

Moving Wall, Newport RI
Sept 2019
John L. Ciummo
Sergeant, USMC 1965-1969

Good afternoon to all of the honored guests and attendees gathered here today on this memorable occasion. My name is John Ciummo. I reside in Middletown along with my wife and son.

My talk will consist of two parts. The first part will be some reflections of my tour in Vietnam as a young 22 year old Marine serving as a Marine Scout dog handler attached to the First Marine division. I would also like to reflect back at the casualties the Marines Corp incurred during it's time in Vietnam. The Marine Corp paid a very high price during those five years.

I enlisted in the Marines, along with thousands of other young American boys, in June of 1965, three days after graduating from high school. After a summer of fun at Parris Island, I was sent to Camp Lejeune, NC to serve with 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine regiment.

In the fall of 1967, I volunteered to train as a Marine Scout Dog handler. After twelve weeks of training, I received my orders to Vietnam, where I would serve with the 1st Marine division.
I was discharged in 1969, with the rank of Sergeant.

Some may ask: what is the mission of a scout dog handler? The Marine Corp. maintained two small platoons of scout dog teams in Vietnam, with approx. 30 dogs and handlers per platoon. We would be assigned to Marine infantry units during combat operations for up to 30 days at a time. After operations ended our teams would rotate back to our base camp for a week of rest where both handler and scout dog could recover and await their next assignment.

We were the “eyes and ears” of that unit. Our mission was to walk point, out front, with our scout dog to detect enemy ambushes, snipers, booby trap trip wires, by using the dogs’ keen senses of sight, hearing and smell. It was up to the handler to learn how to “read” their dogs alerting signal. This talent came with training and the harsh realities of combat.

Because of the dogs’ senses, we participated in many night ambushes.

I had the privilege of serving with units from the 1st, 5th, 7th Marine regiments and 1st Recon on numerous operations in Northern I Corp.

Looking back after 50 years, what I remember the most was the enormous responsibility thrust on our young shoulders while leading Marine units during combat operations. Most of us were in our late teens or early twenties. I felt the like the “old man” when I turned 22.

My greatest fear, and I think I can speak for all the handlers, was making a mistake that cost Marines their lives. The Marines in that unit I was attached to depended on me and my scout dog to warn them of impending danger. This was our sole responsibility during operations.

We were not perfect by any means. Constant fatigue, tropical heat, lack of sleep and never having enough water affected you and your dogs' ability to perform your mission.

This dulling of the senses could sometimes lead to disaster, and that weighed on our minds. Every time you reported to a new unit, you had to validate your worth to that unit.

There were a few instances where handlers lost faith in their dogs' ability to perform effectively in the field.

Their dogs were worn out from too much time in the field, or had become gun shy and could not be trusted under fire by their handlers.

Going out on operations with an untrustworthy dog was a death sentence.

We considered ourselves to be an elite unit. We had volunteered for the Marines and then volunteered to become Scout Dog Handlers to walk point. We also developed a little bit of arrogance along the way.

Over time, many experiences that I used to remember clearly have faded, which is a good thing. War for the young men at the tip of the spear is ugly, brutal and extremely cruel in its unfairness in regards to who lives or dies on the battlefield.

But I will relate to you what for me was the worst ten days of my tour. During those ten days, I lost four good friends killed or wounded in combat.

One was killed along with his dog while on patrol.

Two handlers became double amputees, and their dogs killed, when their dogs tripped undetected trip wires attached to booby traps-and the fourth was buried, along with his dog, when scouting in an enemy tunnel that had collapsed. When the unit finally dug him out, he was near death due to suffocation and his dog had died in the collapsed tunnel. He had suffered a complete nervous breakdown. We never saw Bob again.

These four young men were my friends and my Marine family, and now they were gone.

Any man who has seen enough combat knows in his heart that no matter how proficient he becomes at his craft, survival has much to do with random chance.

I read something about this subject once and the line went like this: Fate put you there (meaning Vietnam) and chance took the other guy away. A series of decisions during your life made you join the Marines during

wartime. And fate could end your life in a split second. You had almost no way to control it.

One last reflection has to do with the nature of the war itself. The press and media have always portrayed the war as different and unique than any other war America has fought.

I disagree on one major point. For the average “grunt”, the war was like any other war that has been fought. He faced imminent death or life changing wounds every day in the field, his constant companions were: fear, anxiety, mind numbing fatigue, lack of sleep, filth, bad food or no food, constant thirst, the lack of water in the field, monsoon rain for weeks at a time with no shelter or change of clothes. Malaria, dysentery, leeches, mosquitoes in swarms, loneliness, missing home, bad orders that made no sense, petty harassment back in the rear echelon areas all weighed on us daily.

All these and more were what the grunt had to live with and endure. And yet in spite of all this, the “grunt” carried on with his duty: Fighting the good fight everyday & completing his mission. Hoping to reach that magic rotation date in one piece, and go home to his loved ones to start adulthood.

There are 46 Marine Scout Dog handler’s names on this wall.

I am here to honor them and the memory of their deeds.

As I stated at the beginning of my speech, I would like to address the cost of the Marine Corps, in lives' during the Corps time in Vietnam.

Although the Marines manpower strength in Vietnam represented only 15% of the total American troops in country.

Every fourth name on the wall is a United States Marine.

According to official that records I obtained from the Marine Corp Historical Division, a total of 309,771 Marines served in Vietnam.

Total casualties were: 78,756.

This number includes 14,836 KIA's. This is 25% casualty rate. Far and away higher than any other branch of service that served in Vietnam.

20,574 of these Marines were between 17-19 years old with less than a year of service in the Marines.

The First Marine Division suffered 39,407 casualties and the Third Marine Division incurred 30,214 casualties.

The 1st Battalion, 9th Marine, the famous 'Walking Dead' suffered the highest casualty rate of all: During the 47 months in country the battalion participated in 43 major engagements in Northern I Corp. Over 2900 hundred Marines rotated through the Battalion. A normal battalion contains 800 men.

This unit lost 747 KIA for a 26% KIA rate.
This is the highest KIA rate of any unit in Marine Corp.
history.

And finally, a unit that I was attached to for 60 days,
Mike Co. 3rd Bat./ 7th Marine was under the command of
then Captain, Later Lt. General , Paul Van Riper.
In wartime, a Marine company usually will field around
150 Marines at any time, sometimes fewer.
During it's time in Vietnam, 171 young Marines were
killed and over 300 wounded.

The reality of these numbers meant that being a combat
Marine was an extremely dangerous occupation.

We are all present to honor every name on this wall.
Although we cannot possibly know the individual story
behind each and every name on this wall, each name has a
common thread that links them all together.

Whether they volunteered, or drafted, they were first and
foremost American youth in their prime. Baby Boomers.
We were the sons of the greatest generation--when called
to service, you went. Sometimes reluctantly, but you went
and served.

We have a tendency to view history by looking back at
events, seeing all the warts, mistakes and foibles
committed by seemingly well-intentioned men. But

people forget there was strong support for the Vietnam war by the American people during the early years. It was our duty to serve our country.

The over 58,000 names on this sacred wall, gave all their tomorrows in service to their county.

Let us never forget them. Never let anyone shame their service to this country. God bless them all.

Thank you all so very much.

John L Ciummo
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