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# 'Magnificent Bastards' Whip Reds In Bloody Battle for Peninsula

By PAUL DEAN

CHU LAI, South Viet Nam (AP) — The downy-chinned Leathernecks of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, earned the right to print a World War II Marine nickname in bold type.

"And you can quote me," said their commander, Lt. Col. Joseph (Bull) Fisher of Arlington, Va. "These men are truly 'Magnificent Bastards'."

For the 72-hour battle of Van Tuong Peninsula — Operation Starlight — 800 of Fisher's men, 80 per cent of them just breaking out of their teens, had chewed and fought through rice paddies and dunes against the Viet Cong's 2,000-man 1st Regiment.

I watched as the young Leathernecks were smeared on the first day, rallied on the second and on the third routed their little adversaries in black pajamas.

We were lifted at dawn Wednesday in five waves of 20 HU34 helicopters to landing zones 12 miles south of Chu Lai. Carbine fire whanged through trees and bushes and men began to fall.

## Planned Down

To our right, Hotel Company was pinned down by machine-gun fire and Marines were throwing themselves into ditches and hedgerows, their positions for the next 28 hours.

And in the middle of it all, Fisher stood upon a dike.

"Come on you Marines," he yelled, "this isn't Hotel Street and those ain't pinball machines shooting at you."

With air support and our own 81mm mortars hitting at VC bunkers to our front, two companies started their advance.

I climbed with Echo Company against a nameless pimple of a hill. The VC waited until almost two platoons had reached the naked crest, then zeroed in with 60mm mortars.

## On Hilltop

For 45 minutes we grovelled in the dirt on that hilltop with only a spunky medical corpsman standing erect to attend to the wounded. A while later he was killed by a bullet through the head.

Of 30 men who climbed the hill, only 18 walked out uninjured.

But the worst was yet to come.

Echo Company advanced through a VC village with barbed wire entanglements, a honeycomb of foxholes, knapsacks and blue linen rolls of rice dumped on the ground. Echo Company was hit again. Small arms fire raked one platoon.

In a ditch where the medics piled the wounded, a fullback-sized platoon sergeant screamed from a bullet wound in the ankle. At his side, an 18-year-old Marine with half his face blown away chewed at what was left of his lip and remained silent. But he uttered 'Thank you' when a corpsman propped his head against a bloody knapsack.

That evening, we dug in. At battalion headquarters 15 miles away, Sgt. Chuck Clapper, Seattle, Wash., was ending nine hours on the telephone as he tallied KIA's — killed in action — and WIA's — wounded in action.

His reports included some senior NCO's, included one ser-



Lt. Col. J. R. (Bull) Fisher

geant, a veteran of World War II and Korea, who had predicted "I figure I won't see this one out."

The battalion didn't sleep that night.

A one-man VC suicide squad was cut down as he tried to infiltrate our lines. He carried no rifle, but had a belt of U.S.-made hand grenades.

Then, Fisher spotted what he thought was a company of VC moving on a hill, a mile in front of our position. He called in the heavy mortars.

At first light Thursday, the 2nd Battalion moved out.

We swept through a deserted VC command post, capturing more grenades, land mines, old U.S. Army radios and a document later interpreted to be a VC communications plan.

In a dozen fire fights, 15 hard core VC troops fell. Thirty-one Communists were captured and that evening were airlifted back to Vietnamese authorities for interrogation.

"Look at those miserable little runts," growled an MP guard. "They don't look like they have the strength to lift a rifle, let alone stand up against a battalion of U.S. Marines."

It was another sleepless night at the command post. Only two companies remained to finish our part of Operation Starlight.

But during this night the battalion faced a new threat.

Twice we nearly came under fire from our own guns — once when aircraft strafed only 300 yards in front of our positions and when naval artillery began lobbing shells over our heads. Only "flash" emergency radio messages from Col. Fisher saved Marine lives.

Friday morning was clammy and the men had C-ration breakfasts of ham and lima beans and coffee heated over burning plastic explosives.

Then Sgt. Edward Garr, 33, Oklawaha, Fla., yelled a radio message to Col. Fisher.

"Message from starboard ... 'helo's (helicopters) on way—commence retraction.'"

By helicopter and Jeep I hitched a ride back to Chu Lai to await a C130 transport aircraft bound for Da Nang.

There were other Marines waiting for that flight. But these men were zippered in olive green rubber sacks.

They had been killed in action.