

Benton Szejak

Advanced Composition

Dr. Maxwell

December 2, 2016

The Patriarch

People join the Army, just like they join the Navy, just like they join the Air Force. But there is something different about the Marine Corps. When William McLaughlin enlisted and graduated from boot camp in 1957, he didn't just join: he became a Marine. He became a rigidly disciplined and highly skilled leader motivated to serve his country—or anyone for that matter—in anyway he could. When I was briefed of about The Citadel Veterans History Project at the beginning of the semester, I immediately thought of Mr. McLaughlin and called him to request his participation.

Before our interview, I didn't know that he was part of one of the first military operations in the Vietnam, a place he would return to fight for his country two more times. As a kid, I naively didn't think to ask about his life or what it took to earn all the medals in his shadow box. He and I are not related by blood, but he and his wife cultivated such a long and loyal friendship with my grandparents that the two families grew together. That is why, for as long as I can remember, he has simply been my tough Uncle Bill. Even though I didn't know his story, I respected this man before I conducted the interview and learned the details of his military service.

Uncle Bill is incredibly selfless. That term is thrown around too much, but my Uncle Bill epitomizes it. Right now, for example, he spends much of his days caring for his wife of more

than 50 years as she battles Parkinson's and Dementia. Before that he was caring for his late son suffering from kidney failure. He raised two sons, and when his three young grandchildren needed a home, he stood tall and raised them all to be successful. And when my grandfather was dying of cancer, he helped our family as my father tried to keep our family's business together. All of that alone made me respect him.

But Mr. McLaughlin is more than tough. He is a no-nonsense, combat-operating soldier. In Vietnam he participated in countless battles and witnessed unspeakable devastation. In our interview, there is one instance when he recalls bodies piled up everywhere as field doctors had only their own bodies to use to keep the dust out of the men they were operating on. He went on to describe a time that he and his men were pinned down.

It was on his second tour of duty in Vietnam, near the central Highlands and Demilitarized Zone. After being dropped off by helicopters, all of the officers in the unit had been killed or out of action. The chaos was growing, and soldiers without leadership were beginning to lose track of their mission and their training. When Mr. McLaughlin radioed back to his superiors and informed them of the situation, they promised to get him an officer as soon as possible, but put him in command until then. Another helicopter would not arrive for 36 hours. As the enemy encircled him, he ordered his men to call in artillery strikes wherever he could see the Viet Cong advancing on them. When that helicopter finally arrived, the fresh officer was shot between the eyes before he could get off the exit ramp. Mr. McLaughlin never even found out the young man's name.

Eventually, another officer arrived and the men were able to escape the clutches of the ensuing foe. It's the kind of story that becomes that climatic central scene in Hollywood movies,

but Mr. McLaughlin does not glorify the scene; he talks about it as if it were only the beginning of that tour and of the many similar days followed.

Mr. McLaughlin might not have made it out of that firefight if it weren't for his training. He has not only achieved the highest enlisted rank possible but also graduated from a number of speciality schools. He has the rare distinction of being a Marine who has graduated from Ranger School. As he discusses in the interview, he was selected along with only five other Marines to attend the Army Infantry's famous school for the most elite soldiers.

Between tours of duty, he went to as many schools as he could, including Drill Sergeant School. In his big, deep voice he told me about how he didn't want to be a Drill sergeant and acted like a loose cannon at the interview so that he wouldn't be selected. Little did he know at the time that he was going to be selected either way and that he would eventually be most proud of the time he spent making new Marines in the image of himself down in Parris Island.

As tough as Vietnam was each time he served there, Mr. McLaughlin maintains that the worst post he had in the Marine corps was as a recruiter in Maryland. It was the 1969 and the spirit of the sixties was in full swing. As he puts it, "they did just not want to join the military, they didn't want to go to Vietnam." One recruiting trip was much worse than the others. While speaking with the Principal at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, students flipped over his government-issued sedan and set it ablaze. "They just torched the whole damn thing," he explained. Hearing him tell the story makes you realize how difficult it was for him to understand why anyone would do such a thing. At this point, he had already served his country three times abroad and his reason for being at that high school was merely because that's what his country asked of him.

After many more years of service Mr. McLaughlin retired from the Marine Corps in 1984 and went to work in a bike shop. But after being frustrated with the lack of discipline in the environment, he returned to aid the military as a civilian. He led a team of security personnel for the Navy's most elite special forces unit, SEAL Team Six. The group is so secretive that his official title they assigned him was "shipfitter." It would be his last job before retirement; the old marine wished only that he could have done it longer. He loved the men, the mission, and the chance to continually serve. Given the opportunity, he would have joined them on any of their missions and says he often tried to sneak on the plane with them.

If I live to be half the man that Mr. McLaughlin is, it would be more than enough. He has never given up on himself, his family, or his training. At the age of 78, he is still in great shape from long distance biking and is as solid as a rock. The Ranger qualified Marine Corps Sergeant major is both a trained killer and a servant to all.