

Bruce Clay & Hugh McIlroy

Bruce & I completed recruit training at NTC Great Lakes on the same day and both of us were ordered to join MCB-62 at CBC Gulfport, MS. After several weeks of working parties and odd jobs we started training so we could join the battalion in Vietnam. We arrived in Phu Bai in late April 1967. We were quite popular when we arrived because we were Marlboro smokers and brought several cartons of Marlboro cigarettes with us. Apparently, the PX had been out of Marlboros for some time.

The battalion had been tasked to conduct a bridge/culvert survey of Route #1 from Phu Bai to a point about half way between Phu Bai and Da Nang. A CPO (EOC Ball?), Bill Howe, Bruce and I were assigned to conduct the survey.

We had a 3/4-ton utility truck and joined a Marine security unit outside of Camp Campbell then proceeded south along Route 1. Every time the team discovered a bridge or culvert that intersected Route 1, Bruce & I would jump out of the truck and measure the bridge/culvert/stream. Our measurements included length and width of any bridge, the height of the bridge over the culvert or steam, etc.

It was hot and humid. Bruce & I would stand up in the truck bed behind the cab and open our flak jackets while the truck was moving to cool off.

We would smoke a cigarette almost every time the column/unit paused long enough to do that. On one occasion, Bruce was standing near the edge of a small bridge we had just measured. When he lit his cigarette, he dropped his lighter into a stream about six feet below the road. Bruce maneuvered down the bank and waded into the stream to retrieve his lighter. He was not in the stream more than a few minutes, but when he got back up to the road, his lower legs were covered with leeches. It took us several minutes to remove the leeches using lit cigarettes.

Later that day, near Phu Loc, the entire column abruptly stopped. Bruce & I were standing in the bed of the truck, enjoying the moving air, so we could see the Marines in front of us and behind us. Marines were running by us, others were jumping out of the trucks, diving underneath them and firing toward an area on the landward side of the road. We were mesmerized by all the activity. I remember watching the tracers from the Marine's M-60's, hearing the thump of M-79 Grenade Launchers and the sounds of small-arms fire. We must have stood up in the back of the truck for several seconds when, all of a

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EASCN Clay on Route 1 somewhere south of Phu Bai, September 1967

sudden, we heard the sharp crack of bullets flying by us: just like it sounded when we were pulling targets in the pits at the rifle range. I'm not sure who said it, but someone said: "Holy SHIT! Someone's shooting at us!" We both leaped from the truck bed and landed in a ditch beside the road, right beside Bill Howe, who had taken cover right away. I cannot recall where the Chief went.

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EASCN McIlroy (on the left) and EASCN Clay (on the right) on Route 1 somewhere south of Phu Bai, September 1967

Bruce and I immediately began to engage the VC. I remember pulling the trigger on my M-14 many, many, many times. So did Bruce. However, I failed to chamber a round and I think Bruce chambered every round in his magazine but never pulled the trigger - or it was the other way around. As a result, neither one of us sent a single round downrange toward the enemy.

Within minutes, the ambush was over. We saw Marines with field dressings on their head & face being helped to the rear. Someone said there were bodies at the front of the column, so Bruce & I went to see them.

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Near the front of the Marine unit, we saw three or four bodies of VC laid out in a line beside the road. They were naked except for black shorts. One body had a small hole in his forehead but the whole back of his head was gone. One of the others was missing an arm below the elbow, another had a hole in his chest but most of his back was gone. The Marines were animated: all of them pleased with their work. I heard several Marines commenting that the VC were hit by M16 rounds.

Because of that action, we were both awarded the Combat Action Ribbon. That was, and has been a source of great pride to me and that experience helped me understand the importance of discipline and training.



EAS2 McIlroy (on the left) and EAS2 Clay (on the right) at Red Beach on the Bay of Da Nang in 1968

The picture of Bruce & I on the Beach is at Red Beach, Da Nang, in 1968 during the battalion's deployment to Da Nang in 1968

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just before we received orders: Bruce was ordered to OCS, I was ordered to NTC Bainbridge, MD.

Bruce had expected orders to OCS since he reported to Recruit Training at Great Lakes in November 1966. After 12 weeks of Recruit Training and more than 13 months with MCB-62, in April 1968 he was finally ordered to OCS at Newport, RI. He departed MCB-62 from Da Nang on 1 May 1968. I applied for the NESEP in November 1967 and was ordered to NTC Bainbridge, MD for final screening on 7 May 1968: just one week after Bruce departed.

After final screening at NTC Bainbridge I was ordered to Purdue University. I graduated from Purdue in February 1971 and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant of Marines. From there I was ordered to The Basic School (TBS) at Quantico. There were several other NESEPs in my TBS class, so we would get together for a dinner or drinks. After one of our dinners, Gerry & I were walking back to our quarters in Thomason Park (on board MCB Quantico). We had a big snow that day so there was a lot of snow on the ground. As we walked toward our quarters we were bombarded by snowballs. Being a partially trained Marine infantry officer, I immediately located the source of the snowballs: an apparently inebriated fellow on the front porch of some nearby quarters. I observed this fellow gather snow into a snowball then exclaim "I Kir U MaLine" as he chucked it in our direction. I remembered how we would laugh when Bruce said that in Vietnam, so I said to Gerry, "That sounds like something Bruce Clay would say" as I prepared counterfires. From the porch I heard: "McIlroy? Is that McIlroy"? Holy SHIT! Did you join the Marines"? We met in the front yard and could not believe the coincidence. Bruce & Jane (his wife) and Gerry & I talked (and drank) well into the next day. Bruce Clay was then a Lt(jg), CEC, USN and Assistant Resident Officer-in-Charge of Construction at Quantico.

I finished TBS in September 1971 and did not see Bruce again until the spring of 2000. I was attending a seminar in Orlando. We had discovered that Bruce had settled in Orlando so we contacted Bruce and Jane and met them for dinner. Bruce had resigned from the Navy, qualified as a Professional Engineer and enjoyed a highly successful career building Disney World.

At dinner, I learned that Bruce was concerned about our time in Vietnam. He asked me if I thought we had been "used". I tried to reassure him that we were young and answered our nation's call. I argued that we were not aware of the politics nor the failures

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of our government back then. We simply did what we thought was right.

I think that helped him. At least hearing from me that I had requested an infantry MOS, which in 1971 usually meant orders to Vietnam, and was ready to go back, he believed that, at least, I didn't feel "used". No one from my TBS class was ordered to Vietnam: we were the first TBS class to do that. I was ordered to the 1st Marine Brigade at Marine Corps air Station, Kaneohe Bay, HI as a Platoon Leader. Tough duty.

Several years after we met in Orlando, I tried to reestablish contact with Bruce. Roman Hnatowski helped me with that. We learned that Bruce's wife, Jane, had died from cancer several years before and a few years later Bruce succumbed to cancer as well.

I treasure my memories and friendship with Bruce Clay. He was a good man, a good friend, but a lousy snowball chucker . . .

McIlroy