37 DAYS IN VIETNAM

~ A HOSPITAL CORPSMAN'S STORY ~

Early in 1966, I was a U.S. Navy hospital corpsman serving in Quang Ngai Province, Republic of South Vietnam, with the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.* For 37 days, from January 28 until the morning of March 5, I mostly "humped the boonies" with the Marines, first with Headquarters & Service Company and then with Lima Company.

The days were long, exhausting, and tedious, the future uncertain. We slept in the dirt, could bathe but rarely, and ate MCIs (MEAL, COMBAT, INDIVIDUAL), knowing all the while that death or dismemberment might be less than a heartbeat away for each of us. Indeed, our ranks suffered attrition through wounds and death on almost a daily basis. I soon came to realize that the United States had committed itself — and me! — to a war that we could not win, and indeed would have no winners at all.

On the bright, hot morning of 5 March, on the lower levels of a nondescript elevation called Hill 50, my worst fears came to pass when we joined battle with elements of the powerfully armed, entrenched, and well-camouflaged 36th Infantry Regiment of the Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam People's Army. In the next few, bloody hours, the 3rd Battalion sustained heavier casualties than it would in any other action during its seven-month tour of duty. Long before sunset on 5 March, my battalion would mourn the deaths of 42 Marines; another 102 would suffer wounds, many of them serious. It was one of the bloodiest days in Marine Corps history; I was among the seriously wounded.

This is the story of the Vietnam War from my perspective, illustrated with covers, picture postcards, photos, stamps, and ephemera. Specific dates that are given are taken from my own military records and from official and academic military archives.

The decorative stationery in this exhibit features a bamboo motif common in Southeast Asian decorative art. Following the title page, each such page signals a new phase in my military career. I hope that these pages help to illustrate how even a war as bad as the Vietnam War cannot destroy the human impulse to create and appreciate beauty.

I dedicate this exhibit to the Marines and Navy corpsmen who died on the battlefields of Vietnam, to those who survived and may suffer still, and to the brave people of Vietnam.

HM3 Bob Ingraham in 1965

Semper fidelis,

Bob Ingraham

Bob Ingraham
Vancouver, British Columbia
8 June 2007

*** In this exhibit, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division is abbreviated to "3/1" or "3rd Battalion."**

I become a Navy corpsman

When I joined the U.S. Navy, my recruiter promised that I would become a Navy journalist. Recruiters, of course, are not to be believed: At the end of boot camp, the Navy sent me off to Hospital Corps School at the U.S. Naval Hospital near Balboa Park in San Diego. I would become a hospital corpsman.

An E.C. Kropp Co. postcard shows a 1940s view of the U.S. Naval Hospital at Balboa Park in San Diego, California, looking much as it looked in 1963 when I attended Hospital Corps School there. The buildings still stand, but no longer serve as a hospital.

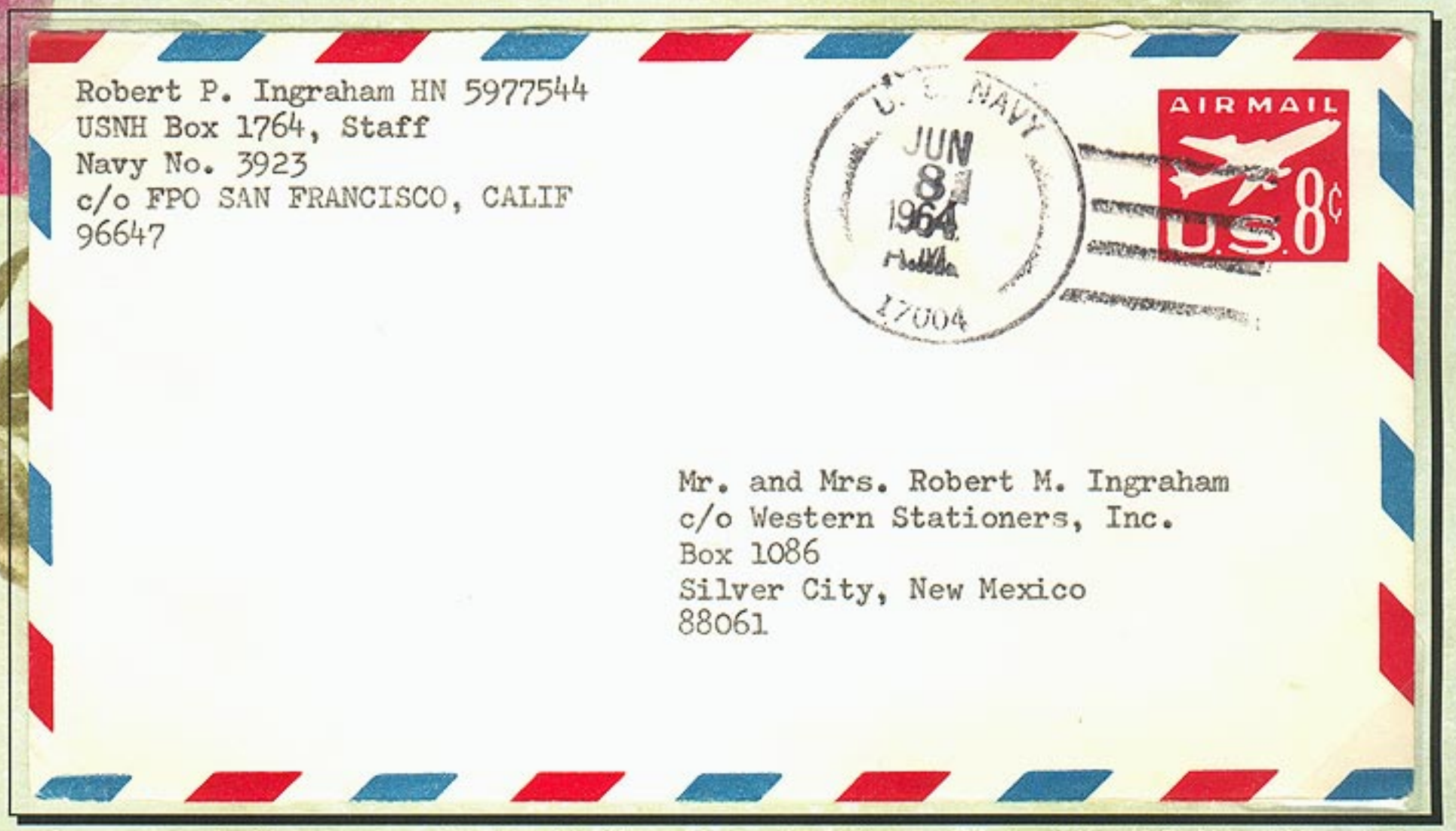
In an intensive four-month course, commencing 31 January 1963, my class of 32 new corpsmen learned basic anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, and hygiene; we learned the basic roles of the paramedic, the general surgeon, the nurse, the orderly, and the pharmacist. Following graduation, we normally worked alone or with other corpsmen; while doctors and nurses were often on call, we were expected to be able to perform independently, and often did so, undertaking routine diagnosis and treatment of illness and injuries.

We were under no illusions about the potentially hazardous nature of our career: On a wall in the administration building of the Hospital Corps School were scores of photographs of corpsmen who had died in combat. We practiced giving first aid to mock battle casualties. I prayed then that I would never have to be on a battlefield.

U.S. Naval Hospital, Yokosuka, Japan

My first duty station after Hospital Corps School was the U.S. Naval Hospital at Yokosuka, Japan. My first job there was the last thing I expected: I worked in a delivery room and nursery! Over the next two years, I also worked in pediatrics, in sick bay (the Navy equivalent of an emergency room), and as a medical-records clerk.

It was a dream assignment. I revelled in the opportunities to explore Japanese culture and history. I took full advantage of the low prices of Japanese cameras and electronics, enjoyed the attentions two Japanese university coeds, and taught an English-language class.



A cover posted to my parents, about halfway through my tour of duty at the U.S. Naval Hospital at Yokosuka, Japan. The "17004" in the dial of the duplex cancellation is the postal branch number assigned to the hospital.

Well before the end of my tour of duty in Japan, however, the future looked bleak: In August, 1964, the infamous Tonkin Gulf Incident* provided President Johnson with a pretext to commit American troops to combat in Vietnam. On 1 March 1965, I wrote to my parents from Yokosuka:

> I once told you that corpsmen often go to the Marines, the Fleet Marine Force to be exact.... ...my orders say that I am to report to Camp Pendleton Field Medicine School not later than 1 July 1965 for four weeks training.... After the four weeks training I am to report to the headquarters of the First Marine Division.

In an apparent effort to ease my parents' fears for my safety, I told them that the 1st Marine Division normally remained "stateside," but it was clear to me — and probably to them — that I was headed for Vietnam.

*** The Tonkin Gulf Incident involved an apparent attack by North Vietnamese gunboats on two American destroyers, the U.S.S. *Maddox* and the U.S. *Turner Joy.* The United States Congress approved a resolution to send ground combat troops into Vietnam in support of the South Vietnamese government. There is little historical evidence that the attacks ever took place.**

I Train with the U.S. Marines: Camp Pendleton

The U.S. Marine Corps is the ground combat unit of the U.S. Navy, and relies on the Navy for its corpsmen and doctors. In late June, 1965, I flew back to the U.S. to report for duty at the Field Medical Service School at Del Mar Area, a sub-camp of the sprawling U.S. Marines Corps' Camp Pendleton, at Oceanside, California. I would become a member of the infantry branch of FMF — the Fleet Marine Force, which is a combined command of the Navy and the Marine Corps.

We learned how to field-strip, clean and shoot the M-14 rifle and the .45 calibre automatic pistol. We crawled through "minefields" and under live machine-gun fire, threw practice grenades, and once, using blank cartridges, "defended" a hill at night against an "enemy" force. And, of course, we learned how to treat combat wounds, more or less: Our two-week medical training phase was cut short by six days, and I was ordered to join 3/1.

I did *not* feel prepared for combat. I was unsure that I would be able to save anyone's life. I hadn't even learned how to fire my pistol, much less hit anything with it. However, it was clear that 3/1 was headed for Vietnam.

At the left: A reduced reproduction of a letter that I sent my parents from Field Medical Service School, Camp Pendleton.

Below: The cover that enclosed the letter.

13 July 1965

Dear Mother and Dad:

Camps Pendleton, Del Mar area, is now relaxing after a quick-paced day which included a 1 mile run. It was

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to read

Robert P. Ingraham
HM3/USN 597 7544
Class 1-66
Field Medical Service School
Marine Corps Base
Camp Pendleton, California
92055

Mr. & Mrs. Robert M. Ingraham
c/o Western Stationers, Inc.
Box 1086
Silver City, New Mexico
88061

I Train with the U.S. Marines: On a ship at last!

I joined the U.S. Navy because I wanted to go to sea; growing up in New Mexico, I had never even seen the ocean, much less a ship. After nearly three years in the Navy, I had crossed the Pacific twice by air, but it was my tour of duty with the U.S. Marines that gave me my sea legs.

On 21 August 1965, the 3rd Battalion embarked on the U.S.S. *Magoffin* (APA-199), the attack transport which would transport us from Long Beach, California to Okinawa. In Okinawa, we would undertake jungle warfare training before deploying to the Republic of Vietnam.

3rd Battalion Marines carry munitions boxes aboard the U.S.S. *Magoffin* at Long Beach, California, in August, 1965.
Bob Ingraham photo

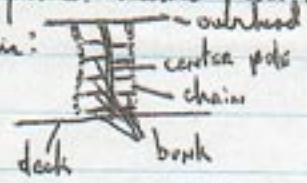
Below left, a reduced reproduction of page one of a three-page letter I wrote to my parents from the *Magoffin*. It is dated 27 August 1965, our fifth day at sea; its cover has not survived. Below right, quotations from the letter, and an enlarged image of the drawing showing the arrangement of our bunks deep in the *Magoffin's* hold:

27 Aug 65, 4:00 p.m.

Dear Mother + Dad:

Henceforth, know me as "Sealegs" Ingraham, the first in the long line of Ingrahams to boldly set out on the uncharted blue reaches of the Pacific.

At 2:00 this p.m. our fifth day of sailing started, which means we left Long Beach at 2:00 p.m. on Monday. To brief you, here are a few facts. The Magoffin was built in 1944 in Seattle, and is a filthy scow. However, it seems to be getting us where we are going. It is about 450' long, and in those 450' are crammed 1,149 Marines and the ship's crew of about 150 sailors. I live in the aft troop berthing space, second deck. That's about ten feet below the water line. My "bunk" is actually a canvas hammock, strung tightly on a frame. Viewed from the end, the "bunk-group" looks like this:



There are 10 bunks in each group. Two feet separate each bunk, and about 300 Marines (and corpsmen) live in a space roughly the size our house. Fortunately we can go topside whenever we want. That's where I am now, sitting on the 02 deck (second up from the main deck) on the port (left) side. The water is extremely blue, the sun very bright, and the wake a brilliant

Henceforth, know me as "Sealegs" Ingraham, the first in the long line of Ingrahams to boldly set out on the uncharted blue reaches of the Pacific.

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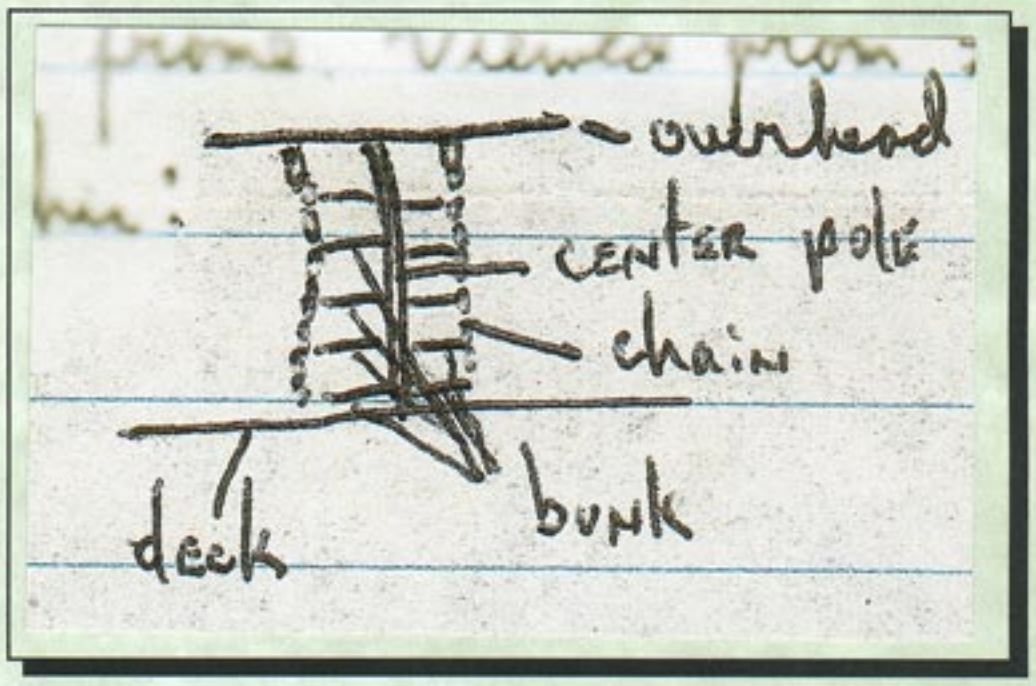

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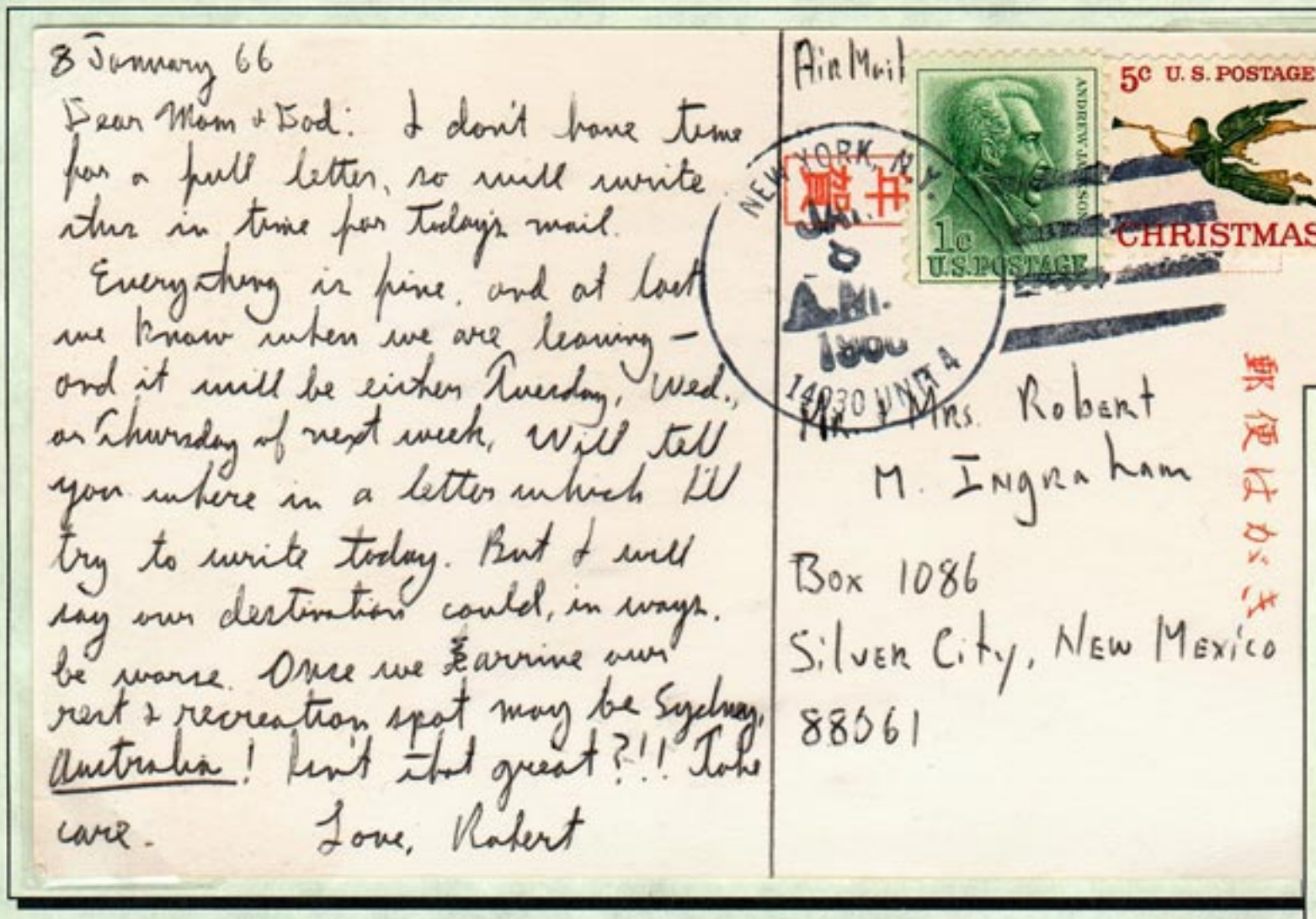
I Train with the U.S. Marines: Okinawa

I had a lot of free time in Okinawa. I used it for beach-combing, sightseeing, the occasional party, and a lot of letter writing. Oddly, our outgoing mail was postmarked New York, N.Y. The explanation is that the post office that served Camp Schwab was a branch of the New York City post office. Mail clerks drew their supplies from New York and sent their remittances for the sale of stamps and money orders to New York, but the postmarks had no relationship to the routing of mail.



8 January 66

Dear Mom + Dad: I don't have time for a full letter, so will write this in time for today's mail.

Everything is fine, and at last we know when we are leaving — and it will be either Tuesday, Wed., or Thursday of next week. Will tell you where in a letter which I'll try to write today. But I will say our destination could, in ways, be worse. Once we arrive our rest + recreation spot may be Sydney, Australia! Isn't that great?!! Take care. Love, Robert

Air Mail

5c U.S. POSTAGE

CHRISTMAS

1c U.S. POSTAGE

NEW YORK, N.Y.

JAN 8 AM 1966

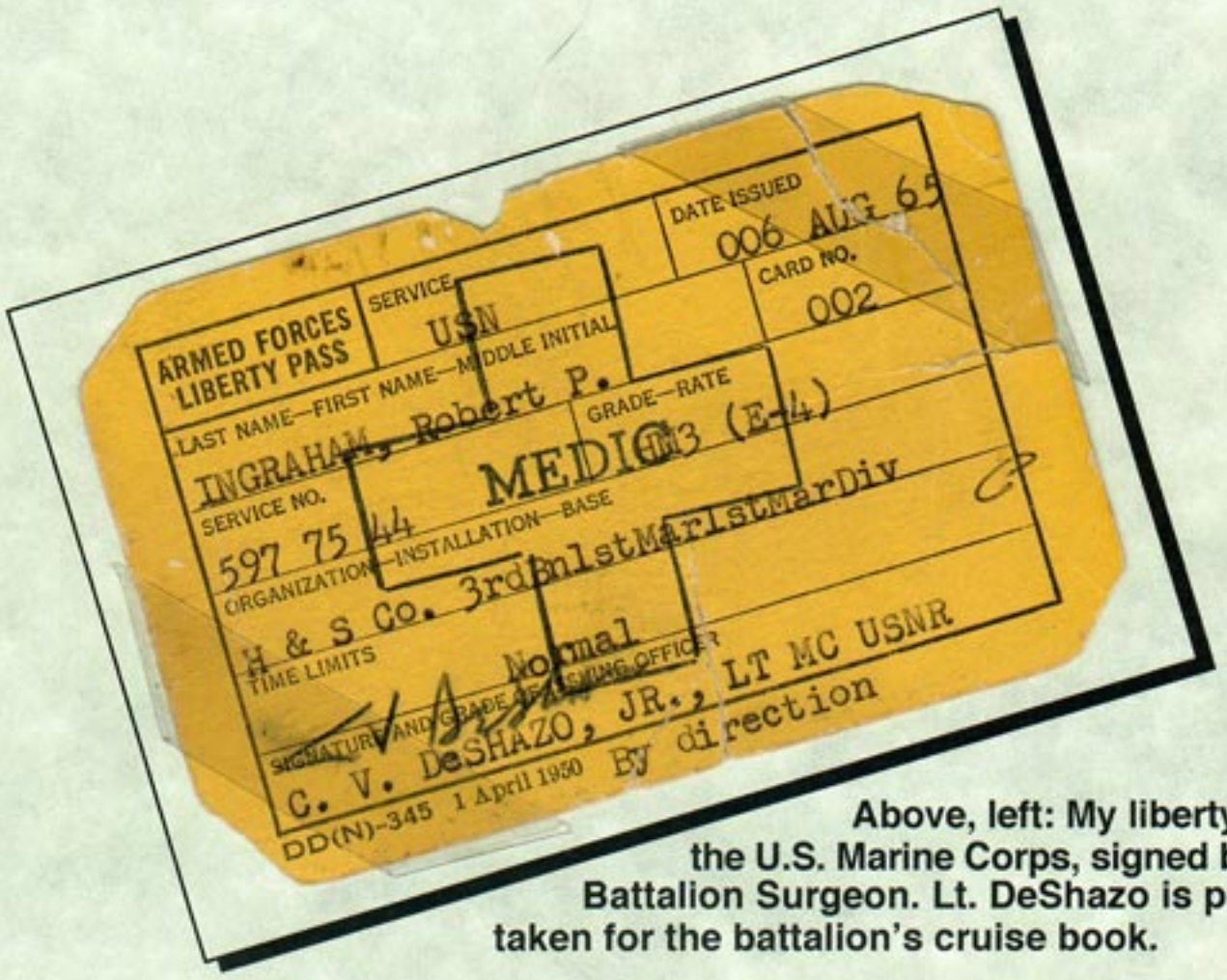
14230 VNA 4

Mrs. Robert M. Ingraham

Box 1086

Silver City, New Mexico 88061

Above, a postcard from Okinawa, dated 8 January 1966, notifies my parents about our upcoming departure for Vietnam. I lightheartedly mention that I might get R&R in Australia. The front of the card is a typical Japanese New Year greeting. The calligraphy on the scroll reads "Hatsu Hinode" — "First Sunrise [of the New Year]." The remaining calligraphy reads "Shinnen Omedetou" — "Happy New Year."



ARMED FORCES LIBERTY PASS

SERVICE: USN

DATE ISSUED: 006 AUG 65

CARD NO.: 002

LAST NAME—FIRST NAME—MIDDLE INITIAL: INGRAHAM, Robert P.

GRADE—RATE: HM3 (E-4)

SERVICE NO.: 597 75 44

MEDIC

ORGANIZATION—INSTALLATION—BASE: H & S Co. 3rdBnlstMarDiv

TIME LIMITS: Normal

SIGNATURE AND GRADE OF ISSUING OFFICER: C. V. DeSHAZO, JR., LT MC USNR

DD(N)-345 1 April 1930 By direction

Lt. C.V. DeShazo
Battalion Surgeon

Above, left: My liberty card from my months with the U.S. Marine Corps, signed by Lt. Claude V. DeShazo, 3rd Battalion Surgeon. Lt. DeShazo is pictured above right in a photo taken for the battalion's cruise book.

I TRAIN WITH THE U.S. MARINES: OKINAWA

The Battle of Okinawa in 1945, which included 3/1/1, was the bloodiest battle of the war in the Pacific. About 12,000 Americans became casualties. The arrival of the battalion in Okinawa, on 11 September 1965, was safe and without fanfare. We were taken by bus straight to Camp Schwab, about half way up the southeast coast of the main island, Okinawa Shima, to begin our "jungle training" phase.

A Curteichcolor postcard shows an aerial view of Camp Schwab, Okinawa, home of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, September 1965-January 1966. The undated postcard is used, but apparently was enclosed in an envelope rather than mailed separately. The unknown writer explains, "We do a lot our combat training in the mountains in the background."

Several weeks of my time in Okinawa was spent on light duty in Headquarters & Service Company while I recovered from surgery for a hernia. Otherwise my training consisted of short hikes, completing a jungle-warfare course, and firing one clip of .45 bullets at a stationary target, which remained untouched. Little that I learned had any relevance to what I would later face in Vietnam. Of Vietnam's history, culture and politics we learned nothing.

The other reason for our five months in Vietnam was that the White House and the Pentagon were playing political chess with the South Vietnamese government and military. The Americans who were charged with bringing peace to Vietnam had confusing and overlapping areas of responsibility, and disagreed about the best way to get the job done; South Vietnam's government was riddled with corruption and had been characterized by frequent assassinations and coups; its soldiers were well equipped with American arms but poorly motivated. The 3rd Battalion, a mere pawn, twiddled its thumbs in Okinawa while the White House and the Pentagon pondered our future.

I Train with the U.S. Marines: 3/1 Embarks for Vietnam

On 26 March 1966, as the U.S.S. *Paul Revere* neared South Vietnam, I wrote a letter to my parents. It would be postmarked the next day, the eve of our arrival in Vietnam, along with a huge task force. I wrote, in part:

> *Paul Revere* is now steaming toward Da Nang, where we will pick up reporters and photographers tomorrow. By the time you get this the Third Battalion (and five other Marine battalions and Army and Vietnamese forces) will be well into the biggest portion of this war, a drive to trap a couple of reported VC regiments someplace south of Chu Lai. The assault is scheduled for 7 a.m. on the 28th, and you will undoubtedly know more about its success than we will.

The "drive" was Operation Double Eagle, a huge amphibious landing that harkened back to the days of the Marine Corps island-hopping campaign across the Pacific towards Japan. It would mark the start, for me at least, of 37 days of nearly continuous and mostly futile field operations involving some 5,000 U.S. Marines as well as units of the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN). Marine and U.S. Air Force aircraft provided support, along with Navy combat vessels.

At the left, a reduced reproduction of a letter that I wrote to my parents two days before 3rd Battalion clambered down cargo nets and into the landing craft of the U.S.S. *Paul Revere* to begin an assault on Communist forces in Quang Ngai Province, South Viet Nam.

Below, the cover in which the letter was mailed. Note the partially readable *U.S.S. Paul Revere* cancellation and the endorsement for postage-free mail. Free-franking privileges applied for servicemen throughout the Vietnam combat zone, which extended 50 miles at sea.

26 January 1966

Dear Mother + Bud:

Thanks to some total fool in either the military or the Jewish Estate, you are thinking that I am in Vietnam. Well, I'm not – not yet anyway. Paul Revere is now steaming toward Da Nang, where we will pick up reporters and photographers tomorrow. By the time you get this the Third Battalion (and five other Marine battalions and Army and Vietnamese forces) will be well into the biggest portion of this war, a drive to trap a couple of reported VC regiments someplace south of Chu Lai. The assault is scheduled for 7 a.m. on the 28th., and you will undoubtedly know more about its success

seemed happy too. Beyond his family his possessions were a few dogs,

I Train with the U.S. Marines: 3/1 Embarks for Vietnam

By early December, 1965 the 3rd Battalion was committed to Vietnam, and early in January, 1966 we embarked on the U.S.S. *Paul Revere* (APA-248), an attack transport like the U.S.S. *Magoffin*, but newer.

A postcard published by the Marine Photos & Pubishing Company of San Diego shows the U.S.S. *Paul Revere* (APA-248) steaming out of San Diego, California.

Three years earlier, I had photographed the *Paul Revere* in San Diego Harbour, never imagining the role it would play in my future. It's the middle of the three ships in the photo at the right.

We did not go directly to Vietnam from Okinawa, but instead sailed southwest to the Philippine Islands, first to Subic Bay, Luzon, where we took on supplies, staged a practice amphibious landing, and nearly broiled to death on a forced hike.

Next we sailed to the Philippine island of Mindoro, where, on 23 January 1966, we took part in Exercise Hilltop III, another practice amphibious landing. We marched a few miles inland to bivouac near a farmhouse. Our greatest challenge was not squashing toads, which were thick underfoot. The farmer sold us dusty and warm but satisfying bottles of San Miguel beer. We returned to the *Paul Revere* the next day and departed for Vietnam.

At the left, 3rd Battalion Marines climb up cargo nets on the U.S.S. *Paul Revere* after a practice amphibious landing at Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands.

Bob Ingraham photo

Operation Double Eagle

At sunset on 27 January 1966, U.S.S. *Paul Revere* was steaming off the coast of northern South Vietnam. A fog bank obscured the coast, but in the far distance we could see the mountains that separate Vietnam from Laos. Around us, mostly unseen, were the ships of the Operation Double Eagle task force. 5,000 Marines were poised to go ashore.

Sunset off the coast of South Vietnam on the eve of Operation Double Eagle. Two ships of the Double Eagle task force are visible on the horizon.

Bob Ingraham Photo

Early on 28 January, following a traditional breakfast of steak and eggs, 3/1's Headquarters & Supply Company climbed down the cargo nets into landing craft for the assault on "Red Beach." Double Eagle had begun.

Headquarters & Service Company Marines of 3/1 move cautiously inland on "Red Beach" in the rainy opening hours of Operation Double Eagle.

Bob Ingraham Photo

We had our first combat casualty that night, when a sniper's bullet ploughed a furrow across the top of a Marine rifleman's head. I helped treat him inside an armoured personnel carrier beneath a dim light bulb. He was the first of a steady trickle of casualties that we would suffer over the next month.

I decided early on that America was an interloper in a civil war; my main goal came to be survival. I did not know how very close I would come to never reaching that goal, and how many of the Marines in my battalion would never go home.

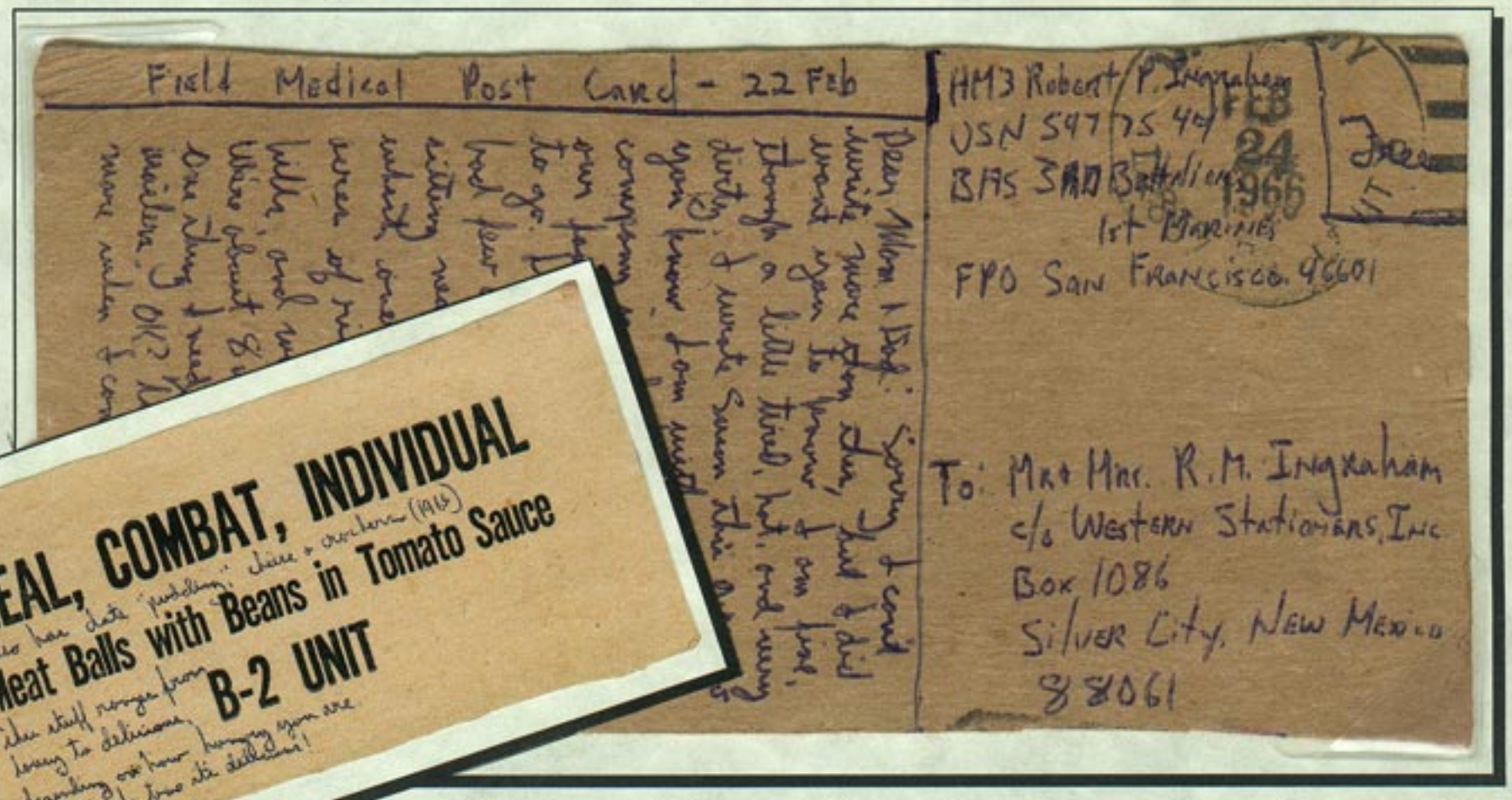
Operation Double Eagle: search & destroy

Operation Double Eagle was first and foremost an effort to capture or kill Viet Cong, who had come to exert wide control over Quang Ngai Province, in numbers roughly equal to the Marine Corps presence. While previous Marine Corps operations, starting in March, 1965, had employed small units to "Win Hearts and Minds" on a village-by-village basis, Double Eagle was committed to battalion-size and larger operations with the main goal being to search for and destroy VC and their infrastructure, assuming we could find them, which we rarely did. We also tried to "Win Hearts and Minds," but on a limited scale. On 17 February 1966, Double Eagle segued into Double Eagle II, with no discernable difference in our role.

At the left, Lt. Claude DeShazo, 3/1's battalion surgeon, examines a Vietnamese civilian; our medical program for civilians was hugely hampered by inadequate supplies. In the centre, a 3/1 Marine escorts a VC prisoner. At the right, 3/1 Marines on a battalion-size Search & Destroy mission. ***Bob Ingraham photos***

My tour of duty in Vietnam was not a terrible ordeal, most of the time: there were moments of laughter, of relaxation, of enlightenment. Often it was just excruciatingly boring. Sometimes, however, we had to fight for our lives, and were witness to unspeakable horrors.

I wrote many letters in Vietnam, but paper was scarce. Food was reasonably plentiful, however — we normally had three meals a day, each one a "MEAL, COMBAT, INDIVIDUAL," or "MCI." (We called them C-Rations, a term left over from the Second World War.) The MCIs were nutritious, and some were even tasty. At times, the cardboard boxes they came provided our only writing material.

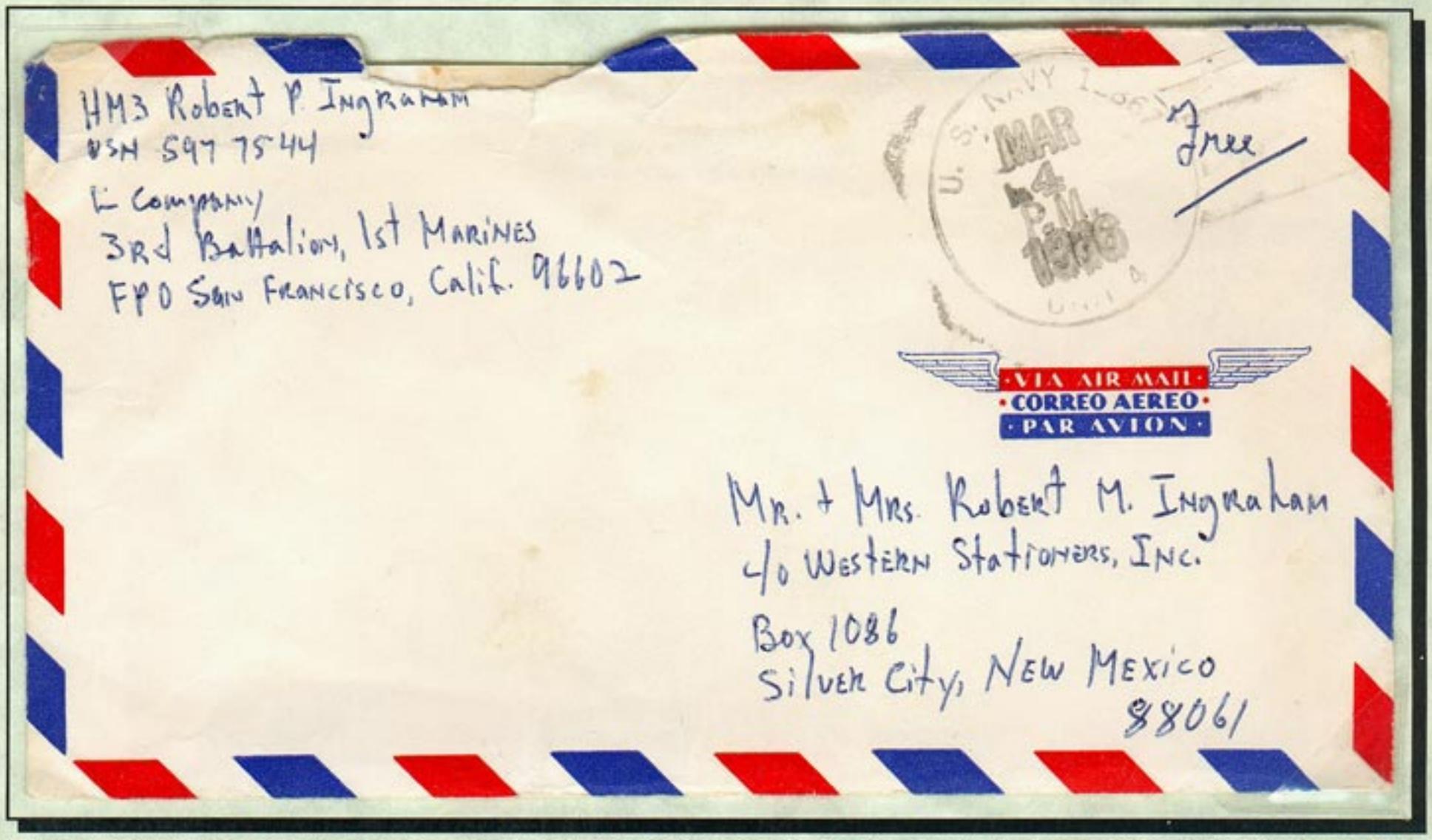


The boxes that our combat rations were packed in often provided our only writing paper. This free-franked "Field Medical Post Card" (my term, written at the top of the card) is postmarked 24 February 1966. On the back of the card (see inset), I noted that this particular meal included date "pudding," cheese, and crackers, and was manufactured in 1963. Every MCI contained four cigarettes.

Operation Utah

Double Eagle II ended on 1 March 1966. By this time I had been transferred from Headquarters & Service Company to 3rd Platoon, Lima Company. In just over a month, I had witnessed almost a dozen incidents which were commonplace in Vietnam but would have made headlines back in the States.

On 3 March, I wrote to my parents. Lima Company had been transported to Chu Lai for a few days' R&R. I wrote about my transfer to Lima Company. I described the death of a young Viet Cong, fatally wounded by a rifleman in my squad. I mentioned that 3rd Battalion's 31 days in the field had set a record for the war. I thanked Mom for cookies, Dad for film, and told them that in one mail call I had received 13 letters from my girlfriend. I posted my letter in an airmail envelope, writing the customary "Free" where a stamp would normally go. It was postmarked the next day, 4 March 1966.



The cover shown above, postmarked 4 March 1966, would be the last one I would mail in Vietnam. The next day, my platoon would engage a unit of a heavily armed North Vietnamese regiment, and I would be seriously wounded.

Our R& R was brief. After breakfast on 4 March, we got word to be ready to move out on another operation. By mid-afternoon, helicopters had taken Lima and two other 3/1 companies into an area a dozen miles south of Chu Lai, where we were to interdict North Vietnam's 46th Infantry Regiment. This was Operation Utah, although it was not named until the following day.

We bivouaced overnight near "Hill 50," so-named because of its 50-metre elevation. The next morning, we marched south towards the hill; we'd been told that the hill had been secured by friendly ARVN troops, and that we were to link up with them. We didn't know that the hill had been honeycombed by Communist troops who were waiting for us with heavy automatic weapons. Moments after my platoon started moving up the hill, we took the full force of a surprise attack. Our first casualty was my platoon leader, Lt. Culver, whose arm was nearly severed at the shoulder. Another Marine — he seemed to be asleep — had a fatal head wound. I was starting to care for a grievously wounded Marine— he had been eviscerated — when a nearby sniper shot me through the right thigh, shattering my femur and pulverizing my inner thigh.

The battle raged for another hour before the wounded, I among them, could be evacuated by helicopter to a field hospital. By evening, I was on board the hospital ship U.S.S. *Repose*, awaiting surgery, in great discomfort, but safe.

HM3 Bob Ingraham awaits medical evacuation.
Larry Skonetski photo

U.S.S. Repose (AH-16) — 6 March 1966

Only a few hours after I was shot, I had surgery on board the hospital ship U.S.S. *Repose*, the *"Angel of the Orient."* My wounds were cleaned and packed with cotton. A body cast stabilized my femur, and I was ready to be shipped home. The next day, on 6 March, I wrote to my parents, explaining how I was wounded and assuring them of my safety. In truth, I was in danger of losing my leg, and morphine was clouding my mind: I dated the letter 5 March 1966.

THE AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS

Dear Mother + Dad: 5 March 1966

For once I've got plenty of time to write, and I think we can thank God for that. Life is pretty wonderful, for you see, yesterday I started death once again. Speaking emphatically, I am fine except for a fairly bad leg wound. I am in excellent hands. Surgery was performed on my way to comp... months & am sure... to the states. I will ... in El Paso.

Briefly, here is ... started a long recov... from Da Lai. Then ... departure was a lo... machine gun fire. ... soldiers on top ... Vietnamese army ... were "friendlies." ... opened fire on us ... casualties. The ... One man was hi... wounds. He still ... brush. Everyone ... had to help the wounded who were scattered all over th...

HM3 Robert P. Ingraham
Orthopedic Ward
U.S.S. Repose (AH-16)
FPO San Francisco, Calif. 96601

Free

U S S
MAR
7
1966
A.M.
REPOSE (AH-16)

Mr. + Mrs Robert M. Ingraham
c/o Western Stationers, Inc.
Box 1086
Silver City, New Mexico
88061

Above, a 1960s postcard of the *Repose*, published by Marine Photos & Publishing Co., San Diego. During the Vietnam war, 9,000 combat casualties were treated on the *Repose*. At the left, a reproduction of the letter I wrote to my parents. Below, the cover in which I posted the letter.

Evacuation: From Da Nang to the Philippines

The hospital ship *Repose* remained my sanctuary for only two or perhaps three days. I was getting regular doses of morphine or Demerol, and slept a great deal. I recall an intense feeling of relief, during my waking moments, that I would never again have to be in combat. But I faced a difficult recovery: Infection in my wound was inevitable — gunshot wounds are always classified as "dirty" wounds — and no one could assure me that I would not eventually lose my leg.

From the *Repose*, I was flown by helicopter to Da Nang, where I stayed overnight in a Quonset-hut hospital ward. The next morning I was flown from Da Nang to the hospital at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, in a Lockheed C-130 Hercules. I recall being loaded onto the aircraft but nothing of the flight itself.

My evacuation from Vietnam began on a Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft similar to the one shown in the used postcard at the left, published by the Columbia Wholesale Company of North Hollywood, California. The "Herc" could carry 74 patients on litters, and two medical attendants.

The helicopter shown in the background is like the one that evacuated me from Hill 50 — a Sikorsky U-34 Seahorse.

From Clark AFB, I talked with my parents, in Silver City, New Mexico, "patched through" to them via a telephone/ham-radio network. The "ham" who handled my call was Dean Battishill, a friend of my parents and of my Uncle Phil. The call reached my parents in the early hours of the morning; they did not know that I had been wounded, and assumed that I was still in Vietnam.

At the right is one of Dean Battishill's QSL cards, posted in 1951 from Silver City to a ham in Florida. "QSL" is radio "Q Code" which means "I acknowledge receipt."

Below, a reproduction of the stamp franking the QSL card and the Silver City machine-duplex cancellation.

SILVER CITY, NEW MEXICO

P. O. Box 176 -:- The Sunhine State

Radio W4POF Tnx fer QSO of 6-29-1950, at 8:05P m. MST.

W5LAJ

Ur 28 Mc. A3 Sigs RST 59

Xmtr: PP813-5514 BMod.

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7 Crescent Drive

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C. Fritz - Joliet, Ill.

Evacuation — From the Philippines to San Diego

After staying overnight at Clark Air Force Base Hospital, I was taken by ambulance to the air field and bundled aboard a Lockheed C-141A Starlifter. The Starlifter was at that time the largest aircraft in the U.S. Air Force; configured as a long-range medical-evacuation aircraft, it could carry 80 litter patients and 23 medical attendants.

By the time I left the Philippines, I was very ill. Multiple infections had gained an upper hand in my wound, and I was starting to suffer from a bladder infection, resulting from unsterile catheterization on the *Repose*. I was still getting regular injections of morphine or Demerol. I have only vague memories of being in a large, crowded, dark, noisy space, with nurses and Air Force medics constantly on the move. I have always assumed that the aircraft was filled primarily with casualties from Operation Utah, which had ended on 6 March and left at least 94 Marines dead and 276 wounded.* The day I was shot, 5 March, ranks as one of the bloodiest in Marine Corps history.

The second stage of my evacuation from Vietnam was on a Lockheed C-141A Starlifter, similar to the one shown in the mint contemporaneous postcard at the right, published by Charleston Post Card Co.

The Starlifter went into service in April, 1965, and throughout the Vietnam War delivered soldiers and cargo to the combat zone and returned to the U.S. with combat casualties.

I have never known with certainty what our route was across the Pacific. I believe that we landed in Hawaii. I remember a hatch opening near my litter — the light was blinding. A general came on board and presented me and presumably the other casualties with their Purple Hearts, the award given to all American combat casualties. At the time, I didn't really care. A few years later, I came close to throwing my Purple Heart away in disgust. Today, I am proud to have earned it. In 2003, the U.S. issued a stamp commemorating the Purple Heart. At the right is a used example.

My Starlifter eventually arrived at Travis AFB in northern California, where I stayed overnight at the base hospital before being flown the next morning to San Diego. I remember little of these last hours of my evacuation, and have no memory at all of arriving at the U.S. Naval Hospital at Balboa Park, on 11 March 1966, seven days after I was wounded, taking the International Date line into consideration. However, I recall with some horror what happened immediately after I arrived at the hospital: Corpsmen removed my cast and without giving me any pain killer proceeded to pull the dried cotton packing out of my wounds. The pain was worse than being shot.

By the end of day, I was on an orthopedic ward, in traction; way back on the *Repose*, my surgery included having a threaded steel pin inserted through my right shin as an anchor point for traction weights. I would be in traction, unable to leave my bed, for the next 111 days.

*** The records of Operation Utah's casualty figures are ambiguous. Figures of 96 dead and 278 wounded are also given in official sources.**

Recovery at Balboa Naval Hospital

I remained at Balboa for almost nine months. Antibiotics controlled my infections, and I had a skin-graft. After 111 days in traction, I graduated to a body cast, then to a full-leg cast, and finally to a weight-bearing brace. My "celebrity status" as a Vietnam veteran earned me visits from celebrities, including actor Jackie Cooper. I enjoyed visits with my family and with Susan — by now my fiancée — and began to delight in weekend liberty. In August, 1966, I got to go home on leave.

Above, a cover posted to my Grandmother, Ratie Mosher Ingraham, from Balboa Naval Hospital. As a combat casualty, I still had free-franking privileges. The absence an endorsement authorizing free postage indicates that the system was open to abuse. Such covers are scarce.

At the right, a photo of me with my Grandma Ingraham on my right and my Grandmother Herrick on my left, taken on my first leave home after Vietnam.

My discharge from Balboa Naval Hospital on 25 November 1966 came in time for my wedding on 27 December. I would become a husband, a journalist, a father, a teacher, a photographer. But always the backdrop of my life would be the 37 days that I spent in combat with the U.S. Marines in Vietnam.

In 2000, the U.S. issued the stamp at the right, showing a veteran at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. It evokes the sum total of my wartime experiences.