

“Horrible Jones”, McDivit, and the CH-46 Helicopter

By Dick Culver

It all started with a design flaw in the CH-46 Helicopter. In their scramble to replace the aging CH-34 troop carrying Helicopter, the Marines had chosen the CH-46. At first, it seemed to be at least adequate for the job, but continued operational use began to uncover seemingly minor problems that became problems of major proportions. The transition to the CH-46 was not yet complete in the summer of '67, and the CH-34 was still in use with many units. The flaws in the CH-46 however were to come back to haunt us big time, especially if you happened to be serving in one of the battalions assigned to the Special Landing Force!



1st Sergeant Horrible Jones and the Exec of Hotel 2/3, Mike Chervenak

In an inspired flash of genius, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific had created a new unit called “The Special Landing Force”. This outfit was designed to do several things. Operationally, they had the job of boring small holes in the South China Sea and waiting for something untoward to occur. The Special Landing Force was in modern parlance, the 911 service of the Vietnamese Coast. It was broken down into two separate reinforced Battalions, and designated SLF Alpha, and SLF Bravo. Each unit had a standard Marine Infantry Battalion with attachments of an Artillery Battery, an Engineer Company, an Amtrac Company (amphibian tractor company), a Recon Platoon, a Helicopter Support unit (engineers trained to clear and set up landing zones, and perform sling loading/unloading and resupply missions), and a Helicopter Squadron for landing operations.

Our main base of operations was an LPH (Landing Platform-Helicopter) housing two rifle companies, the Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters and Service Company (better known as “Heat and Steam”) and the SLF Headquarters Group. The LPH was essentially a small Aircraft Carrier designed to support helicopter assault landing operations. Two of the four battalion rifle companies were stationed aboard the LPH, and two aboard an APA (Assault Landing Ship). The additional support units were stationed aboard an LST (Landing Ship, Tank), and an LSD (Landing Ship, Dock) designed to launch Amphibious Tractors if it became necessary to revert to pure surface amphibious transportation (assuming weather precluded helicopter operations). The APA could launch and recover troops utilizing Mike Boats (the jobbies with the drop front seen in most WWII movies).

The SLF was an inspired concept. For those of you who didn't have a chance to participate in the evolution, the idea was this. A Marine Battalion (of either the 1st or the 3rd Division) would be rotated out of country (Vietnam) up to our prewar base(s) on Okinawa.

The idea was several fold, first it gave the battalion a chance to turn in their worn out gear, get some evening liberty without getting shot at for about 4 weeks, and flesh out the battalion with replacements for our battle casualties. The new replacements would have a chance to train with the veterans and get used to the individuals in their units (squads, platoons, companies, etc.).

Upon completion of their re-outfitting and training, the battalion would be designated either SLF Alpha, or SLF Bravo, depending on the assignment. The newly designated battalion would then be sent down to the Philippines for a practice landing exercise, followed by a "real" landing in the Delta of Vietnam. These Delta Landings were referred to as "Deck House Operations". After the Delta Landing, the newly blooded battalion would be sent once again to the Philippines for about 3 – 4 days liberty in Olongopo (Subic Bay), and then board their amphibious shipping and return to patrol the Vietnamese Coast as a 911 force for a 6 week period and then (theoretically) be rotated back into Vietnam to a semi-permanent base camp from which they would conduct operations as dictated by the appropriate Commanding General (1st or 3rd Division). A new battalion would then be loaded aboard the amphibious shipping and be rotated back to Okinawa to go through the same retraining cycle, only to eventually be sent back in country. The idea was to have a battalion training on Okinawa, two serving as SLF Alpha and Bravo, and one standing by to go back to the Rock and be refurbished and retrained. On paper it sounded great. Unfortunately in the case of 2/3 and 1/3 it didn't work out that way – Murphy took a hand.

Both 1/3 and 2/3 were destined to spend a full 8+ months on the SLF. Sounds soft, eh what? Well, if it had been a mainly shipboard assignment with only an occasionally thrilling interlude, all would have been well, but the period of April through November of 1967 was not to be one of peace and tranquility. I can't answer with any amount of certainty for 1/3 and SLF Alpha, but for 2/3 and SLF Bravo the 8 months were designed to satisfy the most addicted of adrenaline addicts! The Battalion started with a minor operation in April that turned into the notorious hill fights at Caisson (881 and 882 both north and south). The Hill Fights were marked with numerous jammed M16s with cleaning rods down the bore to eject the empty cartridge cases.

By the first week of September 1967, my rifle company had only five individuals that had not been awarded the Purple Heart. The Battalion itself sustained over 800 casualties in the 8 month period... As I said, not an assignment for the "faint of heart", but certainly one to help you decide if soldiering was to be your life's work.

The 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment had been assigned a Helicopter Squadron that was equipped with the then relatively new CH-46 helicopter, while the 1st Battalion was stationed aboard the U.S.S. Iwo Jima and were still using the relatively ancient CH-34 choppers.

As if to add insult to injury, not only had we been given rifles that didn't work, but our helicopters started disassembling themselves in flight! Some design flaw in the CH-46 Helicopter allowed the tail pylon to start separating from the rest of the bird after an extended period of flying. The situation became so bad that the scuttlebutt was that a wounded man was eligible to be awarded the Bronze Star for allowing himself to be med-evaced in a CH-46. Once the disastrous self-disassembly of the CH-46 this had

been discovered, the “powers that be” decided to immediately rectify the situation. The brass had decided that it was a top priority to have the Boeing Aircraft Corporation to fix the defective aircraft. I can only surmise that the quick action was prompted by the fact that the brass was occasionally required to fly in the helicopter from Hell. Now if we could have armed the Brass with the M16 rifle and made them go on patrol, the infamous M16 incident might well have resolved itself more rapidly, but alas, ‘twas not to be... At any rate, the offending helicopters were packed aboard the U.S.S. Tripoli and shipped back to Okinawa for repairs. This left SLF Bravo (2/3) afoot and without helo support. SLF Alpha was still using CH-34, so were not affected by this incident.

Prior to departing for Okinawa, all of the Second Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment’s personnel and equipment were offloaded and sent to Camp Evans to co-locate with the 4th Marine Regiment located just southwest of Quang Tri. We were sent on several operations to keep us busy while the choppers were being fixed, and just before we were to backload aboard the Tripoli now equipped with the *improved* (and hopefully repaired) CH-46 Helicopters, we had a couple of days respite while helping 1/4 man the lines around Camp Evans. With the stage now set, we’ll get on with the saga of Pfc. McDivit (not his real name).

Now McDivit was a 60 mm mortar crewman with Hotel 2/3, and probably the most devoutly religious individual in the entire company. While not a Contentious Objector, he was the Protestant “Lay Leader” of Hotel Company¹. It wasn’t that McDivit was a bad Marine, in fact he was highly regarded by his own mortar crew... But, McDivit was married with a young child and had decided that field duty was possibly going to prevent him making it home and helping to raise his youngster. This of course, was a common desire of many of our young newly married troops during the Summer of 1967. Once ashore however, McDivit was a model Marine and performed his duties with skill and daring, but getting McDivit ashore was not a task for the faint of heart! McDivit usually left the Tripoli with a piece of bulkhead firmly grasped in each hand and a boot in his fanny. While he would not deliberately avoid hazardous duty, he was always figuring a way to stay aboard ship rather than go back to Indian Country.

The 1st Sergeant of Hotel Company was a legend in the Corps. He had served as a Drill Instructor twice in his career, once before the well-known McKeon incident² at Parris Island, and once following it. He was an imposing figure, standing approximately 5’11’ tall and weighing in at about 210 lbs., none of it fat! He had played semi-pro football at one time and his face wore the scars of having gone through the windshield of a car during an inattentive moment of driving. When Jones returned for his second tour on the field, his former junior DI from his first tour as a DI was now serving as an instructor at the (then) newly formed DI School at Parris Island. It is rumored that his first words upon spying Kenny Jones was “Oh NO!” He’s back!

Now Kenny Jones was known as “Lockerbox Jones” from his habit of having his charges do the manual of arms with a footlocker, and was known as an all around bad @\$@ throughout the Corps. By the time he finished his second tour, he was known as “Horrible Jones”, and not without cause. Jones probably turned out more honor platoons on the Island than any other DI, but his recruits left as “squared away noodles” with the ability to out shoot, out shine, out march and out drill any other unit. Horrible Jones was

a hard (and feared) taskmaster. He was a Marine's Marine and worked to keep himself and his reputation in tact.

McDivit's constant machinations to avoid field duty soon came to the attention of Horrible Jones and an adversarial relationship was almost unavoidable. The more McDivit attempted to avoid field service, the more Jones was on his case. Now Horrible was actually a very caring individual, and had his troop's welfare at heart, although he worked at not allowing such human feelings manifest themselves on a day-to-day basis. It was obvious to me, but the troops did not go out of their way to encounter the awesome wrath of the legendary 1st Soldier.

Finally McDivit had been in Vietnam long enough to earn a trip to Hawaii on R&R. He apparently met his wife and mother in the tropical paradise and then flew back into Da Nang, a refreshed Marine with a new gimmick to avoid further field duty. Upon his return, McDivit requested to see the 1st Sergeant (something he usually avoided at all costs). McDivit tells Horrible Jones that he (McDivit) is now eligible to be sent out of the combat zone. It seems that McDivit met a young lad returning to the States by virtue of being a sole surviving son³. McDivit told the 1st Sergeant that after having talked to the lad in Da Nang, he had reason to believe that he too was a sole surviving son. Horrible, with a look of disbelief on his face said;

“McDivit, youse had better NOT be no sole survivin' son, as you signed a statement in your enlistment contract stating that you wasn't no sole survivin' son! False official statement is grounds for a court martial!”

McDivit replied with an innocent look on his face, saying that his mother had just told him that his father had been in the Navy in WWII and had gone down with his ship. Jones, genuinely concerned, told McDivit that he wouldn't want to be responsible for the death of the last remaining male in his family, but that he'd have to write home to get the appropriate paperwork. To be on the safe side, Jones assigned McDivit to mess duty to keep him out of the line of fire until the situation could be resolved.

Shortly thereafter, 2/3 went ashore for an extended period of combat while the CH-46s were on Okinawa having their tail pylons being glued back on. Time passed and the 1st Sergeant and I were occupied with fighting the war, temporally forgetting about the ongoing saga of McDivit and his soon to be confirmed status of the last surviving male member of the McDivit family. McDivit in the meantime was busily concerning himself with washing pots and pans and working in the messhall. The battalion messhall had also been temporarily assigned to the beach until we got our air transportation back. While we were out running several major operations, the 2/3 messhall was co-located with the 4th Regiment's messhall in Camp Evans.

Finally the long awaited word came down that the U.S.S. Tripoli was on its way back to Vietnam with the newly repaired CH-46s aboard. This was a gala occasion, as we were tired of pulling all the guard duty for 1/4, and were anxiously awaiting a return to our LPH for assignment to further adventures as the SLF. This called for a drink.

Please understand that while other Marines stationed on a permanent basis in Vietnam got a regular beer ration, we got no such amenities. Ships of the U.S. Navy

have been “dry” (without benefit of alcoholic beverages) since the turn of the 20th Century compliments of such stalwarts as Susan B. Anthony and others of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. We had not had a beer in almost a month. From some unknown source, a pallet of beer appeared, and the battalion was treated to two whole beers apiece... THIS was a momentous occasion. Now while two beers isn’t exactly a night on the town, when you’ve been without for a month or so, normally quite staid individuals begin to loosen up a bit. I figured that something was up when I saw Horrible Jones approaching my hooch.

“Skipper.” he says, “I just got a letter in for the Chaplain of the 3rd Platoon of Hotel Company, and dat bein’ me, I opened it!” I braced myself, this didn’t bode well, since Chaplains are not assigned any lower than battalion level. This letter had obviously NOT been intended for the eyes of the 1st Sergeant!

With a sinking feeling, I asked exactly what did the letter have to say? With a small grin and perhaps a bit of reticence on his face, Horrible said that the letter was from McDivit’s mother. Uh oh... this has gotta’ be a Jim Dandy!

I read the letter knowing that we were on extremely treacherous ground! My worst fears were realized. It seems that McDivit’s mother was writing to the Chaplain asking if he would break the news to young McDivit that he *wasn’t* actually sole surviving son. It seems that McDivit’s mother had had a momentary dalliance with a traveling salesman during WWII, and had become pregnant (a mortal sin in those days). Her family had disowned her and sent her and her illegitimate son to live with her grandmother. McDivit’s mother (since she wasn’t married) had simply pulled the name McDivit out of thin air. Unfortunately “Mrs.” McDivit never could bring herself to tell the lad of his true lineage!

I was now faced with informing the most religious kid in Hotel Company that his mother was actually a “fallen woman” and that he was in official parlance, illegitimate. Hummm...

Seizing on an inspired solution, I told Horrible that *HE* was going to have to take the letter to the REAL Chaplain of the 3rd Platoon of Hotel Company and explain the circumstances. Horrible looked at me as if I was in possession of three heads.

“Aw Skipper no, I can’t do that!”

“Sure you can Horrible” sez I (grinning to myself for putting the heat on Jones for a change), “but no sweat, I’ll go with you”.

Jones and I proceeded to the bottom of the hill where the Chaplain’s tent was pitched. After a somewhat strained discussion, the Chaplain told Jones that he thought that it would be quite alright if he (Jones) handled the entire mess.

“Aw no youse don’t,” sez Jones, “you don’t do no First Sergeantin’ and I don’t do no Chaplainin’ – dis one’s yours!”

“Very well,” says the Chaplain, “send the lad down to see me!”

We left the tent with our tails tucked between our legs.

Not to be covered for any length of time, Jones sent for McDivit. Soon a figure in a “tee shirt” and a white mess hat was running from the mess hall to our position on the hill above the Chaplain’s tent.

“You wanted to see me 1st Sergeant?” sez McDivit.

Jones looked at McDivit with a somber expression.

“McDivit you bastard, get down and sees de’ Chaplain!”

Jones looking over at me with a totally straight face says in a voice more appropriate for a parade deck, “he’ll knows what I means in a minute!”

I was totally speechless... Jones never cracked a smile, but I’ll never forget that afternoon if I live to be a hundred!

Postscript:

To his credit, McDivit came out of the Chaplain’s tent smiling, and never again sought to avoid going to the field. He continued to perform as a most excellent 60 mm mortar gunner for the remainder of his tour and finally went home without a scratch. I later ran into McDivit with his young wife and son in the PX at Quantico and had a nice visit. I don’t know what ever happened to him, but the story still is one of my favorites when I think of those days of long ago and the graveyard humor we often shared in a hostile environment.

Horrible Jones was a combat veteran of Korea and a twice-extended tour in Vietnam. He still wore the scars from wounds in Korea. The Marine Corps was his whole life, and after we both went back to Camp Lejeune following our tour with the 2nd Battalion, Third Marines, Jones volunteered to go back for yet another tour. He was assigned to the Civic Action Platoons, and was out on an inspection tour with several others. He and the group were hitching a ride on a Navy Riverine Patrol Boat, sitting on the forward deck. For those of you who believe in fate, Jones was meant to cash in on his last tour. A single mortar round fell out of nowhere and landed on the deck in the middle of Jones’ group. I lost a great friend and the Marines lost one of their finest Staff NCOs... I still miss Horrible, a gruff old bear with a heart of gold. I suspect he’ll be waiting in Valhalla, where all great soldiers go for their final post.

ROC

End Notes:

¹ A religious “Lay Leader” is usually appointed to a field unit to hold religious services for the Marines in the field when a Chaplain isn’t available. Having attended several of McDivit’s services, I can attest that he held a very serviceable field religious service. McDivit was most sincere in his religious beliefs.

² S/Sgt. McKeon was known as the Drill Instructor that marched his platoon into Ribbon Creek on a night march in April 1956 during which six of his Marines were drowned. American mothers were up in arms. The resulting court martial resulted in a complete revision of the Recruit training program in the Marine Corps. The new program included the formation of the DI School and the bringing back of the Field (Campaign) Hat and NCO Sword as symbols of authority. No less of a person than the legendary Chesty Puller testified for the old Marine Corps training methods during McKeon's court martial. McKeon was broken and imprisoned but was later restored to duty, but needless to say his career was over. The new regulations resulting from this incident prevented the DIs from touching a recruit for virtually any reason or using foul or insulting language during their conversion from "civilian scum" to finished Marine. Most of the regulations were cleverly circumvented of course (until recently), but required the DIs to use more inventive methods of getting around the new restrictions.

³ The status of "sole surviving son" was one bestowed by the Department of Defense exempting the sole surviving male heir of a family from (further) combat if all of the (other) male members of the family had been killed in combat. This is supposed to allow the lineage of a family to survive. It is quite correctly felt that such a family should be spared from further sacrifice. This regulation is essentially in the tradition of the recent hit movie "Saving Private Ryan".