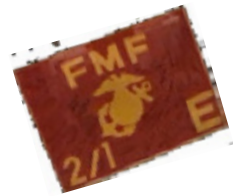


First Person Account

Those Who Walked Point



Lt. Lee Suydam
Platoon Commander
3rd Platoon
Echo 2/1

Let me tell you about **Cpl. Tilo Oesterreich** and **LCpl. Dennis (Knobby) Knoblock**. When I took over the **3rd Platoon, Echo Company,**

2nd Battalion, 1st Marines as a new, green, 2nd Lieutenant, I quickly became aware of these two "Indian Fighters," as we liked to call them. They were legends among their fellow Marines when I arrived in 1967.

Everywhere we went in the **Phung Nu** area south of **Danang**, these two were on point. They wanted to walk point. Knobby once explained to me that walking point helped alleviate the monotony of patrol.

Operation Medina

Operation Medina was a battalion-sized search and destroy mission in the **Hai Lang Forest**. There was a lot of fighting during Medina, most of which Echo was not involved in. I'm told that **Hotel Company** was ambushed badly as the operation was coming to a close and that many casualties were taken. The place was a jungle.

We usually worked with **1:25000 Photo-Picto** maps with contour lines every **10 meters**. With such maps, you could easily identify your spot on the ground using roads, tree lines, elevation, rivers, etc. These maps were very accurate, and you could call in artillery fire with confidence. When we moved into the Hai Lang Forest,

we changed to a **1:50000** (details four times smaller) with a contour elevation every **20 meters**. That's 60 feet, my friends, and that's not very helpful at all. There were no roads, villages, etc., in the jungle. The map was solid green. The only thing we had to go on was the contour lines, which were too far apart to be able to read the map with the limited visibility in the jungle. As a consequence, we stayed lost.

Once, the Battalion Commander called in helicopters and fired starburst clusters through the canopy so that we could be located by air.

Operation Medina lasted a week or more. As usual, Echo was in the lead with my platoon, 3rd platoon, on point with our two natural-born Indian Fighters, **Cpl. Tilo Oesterreich** and **LCpl. Dennis Knoblock**, in the lead.

NVA Hospital

We came upon a stream. We all got cautious. Suddenly, there was machine gun fire and return fire. I ran forward with others to find that Tilo and Knobby had stumbled onto an **NVA hospital complex** guarded by a

single rear guard with a machine gun. Knobby took the machine gun out in a few short minutes. These empty hospitals were about 60 feet long, open air buildings with grass roofs and wooden floors. There were other living quarters and supply buildings. Echo Company followed us into this clearing and long after we left, we could hear the crackle as the flames consumed this jungle facility.

Stuck In The Jungle

We were in the jungle a long time. We were hungry. We had taken a sleeve of rice from the hospital complex. It was like a pant leg, filled with rice, tied off at each end with a rope that could be slung over the neck and shoulder. The rice was crude, unprocessed nodules of grain. If you know Uncle Ben's, you wouldn't recognize this material as rice.

With a little C-4 or a heat tab, you could boil up a small handful which gave quite a satisfying result.

Hundreds of NVA

Later, we came upon another clearing. The canopy was whole, but the underbrush was cut out. This place looked like a Boy Scout campground. There were worn places on the ground where hundreds of men had recently slept. We moved cautiously but rap-

idly. I didn't want to be caught in the middle of the clearing and I wanted to get to the other side quickly. I was about 3/4 of the way across when a machine gun barked to my left. I ran left, toward a little stream and a trail that went away from the clearing, backward and to the left about 45 degrees. The trail intersected with another trail that left the clearing at 90 degrees to the left. So, there was a little triangle of brush between the men on the short trail and the clearing where the main body was.

NVA Machine Gun

When I got to the men, there were three on the short trail and one dead, **Cpl. Terry Fenenga**, in the intersection of the two trails. More machine-gun fire. We mistakenly thought the fire was coming from the left. Then, a grenade sound, like a rock falling through the trees.

Being close enough to throw grenades was not good news particularly when we did not know where the enemy was. The grenade landed in the triangle of brush not far from us. I was sitting down almost shoulder-to-shoulder with the others facing the grenade. I tried to

lean backward in the brush, but it was not forgiving. So, I pulled my helmet over my face before the grenade went off. We were sprayed with shrapnel. A nickel-sized piece of shrapnel hit me on my third rib. My flak jacket was open. It cut a hole in my shirt and left a bloody spot but did not penetrate. I felt that we were all dead men if we didn't find that machine gunner quickly.

"I felt that we were all dead men if we didn't find that machine gunner quickly"

Knobby Takes Out the NVA Gun

Meanwhile, Tilo was in the main clearing. He had figured out that the machine gunner was in a hole in the triangle of brush. Like Indian fighters, Tilo moved his fire team into the brushy triangle on their bellies. Since the bad guy was between the main body and us, none of us could have fired without hitting friendlies.

Knobby thought he saw something like a head coming up out of a spider hole and he fired, dispatching the NVA soldier and silencing his machine gun. We were saved. I was

saved. It was the second machine gun captured by Knobby on Operation Medina. I cannot heap enough praise on these two heroes.

Summing Up

Every man of ours was a comrade whether he was personally known as a friend or just another brother in uniform. When a brother fell, it was a time for remorse. If the brother was a dear friend, all the more reason for anguish and bereavement.

But I tell you, dear reader, there were no losses more bitterly suffered than the loss of those dear friends and comrades that fell to friendly fire, as Tilo did. All too frequently, and because of the lethal nature of all tools in combat, men died from the killing power of our own weapons misdirected by accident or used too close to our forces.

All the Marines I was privileged to serve with stand tall in my memory.

Semper Fidelis.

Always a Marine

— Lee Suydam

About Tilo

Tilo and his family were refugees from **East Germany**. Tilo was later killed in action by *friendly* mortar fire on April 7, 1968. Four shells came in on top of Tilo's fire team. Three died instantly including Tilo. The others that died with Tilo were **LCpl John Mount** of Vineland, NJ, and **PFC Thomas Nash** of Atlanta, GA.



Two 21-year-old youngsters, my hero, Dennis "Knobby," Knoblock (L) and me, Lee Suydam. We've seen each other twice in the last 50 years but we keep in touch.



Tilo Rudolph Oesterreich
Echo 2/1, KIA 7 April 1968
Panel 48E Row 45