

The true story of a Marine rifleman's  
tour from the intense fighting in  
Vietnam to the superficial pageantry  
of Washington, DC

# KILO 3

RICHARD W. FOSTER, JR.

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The True Story of a Marine Rifleman's Tour from the Intense Fighting in Vietnam to the Superficial Pageantry of Washington, DC

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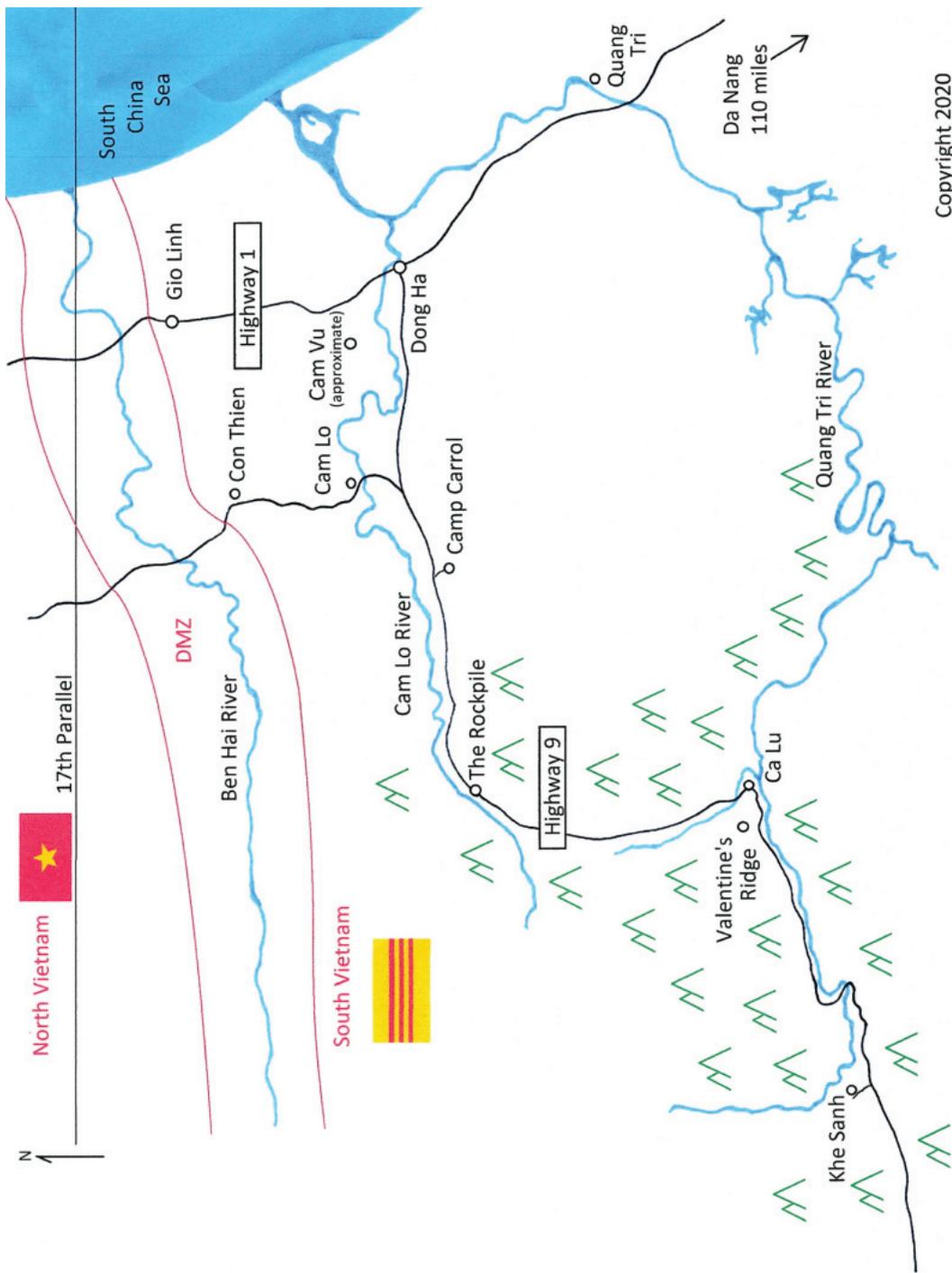
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Map—Marine operation areas



# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	i
Chapter 1: The Decision .....	1
Chapter 2: Prelude .....	8
Chapter 3: The Arrival .....	19
Chapter 4: Dong Ha .....	29
Chapter 5: Cam Lo .....	38
Chapter 6: Gio Linh.....	56
Chapter 7: Con Thien.....	71
Chapter 8: Short Interlude .....	95
Chapter 9: The Rockpile .....	101
Chapter 10: Bangkok .....	126
Chapter 11: Camp Carroll .....	134
Chapter 12: Ca Lu .....	141
Chapter 13: Rockpile II.....	173
Chapter 14: Cam Vu .....	184
Chapter 15: Khe Sanh.....	213
Chapter 16: No Home .....	219
Chapter 17: Manila.....	227
Chapter 18: Final Days .....	237
Chapter 19: Home .....	246
Chapter 20: Eighth and I .....	253
Chapter 21: Special Ceremonial Platoon .....	259
Chapter 22: The Last Day .....	296



# Introduction

**“KILO THREE BRAVO, Kilo Three. Sitrep. Over.”**

The tinny voice from the field radio punctured the silence, but nothing moved in the darkness engulfing me.

From my muddy position in the jungle, I clicked the handset twice, meaning, “All okay.”

A Marine rifleman, I was on a routine nighttime ambush patrol in Vietnam. The year was 1967, and the war was accelerating. In the year that followed, I witnessed the heaviest fighting of the war, seeing and doing things that no eighteen-year-old should ever have to see or do.

I returned a year later in mental shock and physical exhaustion, only to be sent to the premier ceremonial Marine base in Washington, DC, known as the “Post of the Corps.” Transitioning from the mud and blood of Vietnam to the pomp and pageantry of the White House and ceremonial duties all over DC, provided the experience of a lifetime: enlightening, educational, and emotional. The girls loved us, and the politicians, celebrities, and generals let their guards down as they made small talk for a few minutes before and after each ceremony. Nowhere else could such a heady experience be had by a nineteen-year-old Marine, and *surreal* doesn't do it justice.

My family saved every letter I sent home from Vietnam, most of which were honest and graphic. In 1986, I finished and copyrighted a historical novel entitled *Thirteen Months*, a fact-based depiction of events. I never published it, but I used the novel draft and the letters to refresh my memory for this memoir.

No two persons will describe the details of an event exactly the same. Each person has his or her own vantage point. For example, a Navy corpsman described the helicopter crash in which I was involved at Khe Sanh as more severe than I remember. He was aboard that day, and his vantage point was different from mine since he was closer to the front of the craft than I was. This memoir describes the events from my vantage point alone.

I feel obligated to tell this story while I still can. Too soon the veterans of Vietnam will pass on from this life like so many veterans of so many wars have done before us. As other wars erupt around the world, it's never too late to understand the misery and brutality of fighting on the ground or the detached glitter of Washington that continues unabated.

Most of the Marines I served with, both in Vietnam and Washington, had outstanding character and performed like professionals. I am honored to have shared an important part of my life with them. This is my memory of our story.



*Chapter 1*

# The Decision



**“WHAT DO YOU** want to do with your life?” the principal of Henrietta High School asked me. He frowned in disgust as he leaned back in his chair.

I was in trouble again. I seemed to always be in trouble. This time around, I had backed my car up to the front doors of the school and peeled out on the main walkway, leaving two long streaks of black rubber. It had seemed like a good idea the night before.

“I have no idea what I want to do with my life,” I answered politely.

He stared at the ceiling and sighed. “It’s time for you to figure it out. It’s obvious you’re not happy here.” The principal was a middle-aged man who was authoritative without being rude, but he was clearly appalled by my behavior.

I shrugged my shoulders and looked at him. Being summoned to his office every week was becoming the norm.

He shifted his eyes to meet mine. “You have manners but no ambition. You make bad grades, got kicked off the football team for drinking beer, and you’re always doing stupid stuff like last night. It’s time you figure out what you intend to do with your life. It’s obvious that your future does not include academics.”

“No, sir,” I agreed.

“Well, you need to do some serious thinking over the Christmas break.” The fall semester of 1965 was almost over. “Now get out there

and clean up the sidewalk!”

I left quickly before he could decide to pronounce a stiffer sentence.



Henrietta, Texas, is situated near the Texas-Oklahoma border in the gently rolling farm and ranch lands characteristic of North Texas. With a population of approximately 2,800 at the time, it was a typical small town in Texas in the 1960s. The nineteenth-century courthouse building was situated in the center of a square, with small, locally owned businesses lining the four streets around each side. Highway 287 ran through town a block from the courthouse and connected Henrietta with Wichita Falls to the west and Fort Worth to the southeast. Houses were built on both sides of the streets that branched off from the courthouse square, with expensive homes built next to modest frame houses seemingly without logic or planning. Trees and green lawns were well kept, and noisy kids and bicycles were abundant. The quiet streets were often disrupted by teenagers with loud cars and less-than-careful driving.

Near the rodeo grounds on the north side of town was a small hill. After traversing that hill, a sparsely traveled highway ran to ranching and farming communities that stretched one after the other every few miles all the way to Oklahoma. The expanse of road on the hill was covered with black rubber marks from high school kids with powerful cars.

The peacefulness of Christmas season was about to be shattered by my 1962 Corvette, which was white with a bright-red interior and a convertible hardtop. I was allowing it to slowly roll backward toward the bottom of the hill. Just before it hit bottom, I floored the accelerator and popped the clutch.

As both tires began to spin forward, the backward movement started to slow, and I quickly shifted into second gear without releasing the pedal on the floor. The rear wheels rotated at such speed that the speedometer read just over seventy miles per hour even though the car was still moving backward. Within a few seconds, the backward motion stopped and the car began to crawl forward in a cloud of blue smoke.

It stopped squealing near the top of the hill, and I stopped, shouting a war whoop to my friends grinning nearby. “Longest damn piece of rubber ever laid in this county, I’ll bet!” I yelled with a grin.

I won a round of applause from the kids as they ran to their cars to clear out before some neighbor called the cops, and we headed into town to the local drive-in to drink Cokes and laugh about what I had just done.

The car hadn’t been a gift from rich parents. At the age of seventeen, I had talked a local banker into loaning me the money to buy it—without an engine but with my dad’s signature—and had paid the loan by working at a car dealership, where I did lots of cleaning and a little mechanical work. I built and installed the engine myself inside the maintenance bay of the dealership at night.

My dad was a country veterinarian and barely made a living. He charged precious little to the farmers and ranchers, who themselves had difficulty making enough to survive and raise a family. I went on so many country calls with him that by the age of fourteen, I could do a caesarean on a cow while he watched, ready to help if I got into trouble. I always let him do the first cut, since that gave me the willies, but once inside I was fine. He was a great vet but a poor businessman. Most importantly, though, he and my mom loved me dearly and overlooked my constant teenage rebellion. I could roam mostly free—and did just that.

I stood six feet one and owned a slender frame, with short, neat blond hair and blue eyes, which, if you looked, were always filled with mischief. I'm not sure where the mischief and rebel streak came from, but I sure had it. I dressed in shrink-to-fit Levi's, white socks, slip-on black loafers, and sport shirts with button-down collars and rolled-up short sleeves.

I drank with my rowdy friends all the beer I could get my hands on and drove drunk and fast. I was the kind of guy that several girls wanted to date, but most dads were smart enough to not let them get close to me. If irresponsibility had a mascot, I was it.

I had a high school friend, a good friend, named Butch Hamilton. He was the son of a rancher who had died in a Jeep accident when Butch was young. Raised by a single mom whom he loved dearly, Butch was always careful to not disappoint her. He was a little shorter than I was and sported dark hair and an innocent, boyish face and grin. He was just as wild and crazy, but somehow managed to portray innocence to adults. He had girlfriends all the time, and we would laugh at how he could fool their dads. The kids knew, of course, but they weren't talking.

During a double date one night, I watched Pam Rider, his date, eagerly kiss and chew on his ears in the back seat, and all I could think was *wow!* She was our age—slender, blond hair, green eyes—and had a sultry air about her that I found tantalizing. I had never been around such a girl. Little did I know that she would support me with letters while in Vietnam and with intimate company when I returned.

I dated a few girls when I was seventeen, but my favorite was Novella Straley. She was fifteen at the time, freckled-faced, and always had a ready laugh. She was such a nice person—and so innocent—that I never took advantage of her. Her dad, however, always hated to hear

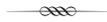
me at the door, so we snuck around often. Sharon, her older sister, dated Butch and could usually get Novella out of the house with them and pick me up somewhere in town for a double date. Sharon was, like her sister, a quality person and a pretty girl, but she was Butch's girlfriend. We were friends, but we left it there. Novella and I would kiss and cuddle, and I could and did confide in her. I had a lot on my mind. When alone, we would talk of life and the future. I always had deep thoughts and questions.

“What do you want to do?” she asked one night.

I smiled to myself, remembering that our high school principal had recently asked me the same question. “I’m not sure, but there’s more in this world than going to high school, and I want it. I want to taste it and feel it.”

She didn’t really understand, but she listened. I could always count on her for that. She finally squeezed my hand and gave me a cute smile that only she was capable of giving. “You’ll figure it out.”

I got home that night and found my dad asleep on the couch. The ten o’clock news was on and was showing the fighting in Vietnam. I saw our military in action, both on the ground and in the air, and knew at that moment that I was being called. It was a sudden knowing—a belief that something bigger than me was taking place and that I had a part to play.



I saw Novella a couple of nights later in her front yard. I stopped the Corvette, and she ducked inside to sit beside me.

“I think I know what I want to do,” I said.

“And what is that?”

“Join the Marines and go to Vietnam.”

She fell silent for a moment, lost in thought. “Why?”

“Well,” I responded calmly, “look what we’re doing here. Getting drunk, driving fast, throwing dead skunks in the school gym during a game, and studying crap in school that’s dry and useless.”

She laughed at the skunk prank, which had cleared out the gym. Not a single adult had been amused. She took her time with her reply. “And if you get killed?”

“I can’t think that way,” I said in a firm voice. “There’s a need, and I feel like I can help.”

“It sure will be quiet with you out of town.”

I laughed, and her dad turned on the porch light.

“Oops. Gotta go.” She was out of my Corvette in a flash.

I drove to Butch’s house and went over the same conversation with him.

He nodded after I finished. “I understand. In fact, I think about the same thing. If you go, I may go too.”

I was stunned. For the first time in my life, I realized, I had made a decision that could affect someone else. I could barely stammer a response. “Really?”

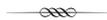
“Really,” he said.

We sat in silence.

I repeated Novella’s question. “And what if we get killed?”

“Can’t. Too many girls out there need us.”

We giggled at the absurdity of the thought.



I talked with Mom and Dad a couple of nights later over dinner. The kitchen smelled like chicken-fried steak, and the conversation was light.

“I think I wanna join the Marines,” I said out of the blue.

Mom dropped her fork.

Dad looked at me. Really looked at me. “Why?”

“I hate school. They teach crap that doesn’t interest me. I’m doing nothing here but making bad grades and getting into trouble. I want more. I don’t know exactly what, but more. I want to see the world. I want to do something that matters. And I want to help our country . . .” I trailed off, not knowing what else to say. I sat still, letting it all sink in.

“Why now?” Mom asked in a trembling voice.

“I know why,” Dad said. “He knows we can’t afford college. He’s only a year and a half from graduating, but he’s restless. I don’t like it, but I understand.” He took Mom’s hand. “Let’s give it a week or two and see how he feels then.”

Two weeks later, a Marine recruiter was at our house, nodding in approval at me and reassuring Mom and Dad that I would make them proud. He did not, I noticed, reassure them that I would come back alive. But that seemed like a minor point at the time. I was on my way.