

LZ MARGO:

Lest We Forget

By Kyle Watts

The elevator doors opened, delivering me to the hotel's first floor. In the hallway, a sign stood on an easel outside a vacant conference room. "Battalion Landing Team 2/26. Reuniting and Remembering." A somber photograph filled the board beneath the headline. A Marine stood behind his machine gun in a knee-deep fighting hole. His helmet was missing and his flak jacket hung open. His eyes glazed over in a thousand-yard stare. Superimposed words alluded to the story on his face. "LZ MARGO ... LEST WE FORGET."



COURTESY OF ALAN GREEN

I searched Landing Zone (LZ) Margo online before I arrived. The results were disappointing and scant. Whatever it was, veterans came from around the nation to remember it. They invited me to join them and document the experience. I felt bad, having never even heard of the place. I wished I could see through the eyes of the man in the photo to grasp the story they told.

I followed signs to the continental breakfast room and paused at the entrance. Hotel guests packed the room, but I immediately picked out the table full of men I was there to meet. Unsure of where I fit in, a voice from behind prodded me along.

"You here for the reunion?"

"Yes, I am."

"You somebody's son?"

"No sir. I'm the writer."

"Ah, the writer! Come on, these are the guys you want to speak with."

He walked me to the table and introduced me to the group. They grabbed a chair and made room. I listened to their discussions as I ate my breakfast. Shortly after I joined them, another interruption followed.

"Y'all are veterans?"

All of us looked up. The woman posing the question was not looking at me, so I kept my mouth shut. Forty years separated me from anyone else around the table. I doubted she considered me one of the group. Though not as trim as they once were, and more grayed, the men surrounding me were indeed veterans. No matter their age, even an outsider cannot mistake a bunch of Marines. The gentlemen closest answered for the group.

"Yes, we are. Marine Corps."

"Oh alright! What brings everyone to Detroit?"

"Here for a reunion. I haven't seen these guys in 50 years."

"Oh wow! Well, thank y'all for your service!"

Without waiting for a reply, the stranger walked away to her own table. Everyone looked at each other with a familiar blank expression. This must have been the thousandth time they heard it since their country decided they deserved respect.

"It just feels hollow," one of the men finally remarked.

Another veteran described the best "thank you for your service" he ever received, when the owner of a restaurant ordered several rounds of drinks for him, on the house. Another passed around a humbling thank you note and \$10 bill, left on his truck anonymously by a gold star mother.

One of the veterans adeptly closed the conversation to a resounding, silent affirmation.

"The best respect we get is from each other."

I reflected on their comments as we finished eating. In their eyes, my Eagle,



Marines inserting into LZ Margo exit a CH-46 helicopter.

COURTESY OF TOM ROADLEY

Globe and Anchor allowed me a seat at their table. They welcomed me as a brother. I realized, though, I was no different from the clueless stranger who disrupted our conversation. I did not understand what these Marines had experienced any more than she did. How could I possibly capture it with words?

We left the dining area and entered the conference room. No agenda dictated the day, other than allowing Marines to catch up after 50 years. This proved an easy task. I watched them speak as if they were lifelong friends.

"This is incredible," reflected one veteran, "it feels like we are just picking up right where we left off."

They laughed at each other's stories from boot camp and experiences from the rear in Vietnam. Many of the veterans fought together through the siege at Khe Sanh. Even the discussions of this



KYLE WATTS

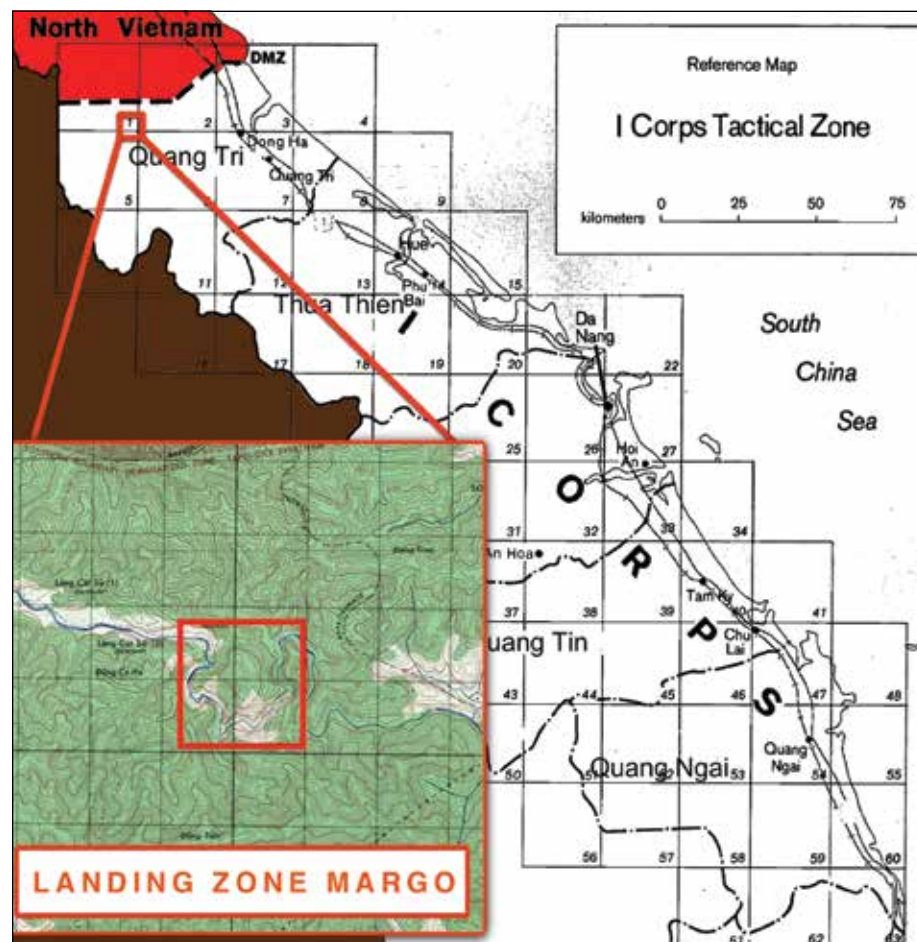
infamous battle eventually led to the place that altered their lives.

"I put more Marines in body bags at Margo than I ever did at Khe Sanh."

The sentiment echoed around in many forms. One person spoke of a senior enlisted Marine who survived LZ Margo. In his younger days, this Marine fought the Chinese at the Chosin Reservoir. Even he proclaimed Margo worse than any attack he experienced in Korea.

I discovered an alarming majority of the men present were Purple Heart recipients. Further investigation revealed most of them were wounded on the same day—Sept. 16, 1968. I overheard one Marine discussing his foot that was blown off. I watched him walk in a perfect gait to refill

At their September 2018 reunion, 2/26 veterans Teddy Banks, left, and Steve Haisley remember the chaos at LZ Margo.



COURTESY OF KYLE WATTS

his glass and return to his table. When a seat became available, I approached.

“John, did I hear correctly, you lost a foot at Margo?”

“Yeah, out on patrol a few days before the attack. I stepped on one of those toe-popper mines. Took the end of my foot off. They got me out that day. The mine took my foot, then gangrene took the rest.”

He continued talking as he lifted his pant leg and removed a prosthetic limb extending down from his knee. I struggled temporarily, processing his words and his leg, now separated above the table before me. He discussed the surgeries, the constant pain, how prosthetics advanced over the years and the normality of it all now.

“I walk 5 miles every day after breakfast.”

I hoped my words were appropriate, but continued feeling my inexperience. I surveyed the room, filled with Marines as extraordinary as the one seated next to me. I felt the bond between them. I saw regret and sorrow for their brothers lost at LZ Margo, and I saw the open wounds left inside. I sensed the importance of this reunion and the healing power it possessed. No one outside the unit knew details of the battle. Their Corps glossed over it as an embarrassing footnote. Their country belittled the scars it left. These men grew accustomed to being ignored.



Maj Jarvis D. Lynch

COURTESY OF KENT WONDERS

They kept each other alive and fighting through Vietnam. Their memories of each other faded little through half a century. Now, the enduring camaraderie was precisely the reason they came.

I worked my way from man to man piecing together the story. How was it possible I had never heard of Margo?

What could have happened that haunted the survivors for the rest of their lives? One man pulled me aside.

“Let’s get you with the general. He’s the person you need to talk to.”

Major General Jarvis D. Lynch, USMC (Ret) entered the room. Every Marine present shifted. Fifty years ago, they knew him as a major and the battalion operations officer. It was plain to see that he was still their “Chesty” Puller. I introduced myself and asked him to tell me how the battalion ended up at Margo. He told me their journey began at sea.

Aboard USS *Princeton* (CV-37), 2nd Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment reformed as a Battalion Landing Team (BLT). Gaining tanks, artillery, reconnaissance, engineers and more, the battalion grew as a truly powerful force. Word spread of a coming operation in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). They could never be sure. The battalion passed from regiment to regiment, operating in different areas. They called themselves “The Nomads.” They had no home.

They arrived at Camp Carroll in early September, just south of the DMZ. Lynch worked to solidify their orders. Generals in charge of their fate placed the battalion in LZ Margo, 15 miles from the Laos border, deep in enemy territory. Word passed to move out in 24 hours. While the battalion prepared, Lynch learned as much as he could about their destination.

Intelligence told him Margo was established two months earlier. It transitioned into a fire support base, but currently sat abandoned. The LZ occupied a hilltop, blasted barren by U.S. airpower. Triple-canopy jungle surrounded it for miles. Draws and ravines created an uneven surface on the hill. As a result, only one chopper fit in the zone at a time. A map revealed steep slopes down from three sides of the hill into the Cam Lo River, flowing in a jagged horseshoe around the LZ. The hilltop looked small, certainly too small to accommodate a BLT. Most concerning, the hill was actually low ground. Fingers and mountains rose up in all directions.

Margo would be the first of several stops across the DMZ, sweeping the NVA back towards the coast. The single helicopter limit in the LZ meant the insert would be painfully slow. It dawned on Lynch that the operation was set to commence on Friday the 13th.

“That date was not lost on the Marines,” he remembered.

We spoke for nearly an hour before the general left the room. Our conversation created as many questions as it answered. The LZ seemed such an obviously poor choice. How did the battalion get stuck

there? I learned I was not the only one still asking the question.

I found Lieutenants Kent Wonders and Alan Green, who told me their stories. As the assistant to Maj Lynch, Wonders remained close to the command post (CP). When they arrived, sporadic rifle fire targeted the incoming choppers, but the insertion proceeded without incident. Marines quickly filled the LZ. Maj Lynch immediately sent the rifle companies north of the hill.

Wonders moved around the CP and units still occupying the LZ. He took stock of their new home as he walked. Bomb craters and old, shallow fighting holes dotted the hilltop. It reminded him of World War II photos from the Pacific. Water pooled in a hole at the bottom of a draw, filled by a natural spring. Several Marines surrounded the pool filling their canteens.

“We might run out of food, but at least we have water.”

Wonders arrived back at the CP sooner than he anticipated. Somehow, the LZ seemed smaller in reality than it looked on the map. Marines in every direction settled in. He found one of the radio operators digging a hole and dropped his gear next to it.

“Mind if I help? We can share this one.”

“Works for me, sir, but good luck getting anywhere. This hill is like a rock!”

Wonders grabbed his entrenching tool and jabbed at the ground. The pick sank less than an inch. Several hours of digging yielded a hole 18 inches deep, large enough for one man to lie flat. It seemed more like a coffin than a fighting position. Exhausted, the Marines dropped their e-tools. An explosion north of the LZ interrupted their rest.

“What was that? Mortar?”

“Sounded like a mine. Fox is down there on patrol. Probably one of our own mines, left over by whoever was here before us.”

Shouts for corpsmen echoed up the hill. The radio in the CP crackled to life, calling for a medevac. Wonders took a swig from his canteen and surveyed the surrounding heights.

“First casualty. We haven’t even seen the enemy yet.”

Alan Green arranged his platoon of 81 mm mortars. He picked an old bomb crater for his Fire Direction Center (FDC), and fanned the rest of the platoon out to dig gun pits. The awkward terrain prevented normal dispersion. The Marines attempted to dig in, but quickly hit rocky soil. Instead, they unpacked their mortar ammunition and filled the ammo boxes with rocks and dirt, stacking them up around their mediocre holes.

They established primitive firing positions to support the rifle companies in the bush. They worked to deepen the holes



Lt Kent Wonders

COURTESY OF KENT WONDERS

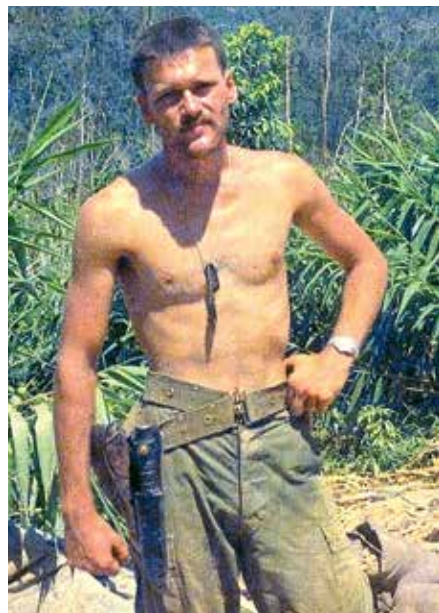
and dial in their aiming stakes. Wiremen strung telephone landlines from the FDC out to each of the eight gun pits. The radioman established contact with forward observers in each company. As the Marines fortified the FDC and brought in ammo, Green noticed a large megaphone sitting next to the radio. “USS *Princeton*” was stenciled on the side. His ammo sergeant noticed the quizzical look on his face and answered the question before Green could ask.

“I liberated it from the Navy before we



The spring site, bottom left, within LZ Margo. Farther up the hill, Marines prepare a mortar gun pit and other fighting positions.

COURTESY OF ERIC SMITH



COURTESY OF ALAN GREEN

Lt Alan Green

left the ship. Didn't seem like they were using it."

The rifle companies north of the LZ worked their way into the hills. They discovered multiple NVA encampments. All were vacant, but showed signs of recent use. Empty mortar pits surrounded the area, dug in deep enough to cover with camouflage and hide from aerial observers. Well-worn trails weaved through the jungle. The NVA carved staircases into the hillsides and reinforced the steps with bamboo. In the steepest parts, they crafted bamboo handrails.

For three days, Marines encountered the enemy, with casualties on both sides. The NVA kept them at arm's length, all around but avoiding a large-scale

engagement. Marines from "Hotel" Company captured a prisoner. The enemy soldier revealed plans for an impending attack that night. Shortly after dark, two Marines in a listening post outside the perimeter were overrun. One of them was killed. Explosions lit up the surrounding jungle as artillery from Camp Carroll and Lt Green's 81 mm mortars fell. From their position back at LZ Margo, Wonders and Green looked toward the black sky in awe as red streams of fire, like dragon's breath, licked the ground over and over. A U.S. Air Force "Spooky" gunship created a wall of bullets around the Marines. The artillery and gunship kept pace all night. A sense of relief came over the Marines when day broke the following morning.

"That's when the order came," they told me.

I recalled my earlier conversation with MajGen Lynch. On Sept. 15, he had received a confusing call from regimental HQ which ordered the battalion's rifle companies back to the LZ. The puzzling nature of the transmission did not surprise him. Marines assumed the NVA heard every word of their unencrypted communication. The order itself, however, concerned him most. Several hundreds of Marines already crowded Margo. It made no tactical sense to pack in several hundred more. Lynch argued his point. He knew the NVA watched their every move. The situation on the ground made it nearly impossible to comply. For reasons unclear, the order stood. Lynch directed the companies to about-face and head back to the LZ.

Lynch continued arguing. The order was a disaster waiting to happen.



COURTESY OF KENT WONDERS

Maj Lynch, center with hands on hips, and other Marines from the CP looking toward the hills to the north of LZ Margo. The first mortar attack began shortly after this photo was taken.

The officer on the opposite end of the radio ran his concerns up the chain of command. Lynch hoped common sense would prevail. While he waited, he ordered the rifle companies to about-face once again back into the hills. As expected, all three companies surprised the pursuing NVA and firefights erupted. At the same time, Foxtrot Marines spotted 20 NVA soldiers with mortar tubes on their backs wading across the Cam Lo River, just west of the LZ.

Lynch raised higher headquarters once more, armed with these new developments. He grew louder and more exasperated with each breath. He shed any concern for his own reputation in an effort to make his point.

"It was an exercise in the use of profanity," he gently recalled.

Higher refused to hear it. The order stood. To make matters worse, an arbitrary time limit was assigned for Lynch's compliance. Higher also directed Lynch to squeeze the entire battalion south of an arbitrary grid line that ran through Margo on the map. The person who made this call was not factoring any tactical implications. Through all the cryptic language, Lynch finally deciphered the reasoning behind the order. A B-52 Arc-Light mission was coming. These high altitude carpet bombings devastated huge swaths of the jungle. One was already on the way. The entire battalion needed to be in the LZ by 2 p.m. on Sept. 16 in order to keep a safe distance.

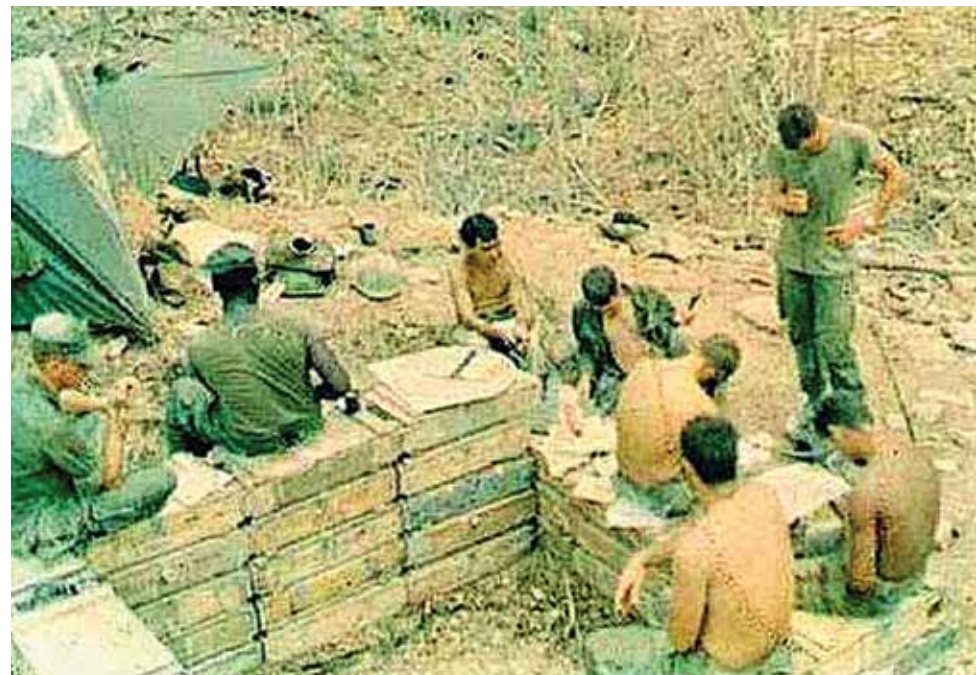
Lynch passed word. A sense of dread pervaded the CP. Lt Wonders returned to his hole and grabbed his e-tool. The Marine who helped him dig the first day watched him hacking away again.

"What's going on, sir?"

"Come on. We need to make this deeper."

The unfolding tragedy revealed itself to me in pieces. I listened to Marines around the room. Each had his own story. On the morning of the 16th, the rifle companies reversed direction a final time and headed back to Margo. Most of the Marines were out of water and looked forward to refilling their canteens at the spring in the LZ. Echo Company entered the perimeter last. By the time they arrived, there was nowhere for them to go. Lance Corporal Teddy Banks, an 18-year-old rifleman, helped carry a Marine KIA up the hill. He placed the body at the casualty collection point, then joined his friend, Harry Rivers. Banks stripped off his gear and lay down his rifle, thankful to doff the burden. He noticed a cache of supplies dropped farther up the hill.

"Hey Rivers, I'm gonna head up there and see if I can find some chow. I'll be



COURTESY OF ERIC SMITH

The 81 mm mortar Fire Direction Center at LZ Margo. Lt Alan Green, far right, standing, listens with his Marines to radio traffic.



COURTESY OF TEDDY BANKS

Teddy Banks aboard the hospital ship USS Repose (AH-16), following his evacuation from LZ Margo. After a month of recovery, Banks returned to the bush with 2/26.

right back."

Banks made it halfway to the supplies. Suddenly, a sound echoed across the hill.

"THOOMP, THOOMP, THOOMP, THOOMP, THOOMP."

It sounded distant, yet close. Banks knew the sound of outgoing mortars, but had never been on the receiving end. Other, more experienced Marines let him know what was about to occur.

"INCOMING! INCOMING!"

Before he could react, mortar rounds exploded at the top of the hill, showering him in debris.

"THOOMP, THOOMP, THOOMP, THOOMP."

He instantly regretted dropping his

gear. He sprinted back down the hill. Rivers and the others in his squad were gone. Banks threw on his helmet and slid his arms through the flak jacket. As he grabbed his M16, an explosion flung him through the air. He felt like someone had trampled him over, running up his right side. When the shock of the explosion wore off, Banks examined himself. He saw blood on his arm, but could not move it to inspect the wound. His helmet fell off as he tumbled, but his right hand still clutched his rifle. He tried to stand but could not move his right leg. The mortars fell in a downpour, raking across the LZ. Banks used his working left side to crawl up a small incline, where the rest of his

squad moved. He reached the top and looked down the other side. The remains of Harry Rivers filled the bottom of a small crater. His hole took a direct hit.

On the other side of the LZ, Private First Class Steve Haisley, from Hotel Co, watched the mortars explode in rapid succession. Deafening shock waves pulsed towards him, and black smoke billowed with each impact. The rounds began to move, walking his direction. Haisley found a hole nearby with a Marine taking cover.

"Move over, I'm coming in!"

He curled up as he dove into the hole. It was not deep enough to fully protect him. He closed his eyes, but heard the explosions coming closer and closer. For the first time in his life, Haisley fully expected to die. He had been in Vietnam for five months. He had been afraid before, even believed he would be killed. His teenage invincibility always pushed the fear aside. This was different. He saw exactly how he would die, and heard death coming. Haisley opened his eyes. He locked onto the Marine next to him, a kid just like himself. Would this be the last face he saw?

"Please God, I'm 19! I can't die yet! Not like this!"

A mortar crashed down next to the hole. Haisley felt a searing sledgehammer plow into his left arm. Surprised, he looked down at unrecognizable carnage hanging from his shoulder. He did not even notice the hole in his back. He thought to investigate the arm further. With mortars falling all around, Haisley stood. The half of his arm below the elbow fell dead, severed completely, except for a shred of skin. He froze, fixated on his forearm suspended by a thread. The Marine with him reached up, grabbed his belt, and yanked him back down into the hole.

"Get down! You're hit pretty bad!"

He stabilized Haisley on the bottom of the hole and yelled over the roar.

"CORPSMAN!"

Near the CP, Alan Green and seven other Marines took cover in the FDC. When the mortars began, Green dove into the crater and instinctively placed both hands over his crotch. Every Marine with him mirrored his defensive posture. The look on one young Marine's face spelled terror, just as much as the sound of death raining down. Screams filled the air along with the explosions. Several of Green's mortar crews took direct hits. The big guns broke and flew in pieces; the Marines manning them did as well.

After several minutes of constant bombardment, a shout came from higher up the hill.

"Fire mission! Fire mission!"



A Marine O-1 Bird Dog observation plane circles LZ Margo as the battalion settles in. Note the jungle-covered hills surrounding the battalion. (Photo courtesy of Tom Roadley)

Staff Sergeant James Doner, from the Reconnaissance Platoon, saw muzzle flashes in the distance. He grabbed his map and worked out the grid coordinates. He shouted them down the hill to the Marines in the FDC. They immediately went to work. One of the Marines picked up the telephone to communicate with the gun crews. After several attempts, he turned to Green and yelled over the explosions.

"I can't get a response! I think all the landlines are cut!"

Green crossed the FDC to snatch the stolen megaphone. He jumped out of the hole and surveyed the hill. Smoke obscured his line of sight on some gun pits. Some were just gone. Other mortars tubes stood tall, ready to take the fight back at the NVA. He crouched and lifted the megaphone to his lips.

"Fire mission! Fire mission! Come on you United States Marines! Get out of your holes and get on your guns!"

His booming voice roused the Marines into action. They readied their ammo and adjusted the mortars to the coordinates Green communicated. As he jumped back into his hole, Green looked out across the gun pits. Only the top half of the tubes protruded above the rim of their holes. Hands flashed up into view dropping rounds down the tubes. The sound of his own mortars firing mixed with the incoming rounds, nearly indistinguishable. It felt good to fight back.

Two hundred mortar rounds fell on LZ Margo in less than 10 minutes. They continued falling. The NVA walked rounds back and forth across the tightly packed

hilltop. Explosions and gunfire kept the volume at a deafening level. If a pause in either happened to coincide, screaming filled the void. Smoke enveloped the hill, limiting visibility. Despite the chaos, initial shock gave way to courage.

An M60 machine gun opened up from a hole a few meters from Green. Corporal



Steve Haisley, pictured here with his younger brother, endured months of recovery and multiple surgeries to reattach his arm. He returned home to Chicago, Ill., where his treatment continued at Naval Station Great Lakes.

Joe Cooper blasted away at a distant enemy, unseen from Green's position. When the barrel burned bright red and overheated, Cooper grabbed it off the gun with his bare hand, replaced it with a new one, and continued firing. Higher up the hill, SSgt Doner and another Marine also opened up with their M60. Mortars landed near Cooper and Doner, peppering their bodies with shrapnel and knocking them off their guns. Green turned back in time to see an entire mortar crew, loaded with ammo, pop up and dash from their gun pit. An explosion knocked their mortar out of action. The Marines sprinted through smoke and shrapnel to the nearest firing gun.

"A squad leader in the old gun became an ammo humper on the new gun," Green told me. "It was incredible, and guys died doing it. It was inspiring. It was heart-breaking. It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen."

At the spring, Marines were caught in the open filling canteens. Lance Corporal Clifton Spiller ran to their aid when the rounds walked away. He picked up a wounded Marine and moved towards the nearest corpsman. The mortars walked back his direction. He knelt, dropped the Marine, and lay over top of him. Explosions rocked the spring again. Spiller jerked as metal and rocks ripped his body. Two others, Private First Class Larry McCartney and Lance Corporal Gary Daffin, observed the carnage from a nearby hole. Daffin told McCartney to head to the CP and find a corpsman while he went to aid Spiller and the others by the water. They stood from their hole,

turned their backs to each other, and headed in opposite directions. Simultaneously, a mortar exploded between them. Shrapnel buried into McCartney's flak jacket and rifle, but he sustained only minor wounds. On Daffin's side of the blast, a large piece of metal flew between the back of his helmet and collar of his flak jacket, nearly decapitating him. McCartney recovered quickly enough to catch Daffin before he fell, killed instantly. By the time help arrived, Clifton Spiller and every other Marine around the water-hole, except McCartney, was dead already.

Kent Wonders lay flat listening to the mortars. By the time he made it to his coffin-sized hole, three other Marines had already squeezed into it. He shoved his face down between two of their backs, while the rest of him remained above the rim of the hole. Nearly 20 minutes of nonstop steel rain had passed. It seemed like an eternity, drawing out his wait for death, and taunting him with every close explosion. He could not begin to guess how many mortars had fallen. Suddenly, it stopped. The only sounds filling the LZ were the screams of the wounded and cries for corpsmen. Machine-gun fire came from down the slope on the north side of the LZ. Wonders stood in time to see Marines with rifles running toward the northern perimeter.

"What's going on?"

"Ground attack! They're coming up the hill!"

Marines filled gaps in the line and

poured fire down the hill. The NVA force in sight seemed smaller than would have been expected to follow such a barrage. Seeing the amount of Marines still ready and willing to fight back, the NVA retreated into the jungle.

Wonders returned to the CP. Dead and wounded Marines lay everywhere. Those unscathed rushed around the LZ helping out however they could. The battalion surgeon worked close by. Wonders saw him performing a tracheotomy, while the wounded piled up around his position. Wonders found Maj Lynch on the radio. Chaos reigned as everyone attempted to grasp the extent of what happened. Wonders offered to take charge of organizing the wounded for medevac. Marines carried their buddies into the collection point. Corpsmen triaged the wounded for evacuation and set the dead aside. Wonders prepared the highest priority Marines to be evacuated on the first bird, then moved onto organizing the wounded for the second. Just as the battalion had come into the LZ, one chopper at a time would carry them out.

A corpsman miraculously made it to Steve Haisley while the mortars still fell. He applied a tourniquet to Haisley's arm and treated his other wounds. Haisley barely retained consciousness as he waited for medevac. The first chopper finally arrived. Marines carried him onto the bird, one of the most critical casualties. He sensed the chopper lifting into the air.

"Help me! Please, help me!"

The cry filled the inside of the helicopter, so loud it could be heard over the intense whine of the engines. Haisley looked around for the source. Another wounded Marine lay on the floor several feet away. Haisley realized the Marine was staring right at him.

"Help me! Help me!"

Haisley wondered if the Marine was asking him to help somehow. He looked around the chopper again. Above his head, the helicopter crew chief stood at his door gun looking down at the dying man. Above the noise, and through his helmet, even he heard the screaming. What was he supposed to do? What was anyone supposed to do? Haisley returned his gaze back to the Marine and found him still staring.

"Help me!"

Haisley extended his good arm and grasped the man's hand. He held it firm and watched the man continue pleading. His screams grew faint as the helicopter continued on. When they stopped completely, the Marine's gaze fell from Haisley's face. His hand went limp. Haisley kept his own gaze, and the Marine's hand, held firm.

Teddy Banks found shelter in a crater to wait out the remainder of the barrage. A corpsman helped him to a casualty collection point, where he waited for medevac. Banks still could not move his legs. His right arm hung motionless and numb, yet his fingers remained locked around his rifle. The corpsman attempted



A CH-46 waits as Marines carry the wounded aboard for medevac at LZ Margo.

to pry the rifle loose, but Banks' fingers would not budge. Despite his wounds, Banks clearly saw he was one of the lesser-wounded and was therefore lower priority. He would be there for a while.

In the wake of the attack, Alan Green consolidated his platoon. Four of his eight mortars were destroyed. Several of his Marines were already moving their wounded and dead to the LZ for evacuation. Green joined in the effort. He saw the wounded stacking up waiting for their helicopters. Poncho liners covered the dead. As he passed, Green paused over two bodies. What remained had been devastated beyond recognition. When Green returned to the gun pits, his platoon sergeant approached. Everyone in the platoon was accounted for except two. They searched the position once more, then returned to the LZ. Green surveyed the wounded for his Marines. Images of the two mangled dead returned to him.

"All of the sudden, it hit me," Green remembered, "That's got to be my Marines."

They located dog tags on the bodies, confirming his gut feeling. The platoon sergeant marked all Marines accounted for.

Kent Wonders continued getting the wounded out of LZ Margo. Chopper after chopper touched down and waited as Marines rushed up and down the tail ramp. One chopper prepared to lift off. Wonders ran to the front of the bird and signaled for the pilot to hold. Two more Marines in critical condition were on their way. Despite the already full cargo bay and sitting exposed on the LZ, the pilot waited. Wonders signaled him once the Marines were loaded and the chopper groaned skyward.

Wonders organized the next group for evacuation. Volunteers came from everywhere to help carry the wounded.

"THOOMP, THOOMP, THOOMP, THOOMP."

Mortars exploded again across the LZ. Everyone dove to the ground without time to find a hole. The explosions walked closer, wounding the wounded again, along with others who had escaped the first barrage. Wonders poked his head up. As far as he could see, men lay on top of the Marines they were carrying when the attack began. He rolled over the Marine next to him and closed his eyes.

The second barrage stopped mercifully shorter than the first. Nearly 100 more rounds fell. More wounded came to the LZ. Choppers landed again and Wonders resumed his mission.

Helicopter after helicopter ferried the wounded out of Margo. Wonders marveled that none were caught by mortars. He knew enough wounded remained



Above: Photo taken after the second attack at LZ Margo on Sept. 16. Marines care for the wounded and mourn their dead.

Right: Marines pile weapons left behind by their wounded owners or destroyed in the mortar attacks. Piles were consolidated into black nets and then picked up by helicopters.

that the dead would not make it out until tomorrow. As the sun faded, a final chopper landed in the LZ. Maj Lynch observed as Marines filed up and down the tail ramp, loading casualties. He finally grabbed a radio operator as Marines continued transporting wounded.

"Get ahold of that pilot and tell him he needs to get out of here. He's already overloaded."

The radio operator relayed the message.

"Sir, he says he can take more."

"No, he can't. He's overloaded. Tell him to get out of here!"

The last casualty entered the bird, and the pilot launched. The chopper struggled to gain altitude. It slid through the sky off

the hill, then dropped into the valley below line of sight. The Marines on the ground waited for the sound of the crash to reach them. Suddenly, the chopper sprang up again as the pilot jettisoned fuel. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. As soon as the helicopter was out of sight, a single echo cut their relief short.

"THOOMP."

They dove for cover as the mortar exploded exactly where the chopper had sat moments earlier.

Medevacs resumed on the morning of the 17th. The NVA attacked LZ Margo with mortars twice more, killing and wounding more. Piles of destroyed and blood-covered gear dotted the LZ—helmets,

rifles, flak jackets—all individual items left by their wounded owners. Marines filled black nets full of the excess gear and helicopters picked them up. The sight of these loads departing proved equally disturbing as the medevac birds. Between the two days' barrages, nearly 30 Marines were killed and 160 wounded.

How could this have happened? Who could have ignored every sign, and forced these Marines into such a position? I reflected on the men I spoke with. Most of them had little or no idea why they were at Margo in the first place. They followed orders. They did their jobs. They sacrificed so much for little purpose. The angrier I became, the more I realized my reaction to their stories did not mirror what I saw in them. Every single Marine at LZ Margo was wounded. They carry these wounds still. They buried Margo deep inside and pressed on. I expected to find bitterness. Instead, I saw thankfulness.

Many of the Marines chose a life of service after Vietnam. Several, like Gen Lynch, stayed in and retired from the Marine Corps. Teddy Banks left the Marines for 11 years before reenlisting. He retired as a gunnery sergeant, after going to war a second time in Operation Desert Storm. He counseled his young Marines, telling them they would not be the same person by the time they made it home. Some, like Steve Haisley, served outside the military. After multiple surgeries to reattach his arm, Haisley regained extremely limited use. Despite this disability, he became a police officer, serving 37 years. No matter their chosen profession, by the time the veterans of 2/26 arrived in Detroit, their lives reflected a dedication to their Corps, communities, and families.

For the second day of the reunion, Sunday, Sept. 16, the veterans planned a formal ceremony of remembrance. I looked forward to the day. I hoped I might learn as much about Margo's impact as I had about its history. Several speakers presented during the morning. Gen Lynch discussed the background of the operation and why they were at Margo. Looking around the room, it occurred to me this was the first time many of those present ever heard these details about the operation.

Steve Haisley addressed the group as well.

"My life is divided into two parts; before Vietnam and after. Sept. 16th, 1968, was the single most defining day of my life. I remember laying in that hole and begging God for my life. I'm sure I promised God everything that my 19-year-old mind could come up with. I remember laying on the floor of the medevac chopper





CHARLENE MATERA

Kyle Watts, left, and 2/26 veterans Steve Haisley, center, and John Webb. Both Haisley and Webb were severely wounded at LZ Margo.

hearing the screams of the Marine next to me. I've never felt so helpless in my entire life. When the medevac chopper landed, they took us into the triage area. I remember very vividly two men standing over my litter discussing my chances. I heard one of them say, 'he's lost a lot of blood, I don't think he's going to make it.' I remember thinking, 'I am 19 years old. I cannot die. I am not going to die.' "

In 2014, Haisley went to the VA for an appointment related to his arm. The bloodwork they performed revealed something more sinister. He had cancer. Despite his tour in Vietnam lasting only five months, the cancer was directly linked to Agent Orange exposure. He considered how to tell his family. He reflected on his life and all the ways Vietnam had defined it. The next morning he sat at his computer. He went online to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Virtual Wall, and scrolled through photographs of Marines killed at Margo.

"I realized, who am I to be sad or feel sorry for myself? These guys never had a chance at life. I have lived 50 years longer than them. They would have given anything to have been wounded and lived the life I have. They would have given anything to be sitting here, right now, with cancer."

To this day, Haisley starts his daily routine by sitting at his computer and reflecting on the faces of the Virtual Wall. His comments can be found under many photographs.

"My life has been so blessed. I can see now that the worst things in my life have turned out to be the best things. They have made me who I am today."

The afternoon of the ceremony centered around the return of two dog tags. Alan Green made contact with two Marine veterans, a father and son, who bought a pile of American dog tags in Vietnam during one of their trips. One set belonged to Clifton Spiller, killed on Sept. 16 at the spring in LZ Margo. The mangled condition of the tags painted a solemn picture of his death, shielding another from the exploding mortars. Another set of tags belonged to Lancaster Brown-Bey, killed after Margo a few weeks later in the operation. Brown-Bey's sister, a Detroit native, attended the ceremony to accept her brother's tags.

The ceremony ended with a Roll Call of Honor. Individuals around the room stood and listed off the Marines killed in action through the operation, both at Margo and in the weeks afterward. For each name given, their photograph was displayed on the screen.

"Lance Corporal Lancaster Brown-Bey, Detroit, Michigan, age 19. Died Oct. 1, 1968."

"Private First Class James Claude 'Bull' Durham Jr., Lincoln Park, Michigan, age 19. Died at LZ Margo on Sept. 16, 1968."

"Corporal Rodney Bradford, Chicago, Illinois, aged 19. Died at LZ Margo, Sept. 16, 1968."

The list continued on and on. When the

names of Echo Company Marines came, Teddy Banks stood to sound them off.

"Private First Class John Martin Donohue, Gregory, Michigan, age 17. Died at LZ Margo on Sept. 16, 1968."

"Lance Corporal Harry Eugene Rivers, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, age 19. Died at LZ Margo on Sept. 16, 1968."

Banks continued. Others followed. In total, 49 names were listed. They ranged from 17 to 27 years old. Some were in the final days of their tour. Some had been in country less than a week. Name after name, face after face, was announced. The gravity of what these Marines carried the past 50 years impacted me more completely. They told me LZ Margo defined them. They spoke of it in painful, distant memories, unearthed for the reunion. The memories came quickly, though, detailed and alive. This place they longed to forget was the place they could never forget and became the great paradox of their lives.

"Years after I became a police officer, I got my own office," Steve Haisley told me. "I covered the walls and my desk with all my old Marine Corps stuff. The guys called it my war room. They'd come in and tell me, 'Vietnam was years ago, you need to get over it.' I'd tell them I could never get over it. I didn't want to get over it. Our memories of the guys we lost there keeps them alive. If I forget them, who will remember?"

Bagpipes played "Amazing Grace." The men surrounding me bowed their heads. Their tears disclosed the living reality of the wounds Margo left. I realized this would be the closest I could come to understand what it meant to them. I wondered if I could endure the things they had. I hoped I might come to emulate their strength. I marveled at their stories. Men like Jarvis Lynch, Alan Green, Kent Wonders, Teddy Banks, Steve Haisley and all the others. They were each the story of LZ Margo. How could I possibly capture it into words? I stood in awe and silently thanked them for allowing me to be there.

Author's bio: Kyle Watts is a former Marine captain and communications officer. He lives in Richmond, Va., with his wife and three children. He recently won the Col Robert Debs Heintz Jr. Award for his article "The Flying Ladder: Emergency Extractions and the Lifesaver from the Sky," published in the April 2018 issue of Leatherneck. He is the founder of Battlesight Zero, an online historical publication with the mission of honoring military veterans by telling their stories. For more information, visit www.bzo-history.com.