

Richard “Rich” Hillmann, Sr.

- *Interviewed by Michael Verrino & Perry Verrino ~ 2005*
- *Interviewed the family by: Kyle DeSantis Sept 9, 2020*
- *Documented by: Perry Verrino*

Branch: Marines

Rank: Sergeant E-5

Years of Service: 1966-1969

Location of Service: Vietnam

Medals: National Defense Medal, Vietnamese Service Medal, Vietnamese Campaign Medal, Good Conduct Medal, Presidential Unit Citation, Combat Active Ribbon



Rich Hillmann was deployed to Vietnam in 1966, was part of the 26th Marines and worked as a field radio operator in an artillery unit. Rich was a Forward Observer and was involved in heavy fighting in the northern section. He was one assigned to hold a base under attack in Vietnam starting on January 21, 1968 for 110 days. “I was at the Siege at Khe Sanh – An area of northwestern Quang Tri Province, Vietnam. There were 40,000 North Vietnamize and 5,000 Marines...So we were ahead! I was in Vietnam for 13 months with only 5-7 days of rest and relaxation (R&R) during that whole time.”

What was a typical day like? We had one or two meals a day and no shower. We were cautious, had fire support duty and cleared areas. There were 1,400 rounds of incoming artillery per day. There were more ordnances (weapons/artillery) used for the Siege at Khe Sanh than the entire World War II. We called the enemy Victor Charlie or sometimes “Mr. Charles” – Showed some respect for them. “Their artillery was better more effective than the US B-52 bombers.”

To sleep, we built makeshift bunkers to stay safe. The food in Vietnam was terrible. Helicopters would drop food and sea rations. “May have been from the Korean War!” The area I was in was infested with rats. The water supply became an issue during the siege. We dealt with antiaircraft fire, smoke and tear gas. We had a tactical exercise to get done. That was it.

When describing his First Day –

- Assigned to an artillery battery.
- I thought having a static position was not going to be bad.
- I was the Sergeant of the Guard but was fired upon twice!

How did you get along with the local Vietnamize? – We did not come along.

Family:

- **Were there letters From Home?** - My family would record reel to reel movies for me
- **How did your parents feel about you being in Vietnam?** – “Not good. Neither one agreed with my first tour.”
- My cousin said “see how much your mother aged while you were gone”
- “I did not elect to do a second tour”
- Artifacts – My parents saved some articles from the war. I did not save mine.

What was a memorable experience for you? “Not getting killed.” “I can’t think of a single person that did not perform to their utmost.”

Did you Support the War? – Even though there was negative activity in the USA, it did not affect the Marines in Vietnam. “It was all Stars and Stripes”. “I was too busy staying alive to think about anything else.”

How did the people back home treat you?

- No problems back in 1968. Later in the early 1970’s there were war protests.
- I still had 10 months to go when I came back from Vietnam.
- I went to Marine Base Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, North Carolina.
- I joined the reserve after that.
- The military paid for my college
- I am selling insurance now.

What skills did you learn from the military? – None. It is not like it is now in the military.

How did the war change your life?

- “I had a much more appreciation of life.”
- “It is good to have a chance to sit down and talk you like this.”
- There is a different perspective on war now. – I absolutely support the war in Iraq. We need to be positive to know what they are doing.
- I still have some friends from the Marines now.

What were the weapons you used?

- We did not train with the M16, but that was what we were given to fight with.
- The M16 originally would jam, but it was retrofitted to fix the issue.
- The gunpowder was also creating a problem in the gun. The ammo was an issue.
- 45 caliber pistols were also assigned to us, but ineffective. “I thought it would be more effective if I took it apart and threw it at the enemy since it was so inaccurate!”

Was there drug use among the troops? – Some of the war movies portrayed a lack of discipline and drugs. In my area, drugs and lack of discipline were non-existent.

What did you do for fun? We tried to keep a sense of humor. There was not much else you could do. There were no real celebrations. On Easter Sunday April 18, 1968 we assaulted a hill. We just wanted to stay alive.

Summary:

- During my deployment, 1500 Marines were wounded, 350-400 were killed.
- A total of 58,000 died in Vietnam.
- Self-Satisfied – we did not need to have America recognized.
- We were attacked 6-7 times a day and pinned down for 77 of the 110-day siege.
- The North Vietnamize artillery was buried in the mountains.
- The village was overrun. 300 of our US team were killed.
- North Vietnamize used tanks against us.
- Two hill positions were overrun
- Fought hand to hand to drive the North Vietnamize out

***The media feasted on the things that went wrong and
did not talk about the things that went right...***