major retired. He'd been a good Marine for 28 years, but he had seen too much death and too much agony.

Notifications and Funerals

Over the next 18 months I notified the families of 18 Marines killed in action, 2 missing in action, and 30 seriously wounded in action. Despite the controversy that existed about Vietnam, I received sympathy and affection from virtually every family. Once a mother said to me, "I'm so sorry you have this terrible job." With tears in my eyes, I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. When I presented the flag to the father, mother, or wife, I always said, "All Marines share your grief," instead of, "On behalf of a grateful Nation." I didn't think the Nation was grateful so I wouldn't say that.

In this article I have chosen to write about two notifications—my first and last—that are typical because of the fact that they are atypical.

My First Notification

On my third or fourth day in Norfolk I was notified of the death of a 19-year-old Marine. The notification came by telephone from Headquarters Marine Corps. The information detailed:

- Name, rank, and serial number.
- Name, address, and phone number of the next of kin.
- Date and limited details about the death of the Marine.
- Approximate date the body would arrive at the Norfolk Naval Air Station.
- A strong recommendation on whether the casket should be opened or closed.

This boy's family lived some 60 miles away in North Carolina. I drove there in a Marine Corps staff car. As I

crossed into North Carolina I stopped at a small country store to ask directions. Like many such rural establishments, the store also served as a post office. I parked and walked toward the store. A middle-aged couple approached. I held the door; they nodded and walked in. The man, carrying a package, looked oddly at me. I assumed it was because of my uniform. Following them into the store, I heard the owner say, "Hey, John. Morning Mrs. Cooper. Got a package for the boy?" I was stunned. My casualty's next of kin's name was John Cooper! I hesitated, then stepped forward and said, "I beg your pardon. Are you Mr. and Mrs. John Cooper of (address)?" The man looked at me, dropped the package, bent, and vomited. His wife looked at him, horrified, and then turned toward me. Understanding came into her eyes, and she collapsed in slow motion. I think I caught her before she hit the floor.

The storeowner took a bottle of whiskey from a drawer and handed it to Mr. Cooper who drank, coughed, and said, "It's Thomas, isn't it?" "Yes. I'm sorry." Cooper and his wife embraced and cried. Seconds passed like hours. The storeowner led us to the rear of the store where we sat. I answered the questions I could for what seemed like an eternity.

I drove them home in my staff car. The storeowner locked his business and led me there in their truck. We stayed with them about an hour until the family began arriving. I drove the storeowner back to his business. He thanked me, extended his hand, and said, "Mister, I wouldn't have your job for a million dollars." I shook his hand and said, "Neither would I."

I vaguely remember the drive back to Norfolk. Violating several Marine Corps regulations, I drove the staff car straight to my home. I sat with my family while they ate dinner. Then I went into the den, closed the door, and sat there all night, alone. My Marines steered clear of me for days. I'd made my first death notification.

More Notifications and Funerals

More notifications and funerals followed. My staff and I were numb. The tension was palpable. My marriage was affected; it ultimately failed. My corpsman was so alarmed that he insisted on taking blood pressure readings on everyone—twice a day. My staff and I ran 5 miles daily trying to reduce the stress.

My Last Notification: A Burial at Sea

One day while I was running, Jolley stepped outside, put two fingers in his mouth and gave a loud, shrill whistle. (I never could do that!) He held an imaginary phone to his ear. I waved acknowledgement and went into the office. Jolley handed me the phone. It was another call from Headquarters Marine Corps. I took notes and said, "Got it." I hung up. I'd stopped saying "thank you" long ago.

Jolley asked, "Where?"

"Eastern shore of Maryland. Father is a retired Navy chief petty officer. The

kid's younger brother will accompany the body back from Vietnam."

Jolley shook his head. "This time of day it'll take over 2 hours to get there and back. I'll call the senior chief at the Naval Air Station and borrow a helicopter." He thought a moment. "Then I'll call the Maryland Reserve unit and have a car pick you up and drive you to the chief's home."

He did and 40 minutes later I knocked on the chief's door. He opened the door, looked at me, looked at the Marine standing at parade rest beside the staff car, turned, and asked, "Which one of my boys was it, Colonel?"

I stayed with him for a couple of hours, gave him all of the information I had along with my home and office phone numbers, and told him to call me anytime, day or night. He called me that evening at about 2300. "I've gone through my boy's papers and

found a will. Somehow he knew he wasn't coming back. He asked to be buried at sea. Can you make that happen, Colonel?" I said, "I can, and I will, Chief." My wife, who had been listening on the extension, asked, "Can you do that?" I replied, "I have no idea, but I'm going to try."

I called LtGen Alpha Bowser, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Atlantic, at home at about 2330. He was a friend. I explained the situation and asked, "General, can you get me an appointment with the admiral in charge of the Atlantic Fleet." LtGen Bowser said, "George, be at his office at 0900 tomorrow. He will see you."

I was there and the admiral did see me. He asked coldly, "What can the Navy do for the Marine Corps, Colonel?"

I told him the story. The admiral consulted briefly with his chief of staff and called the captain of a destroyer,

The Birthday Ball — Whole Lotta Moving Parts... Get It in Gear and Get Ready for It...

Good news! MCA can help you get all those gears moving in the right direction...
Featuring the gifts, party supplies, and services needed for the best ball ever!

- **CUSTOM COINS** — Design your own challenge coins as special Birthday Ball mementos
- **BALL SUPPLIES** — Grace your banquet table with Marine Corps party-themed supplies
- **MEDAL MOUNTING** — Look your professional best by remounting all of your awards



We can help you with all of your birthday ball needs...

AND if you are a member, we can save you money doing it! Check us out today!



JOIN MCA TODAY!

And Get the 10% Member Discount on ALL MCA & Marine Shop Merchandise and Services
www.mca-marines.org • 1-866-622-1775

"Captain, you're going to conduct a burial at sea. You'll report to a Marine LtCol Goodson until this detail is over. Goodson will be at your ship within the hour."

The admiral looked at me, "Colonel, my chief of staff will give you the pier number. The next time you need a ship for a burial, call me. You don't have to sic Al Bowser on me!"

I stood and said, "Aye aye, Sir," did an about face, and got out of his office.

Jolley and I met with the captain, executive officer, and senior chief. We set up four training dates 7 days before the body was expected. I asked the captain and senior chief to meet with the father and give him the details. They did.

Jolley and I trained the ship's crew for 4 consecutive days. The ship was spotless. On our final training day, we were seated in the wardroom having coffee and, I'll admit, feeling pretty

good about ourselves when GySgt Jolley spoke up. "These government caskets are airtight. How do we keep it from floating when it goes over the side of the ship?"

All the high-priced help, especially me, sat there looking dumb! Then the senior chief stood and said, "Come on Jolley. I know a bar where the guys from World War II hang out." (Burials at sea were commonplace during that war.) He looked at us and said, "Gentlemen, we'll be back in a couple of hours."

They returned a couple of hours later, slightly the worse for wear. The chief said, "It's simple, Gentlemen. We cut four 8-inch holes in the outer shell of the casket on each side and put 200 to 300 pounds of weight in the foot end. It sinks! We can handle that, no sweat!"

The day arrived. The ship and the sailors looked sharp. LtGen Bowser,

the admiral, a U.S. Senator, and a Navy band were on board. The casket was brought aboard and taken below for modification. I escorted the father and his remaining son, a lance corporal, aboard. The ship got underway for the 12-fathom level.

The sun was hot and the ocean flat. The casket was brought aft and placed on a catafalque. The chaplain spoke. The flag was removed from the casket, folded, and handed to me. I handed the flag to the father and saluted him. The younger brother cried. The band played the Navy hymn, "Eternal Father Strong to Save." Volleys were fired. "Taps" was played. The casket was raised at the head, and it slid into the sea. The heavy casket plunged down about 6 feet. The incoming water collided with the air pockets in the outer shell. The casket stopped abruptly, rose about 3 feet, stopped, and then slowly slipped back into the sea. The silvery air bubbles, rising from the casket, sparkled in the sunlight as the casket disappeared from sight forever.

I returned to the office the next morning and called a close personal friend, LtGen Oscar Peatross, at Headquarters Marine Corps. I said, "General, get me out of here. I can't take this any longer." I was transferred 2 weeks later. I'd been a good Marine for 18 years. But I'd seen too much death and too much agony. I was used up!

Vacating the house, my family and I drove to the office in a two-car convoy. I went in and said my goodbyes. Jolley walked out with me. He waved to my family, looked at me with tears in his eyes, came to attention, saluted, and said, "Well done, Colonel. Well done." I felt as if I had received the Medal of Honor.

Forty years have now passed, but rarely a day goes by that I don't remember.

Marine Corps Association **GroundDinner**

Save This Date For A Pleasurable Evening
Recognizing The Marine Of The Year From Each Marine
Division & Presenting The Leftwich Trophy

11 OCTOBER 2007
MCA Ground Awards Dinner
1800 – 2100
Crystal Gateway Marriott, Arlington, VA

Make Your Reservation Now!

For camaraderie and professional interaction with the Marine community and a great meal. Featuring General James T. Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps, as the Guest Speaker!

Visit the MCA website at www.mca-marines.org for details and reservations

