



## Operation Union

# When Captain Pratt Got Shot

### Operation Union

*Operation Union was a 1967 search and destroy mission in Vietnam's Que Son Valley that was carried out by elements of the 1st and 5th U.S. Marine regiments. The object of the operation was to encircle and destroy the 2nd North Vietnamese Army Division. While crossing a dry riverbed, Marine rifle company Echo 2/1, under the command of Capt. Thomas M. Pratt III, was quickly pinned down by well-hidden NVA soldiers waiting in the treeline. Unable to locate the enemy fire, Capt. Pratt's tactic was to stand up and make himself a target, forcing the NVA to expose their positions by shooting at him.*

*Here is that story, told by three who were there: Echo's 3rd Platoon commander Lt. Marshall Croy, Echo's U.S. Navy Corpsman HM3 John Weed ("Doc Weed"), and Echo's 2nd Platoon machine gunner L/Cpl Jerry Favero.*

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**Lt. Marshall Croy**  
Echo Co. Executive Officer  
Platoon Commander  
3rd platoon, "E" 2/1

Echo Co., 2nd Bn, 1st Marines, was called out to Operation Union attached to the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines because 1/1 was short a rifle company and needed help. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Van Bell, asked specifically for the Echo Raiders. Echo was short a platoon. The 1st platoon under Lt. Ernie Cockerell was out on another mission at the time and you couldn't call them back. So we picked up a platoon from Hotel 2/1 and went to the helicopter landing zone

to mount out. But the helicopters weren't there yet so we went back to our company area and then, later that night, we boarded the choppers into Operation Union. It was the beginning phase of a regiment-sized attack against the 2nd NVA Division.

### Echo Ambushed

The next morning Echo 2/1 moved out with my platoon on the right flank. Right away we ran into a situation where we got pinned down by NVA snipers. Echo had moved forward into an open area with a downward slope leading to a dry river bed. The North Vietnamese were waiting in the treeline on the other side, dug in far from the river bank. It was individual NVA riflemen — no big weapons, no heavy machine guns — but they were effective. We were exposed and they were picking us off. We took casualties right away so we withdrew back up the slope behind cover. Plenty of fire was coming our way.

### Capt. Pratt Gets Shot

We needed to call in artillery or air support but weren't sure of the NVA's exact location. Capt. Pratt, trying to draw fire to pinpoint the NVA, stood up reading his map and waving his arms at the enemy. He got hit right away, shot in the groin. But he still kept popping up, trying to draw enemy fire. A little later, he got hit again, this time above the right knee. He kept popping up anyway and the enemy finally gave themselves away. We opened up on them. We had with us Cpl John MacDonald, an Artillery Forward Observer (FO) with a reputation that there was nothing he couldn't hit. He called in a fire mission on the enemy positions that Capt Pratt had located. The artillery cut the NVA to pieces and Echo advanced forward

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**"Doc Weed"**  
HM3 John Weed  
U.S. Navy Corpsman  
Attached "E" 2/1

Echo Co. was about a third of the way down the slope when it got pinned down on one side of the creek. There was some automatic fire but a lot of sniper fire and the initial volley killed Cpl Adam Ballard. Machine gunner PFC Jim Gaynor was wounded and I patched him up. L/Cpl Donovan Cordell was also wounded and it looked like he'd caught a bullet in the head.

So now a number of people had been wounded and we're calling in the medevac helicopters. There was a brief period where nobody was getting hit unless they moved and Capt. Pratt, frustrated, stood up to make himself a target. The idea was that while the NVA were shooting at him, the rest of us would pinpoint where the bad guys were actually holding. It worked.

### The NVA Open Up

Capt. Pratt got hit right away in what turned out to be the right groin area. HM3 Ralph Zerbe, the senior corpsman, was with the command group and he tended to Capt. Pratt. Myself, I'm still taking care of Jim Gainer because he was hit bad and kept passing out. So I

was trying to keep him awake to assess his wounds but he kept getting up and falling over. PFC George Hill kept pulling him back down.

### Capt Pratt Hit Again

Capt. Pratt, already wounded, kept standing up. He stood up several times over an hour, hour and a half, and then he caught a second bullet through and through above his right knee. Senior Corpsman Zerbe tried to convince him to evacuate but he refused. He didn't want to leave the company, he wanted to get the enemy sniper, so he refused evacuation and stood up again.

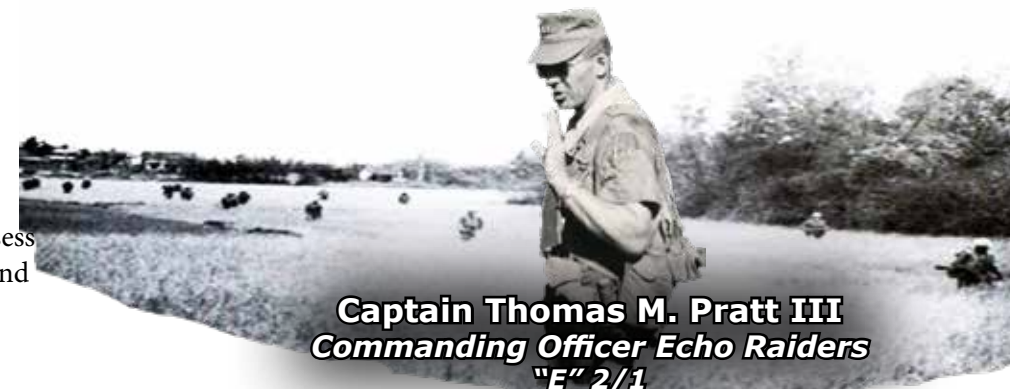
### Gotta Fly Or Die

It's getting late, toward 3:00 pm, and Capt. Pratt was bleeding heavily internally. His right thigh is almost twice the size of his left thigh from the internal bleeding.

While I was patching him up, I told him, "Skipper you're not getting better. I'm the senior field medical officer on this issue and it's up to me whether you're staying or going. You gotta fly or you die."

He says, "What are you talking about doc?" So I tell him, "Look at your thighs, the right thigh is twice the size of the left thigh. You're not bleeding out, you're bleeding into your thigh from the groin wound." I said, "We don't have enough fluid IVs out here to keep you alive. If you don't fly, you'll probably die before morning." Wounded and weak, he finally acquiesced and agreed to evacuation.

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**Captain Thomas M. Pratt III**  
Commanding Officer Echo Raiders  
"E" 2/1

Capt. Pratt survived his wounds but I never saw him again until 47 years later.

### Epilogue

*The U.S. Marines that took part in Operations Union and Union II inflicted over 1,500 NVA casualties and, for a few months, eliminated the 2nd NVA Division as a combat force to be reckoned with.*

*L/Cpl Donovan Cordell, the marine shot in the head, was medevaced on the same chopper with Capt. Pratt. The Captain, in shock and weak from loss of blood, held the dead marine's head in his lap, crying and telling him what a good marine he'd been and how proud he was to have served with him. As it turned out, Donovan Cordell had suffered only a superficial head wound and, 50 years later, the Captain and Donovan tearfully reunited at the Echo Raiders reunion in Prescott Valley, AZ.*

*Capt. Pratt was flown to the U.S.S. Repose, a U.S. Navy hospital ship waiting offshore. After seven weeks on board, he recovered from his wounds and returned to duty as the commanding officer of the Echo Raiders.*

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**L/Cpl Gerald Favero**  
Gunner, Machine Gun #2,  
2nd Platoon, "E" 2/1

We had taken sniper fire and three Marines were down, one killed in action and two wounded. Capt. Pratt wanted to know where the sniper was so we could neutralize him, but no one was sure where the deadly bullets were coming from.

### Bang

Capt. Pratt stood up to look around, waving his arms in the direction of the sniper. Bang! He was down, wounded in the groin area. He asked if anyone had seen where the shot had come from but no one answered up. He kept standing up, against the wishes of the Corpsman who was treating him for his wound. Bang! He was down. Hit again. The people around him could only give a general direction of the sniper's location.

### We Find the NVA

He told us to watch that area in particular. Again, against the wishes of the Corpsman who was now treating two wounds, Capt. Pratt stood up again and the sniper opened up. But this time the sniper missed and we spotted him. Mac, our Artillery Forward Observer (FO), called in a fire mission on the tree and took the sniper, the tree, and the rest of the orchard out.



**U.S.S. Repose (AH-16)**  
U.S. Navy Hospital Ship