

Lieutenant Donald R. Head

The following tribute to Lieutenant Colonel Donald R. Head was written by
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Lieutenant Colonel Donald R. Head 1/21/1943 - 7/13/1996

To the family and relatives of Lieutenant Colonel Donald R. Head, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired).

In the middle of 1967, I met a young Lieutenant of Marines when he joined the 1st. Amphibian Tractor Battalion in South Vietnam. I interviewed him for his assignment as a platoon commander in either company A or B. My initial impression of this young officer from Texas was quite favorable. My recommendation to the Battalion Commander, Lt.Col Rheb Toner, was to assign Lt. Head to Company A. The basis of my recommendation was somewhat self-serving and practical at the same time. I was scheduled to take over Company A when its current commander rotated back to the states in September. I wanted the best officers under my command. Don had all the earmarks of being a good commander. I learned later just how good he was in a combat environment. Secondly, Company A had some of the most challenging missions of the battalion. As a result, they had lost their share of officers, wounded and killed. Lt.Col. Toner approved Lt. Head's assignment to Company A.

When I took over Company A in September 1967, Don, as platoon commander of 4th Plt. had already earned the respect of his men as a good leader and the reputation among Officers and Staff Non-Commissioned Officers as a fine combat Marine. These attributes of a quality professional became apparent to me as he served under my command. It would be difficult to cite all the examples representative of just how good a marine officer he was. It would be simpler to relate one combat situation where Don, as usual, effected the decisive end to an engagement.

On January 20, 1968, the TET Offensive began for the Marines in Company A, 1st AMTRAC Bn., somewhat ahead of the official date historians now mark as its beginning. For two nights previously, our company had been conducting raids on two villages reportedly sheltering "Assassination Teams" that had infiltrated across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the northern boundary of our Area of Operations. On the 20th, a patrol from our navy's river patrol force reported they had encountered a large force on the Cua Viet River south of our position and up river from the battalion position. Since it fell in our Area of Operations, we were detached from our current mission and turned around to retrace our steps to relieve the trapped advisors and their Vietnamese troops. In route, we were briefed by radio that the North Vietnamese Army force we would encounter was approximately a Battalion size. That made them somewhat larger than Company A. This was particularly true since we had progressively lost men and were at about 80 percent of authorized levels.

Before arriving at my predesignated departure point, the Battalion had changed my mission again. Now we were to take up a blocking position in support of an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) unit that had intended to engage the NVA Battalion since the ARVNs were a stronger force.

As Company A deployed at the line of departure, I received a radio call from the Battalion Commander that he had sent a scouting force ahead of me. They had been instructed to coordinate their actions with me. This they failed to do because their squad leader decided on his own to engage, what he thought was a small force. This resulted in most of his men being killed and himself being

wounded. Sergeant Ron Kovic later gained fame from his book made into a movie, "Born on the Fourth of July". Company A now had a new mission to rescue the survivors of this engagement before they were all killed or captured. This part of the mission was accomplished by 1st and 2nd platoons. Unfortunately, this twist caused Company A to become directly engaged with the enemy battalion. Once we had made a contact, it was difficult to revert to the old mission of just being a blocking force.

The 3rd platoon was the next unit to become engaged and did so by making a serious mistake. The platoon commander rode his AMTRAC directly into the position I had assigned him to take and kept riding on to the enemy's position. He had clearly mistaken one terrain feature for another. The 3rd platoon was reduced from 29 men to 9 being able to fight within about five minutes of extremely close combat.

Third platoon's radioman advised me of the seriousness of the situation. Since he was on top of the AMTRAC with the dead, including the Platoon Commander, he could see the NVA troops forming for an assault to overrun the Marines left alive. It was at this point that I had no choice but to commit my reserve force to "Plug the Hole".

Without a second thought, I radioed Lt. Don Head to quickly move his platoon, the Company Reserve Force, directly into 3rd platoon's position, consolidate forces with the survivors, and hold the position until I could reinforce him. Don's typical response to an order of such magnitude was, "Aye, Aye, Alpha-6" (I understand the mission, will comply, Commander of Company A). His usual calm approach when going into such threatening situations was one of his great attributes. I had long since learned that such calmness was in fact an outward expression of his fearlessness.

Lt. Head mounted his Platoon aboard an AMTRAC and headed straight for the 3rd Platoon position. The vehicle had traveled approximately 200 yards when it struck an anti-tank mine. The mine almost turned the vehicle over onto its back. Marines were thrown into the air and came down on the ground and back onto the top of the vehicle. Very shortly it began burning. Fortunately, none on board were killed, but several were wounded, including Lt. Head and his Platoon Sergeant. The Sergeant could not proceed. Don could barely walk as he had been wounded in the leg. He gave me a status report and assured me he would manage to proceed with the remainder of his men who were able to fight. "I'll be ready to go as soon as I get this knee of mine back in working order, Alpha-6."

Don had just earned his second Purple Heart and was heading to the rescue of the 3rd Platoon without regard for his wounds. In his mind, the mission had not been altered by the turn of events. The distance he and the remainder of 4th Platoon covered was approximately 600 yards. He later told me the pain in his leg was such that he became nauseous as it ached so severely. Nevertheless, he remained at the head of the platoon and led them toward the point of contact where the enemy waited.

Another challenge beset Don and his men as they crossed open ground. Just before reaching the beleaguered 3rd Platoon, the NVA called in artillery fire on his advancing platoon. One casualty resulted from the fire before the platoon reached the position of the 3rd.

Don reported the situation within the 3rd Platoon. It was a devastating report. Only seven men were able to fight. Those, combined with his twelve who had survived the tank mine and the artillery attack, formed up a defensive position just minutes before the first assault of the enemy. This quick reaction was key to saving the day for the under strength Marine unit.

As the NVA rose up to launch their second attack, I was able to place our artillery fire on them. The remnants of that assault continued to move forward into Don's position. The enemy brought with them a new surprise for the battle. They employed a Flame Thrower. Only once before in the history of fighting in Vietnam had a Flame Thrower been used. That was at Long Vey, against a Special Forces A Team.

As the bright orange flame ushered forth, my heart sank. I knew the few Marines had little defense against such weapons. As the second blast started to shoot forward, the flame suddenly rotated vertically, skyward. Without a question in my mind, I knew a Marine had killed the flame thrower operator. The remaining NVA continued their assault and were quickly killed by the riflemen of Don's small force. He called for me to shift the covering artillery fire back to where he thought the NVA assembly area was to keep them from launching a third attack.

His small force was now down to eighteen effective counting himself. The other platoons of our company were as heavily involved fighting the NVA to Don's left, and they too were taking lots of casualties. 1st Platoon on the extreme left flank had fought their way into the NVA and relieved the Navy Advisors and their wounded. They were heavily engaged with the enemy and could not spare a man. The 2nd Platoon had been given the task of recovering Sergeant Kovic's reconnaissance force and were heavily engaged. They had taken several casualties and were just barely holding their own. Only four men remained in the Headquarters Platoon including the Commanding Officer. I had lost men to sniper and artillery fire. In short, I had to call on the Battalion to send me reinforcement. Two platoons were on their way but had not yet mounted their AMTRACs. I estimated it would be about one hour before help arrived. Each Platoon Commander was informed of the situation.

Don advised me his Corpsman (medical man) had given him a count of the critically wounded that would die if they were not medically evacuated (Medevaced) immediately. Medevac helicopters were operating in the area and were directed to Don's position. One of the pilots asked if the landing zone was clear and safe from enemy fire. Don assured the pilot it was ready for him to land. He told the pilot he would be standing in the zone to guide them. Don left the security of his fighting position and casually strolled out into the open to direct the choppers in. The pilot could not see that the NVA were taking pot shots at Don. As the chopper touched down the critically wounded were loaded aboard. Don was standing almost directly in front of the chopper when a bullet, probably intended for him, shattered the windshield of the helo. Don stepped aside and waved the Medevac aloft. The pilot contacted me as he headed for the hospital ship. He complained that Don had lied to him, that the landing zone had been hot and covered with small arms fire, and that Lieutenant knew it. I simply told the pilot that if he couldn't take a little small arms fire, he should try flying with a commercial airline, and please send us a pilot that could stand the heat like a real Marine.

Reinforcements did arrive and all dead and wounded were recovered as Don withdrew, turning his position over to Company B. Four days later, things got so intense for us in Company A, reinforced with two platoons from Company B, that the Division sent in the Special Landing Force, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, to relieve us from the field.

On returning to my command post in the rear, I drafted a recommendation for Don to receive the Bronze Star Medal and Combat V, for heroism in battle. Additionally, I signed the designation for his second Purple Heart.

It was my duty to tell each man that upon receiving a second Purple Heart, he was within his right to never go outside the perimeter of the Battalion compound, or he could even take an assignment at a

place like the Division Headquarters, a safer zone. When I told Don this, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Sir, if I die in Vietnam, I want to die with the men I love. I'm staying with Alpha Company and I'll cross the river with my men."

I am proud to say that I have served with such a fine Officer and Combat Marine. Many have served well in the Corps, but not many have served with such dedication to duty and love for those who call themselves Marines.

When two Marines meet or depart from one another it is enough to simply say: Semper Fidelis, Marine.

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