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From Lowcountry Beaches to Hooches and Bunkers: Timothy Frizelle's Story as a Draftee in Khe Sanh

Timothy Maginn Frizelle was born December 14, 1949, in Charleston, South Carolina, to Louis Edward and Frances Maginn. He is the third of seven children; he has five sisters and one younger brother. Frizelle grew up in a large Irish-Catholic family. Along with his siblings, he was educated in the Catholic schools of the Lowcountry, graduating from Bishop England High School. Frizelle grew up on the water of Coburg Creek in West Ashley and on the beach of Sullivans Island. As a child, he enjoyed crabbing and fishing with his father and his siblings. After graduating from high school, Frizelle attended Palmer Business College, located in Downtown Charleston, in 1969.

On December 1, 1969, just 13 days before Tim Frizelle turned 20 years old, he was watching the television with family and friends. The entire country was watching that night. President Nixon had activated the lottery draft for the war in Vietnam. Men were waiting to hear if their number would be called. Frizelle recalls his being number 14 and a friend's being in the 300s. Of the two, only 14 was called.

Shortly after that night, Frizelle found himself in the draft office. With the pecking and buzzing of typewriters filling the office, a man in military dress asked Frizelle, "Army or Marines?" to which he replied, "Army." As a teenager, he worked with a neighbor's tile company that would make frequent trips to Parris Island, South Carolina, where the Marine Corps had basic training; Frizelle did not want to be at Parris Island. As all the draftees shuffled

from chair to chair with their paperwork, Frizelle noticed the men on either side of him crying. He asked both of them if they were alright, thinking something may be seriously wrong. Both men said the officer placed them in the Marines. Frizelle said “You know you had a choice: He asked you ‘Army or Marines?’” When Frizelle found out that both men had selected Army and were placed in the Marine Corps anyway, he felt lucky that he happened to be stamped “Army” since they actually weren’t given a choice after all.



Countless sandbags await use for hooches and bunkers

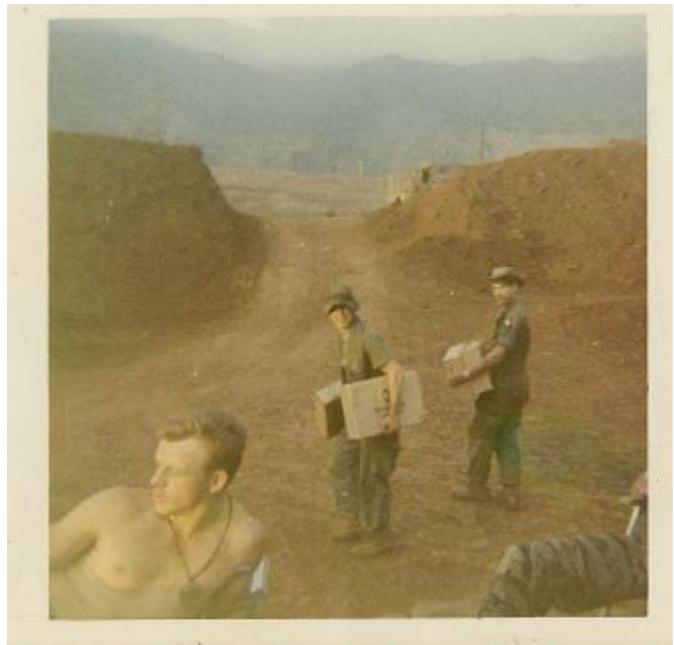
Frizelle left for basic training and Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) at Fort Jackson only days after turning 20 years old. Along with learning his task as a cook, Frizelle was certified with the M-14/M-16 and the 45 automatic. All the men were trained on the ranges. When he reached Vietnam, Frizelle was placed with D Troop, 17th Calvary, 101st Airborne Division.

Being a member of the 101st Airborne, Frizelle was put through more training than the average soldier. Frizelle recalls P-Training. “We spent two weeks at Camp Evans learning how to jump off towers, repel off helicopters, ships... we practiced ambushes. It was awful. It was worse than Basic. It was a tough two weeks. Thankfully, I never had to repel when I got to Vietnam.”

Upon landing in Vietnam, the smell was the thing that stuck out to Frizelle. It was so rancid that he had trouble eating for his first week. As you might expect, with the smell

surrounding him, Frizelle’s living conditions were abysmal. The hooches where he slept were bunkers in the ground made from plywood, covered with tin tops. With no proper walls, sand bags lined the building with dirt floors, which housed roughly 10 cots per hooch.

When Frizelle reported for duty at Camp Eagle, he reported to a man whom he described “Big! 6’8” with a dent in his head.” But what Frizelle also remembers was that no one else was at camp yet; it was empty. So, to pass the first few days, he got acquainted with the camp and his equipment before his company arrived. Frizelle said they produced the best chow at the base camp within the division. People got to know him and liked him because he would get up to make extra peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for guys who were on bunker guard at night. He wanted the people who were on guard fed and awake. While cooking at Camp Eagle, Frizelle also drove a supply truck from different encampments he and other soldiers dubbed “The Khe Sanh Express.” Frizelle was reduced to warming up C-rations at Khe Sanh when his mess tent was blown up by the People’s Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) in the first week of his company’s arrival in Khe Sanh. He had to feed his men.



Frizelle carries boxes of C-rations

So he used a barrel and an Army grade metal stack—a tall metal tube that stuck out of the barrel—to warm the meat and then put it back in the C-ration box for the troops to grab and be on their way. Once he was stationed in Khe Sanh, Frizelle’s days consisted not only of warming up C-rations, but also jumping into bunkers and constantly filling sandbags.

Frizelle was in Khe Sanh for roughly three months. Towards the end of his time there, on March 22, 1971, he was sitting in a bunker when artillery delivered a direct hit. Frizelle was knocked out for some time before he woke up and someone told him he was bleeding. He was sitting on a marmite can— a metal storage cooler. Just as he had gotten up and moved to the other side of the bunker, the cooler he was sitting on took the blast of the artillery shell. He took shrapnel to the face around his left eye and his neck. For this, Frizelle was awarded a Purple Heart.

On March 23, 1971, Frizelle was sleeping in a bunker with a medic and one other



Frizelle kneels with his M14

infantry man. After the barrage of mortars had stopped, they heard footsteps and men speaking Vietnamese on top of their bunkers. The one infantry man ran out to go to another bunker; he was shot in the collar bone and fell in the doorway of Frizelle’s bunker. The medic patched the infantry man up the best he could and ordered Frizelle to stay with him. Frizelle recalled the wounded man’s uniform: “He was a young guy, a three striper, and I kept calling him

Buck Sergeant since I didn’t know his name.” All Frizelle had to defend himself and the wounded sergeant was his .45 caliber and adrenaline. As the battle waged on around them, a man crawled in through their entryway. Frizelle was ready to shoot. “I was going to shoot him. I almost did, and, man, at the last second I heard the guy crawling and speaking Spanish! He crawled out as fast as he crawled in.”

“It was just like you see in the movies,” Frizelle said, “this head popped out of nowhere in my entry way—‘Get him to the chopper!’” The young Buck Sergeant was to be medevacked out of Khe Sanh; the only issue was that the chopper was half a football field away and live rounds were going off everywhere. But Frizelle got him safely on the chopper.

He couldn’t go back to his bunker; he had to help. During this sapper attack, a cook briefly became a mortarman. A mortarman yelled for Frizelle to drop a mortar into the firing tube, and he yelled back that he didn’t know how. After one demonstration, he was a mortarman for a night. “The recoil of a mortar round is loud and powerful. If that thing hits ya, it’s going to do some damage,” he explained. After the battle was over, all the men had to clean debris and bodies from their bunkers so that they could sleep and function.

When asked about his heroic actions of that night, Frizelle said quickly with a lowered his voice, “You help people. That’s what you do. We were both scared, [but] he was hurt and needed someone.” Frizelle’s humble response is a true testament to his character since he was wounded himself the day before.

Fellow company mate Michael Fitzmaurice defended the Khe Sanh encampment from a large sapper attack (PAVN Special Forces soldiers) in the dark and the early hours of the morning. For his actions on March 23, 1971, Fitzmaurice was awarded The Medal of Honor.

Only days after this eventful night, Frizelle drove the “Khe Sanh Express” back to Camp Eagle in Phu Bai with three other men. Here he would spend roughly three months waiting to leave the country. “I didn’t have to cook anymore. It was pretty boring actually. You just hung



*Men gather around Frizelle’s truck,
the “Khe Sanh Express”*

around and waited to go home.” From Camp Eagle, men from his company were sent on a mission in the A Sầu Valley. Here D company was nearly leveled. “We could hear it over the radio. My company had a good bit of men go on this mission. We had 250 men in basic and most were wounded or died in the A Sầu Valley. [The Northern Vietnamese] grounded our company. Hearing it over the radio was... it was bad.”

When Frizelle could finally leave the country he landed on US soil at Ft. Lewis in Seattle, Washington. When he landed, he was given a steak dinner, a new uniform, new ribbons, and a single plane ticket that would fly him everywhere and anywhere he wanted in the US. With this ticket, you could fly multiple times to multiple places, but the moment you landed at home, the ticket was void. “I received \$99 regular pay and \$60 combat pay per month, I had a little bit of money because no one could spend money in Khe Sanh. All the guys were taking a trip to Las Vegas and New Orleans. They said they were going to rough it all the way down there. I skipped out on that trip.”

Before Frizelle booked his flight he signed some paperwork when he got to Vietnam. He was part of a program that if you committed to service for 14 months in Vietnam, you would be out of the service when you got home. So, when Frizelle landed at Ft. Lewis, he had done his time and seen his fair share of war. “I was out of the Army that night. I went home a civilian,” he said. Frizelle flew to Texas then to New Mexico to stay with his eldest sister, Mamie, and her husband, Rick Stoughton. Here, Mr. Rick was stationed with the Air Force before his deployment to Vietnam.

Finally being home was an adjustment. “No one liked the war, so it wasn’t something that you could or wanted to talk about. You didn’t fit in because you had seen combat and you had to grow up faster... you just matured faster with what you saw.” Having veterans in the family eased the transition. Frizelle’s father was a US Navy WWII veteran, and many of his uncles were also veterans. Knowing that they were there when he needed them helped him cope.

“You appreciate running water. I was happy to not fear for my life when I got home. Khe Sanh was crude living. It was Army living.” When Frizelle was finally home, he worked different jobs until he found a career with the US Postal Service, where he worked for 35 years. With a giddy chuckle and large grin, Frizelle said, “I’m on my fourth year of retirement.” He is married to his wonderful wife, Lisa, with whom he has two children, Allison and Sean. He takes full advantage of retirement by passing the tradition of crabbing on to his grandsons: Will (7), Patrick Murphy (2), and Campbell (18 months).

Even the humblest of people have a story. As a Veteran, Timothy Frizelle has a compelling story that he rarely tells. Frizelle’s selfless service demonstrates what’s at stake when servicemen and women answer the call. We are grateful that he is now how and with his family, and proud of his service to our country. Frizelle never thought that he would find himself in the

middle of a war zone, see death, be wounded, and put himself in harm's way to help a wounded comrade—but he did.