

Edward F. Murphy
2/3/3 Reunion Speech
San Antonio, TX
April 28-30, 2017

Officers of 2/3 Veterans Association, veterans, ladies and gentlemen

Arizona artist Austin Deuel, a Marine Corps combat artist who witnessed the Hill Fights, sculpted this statue. It captures the moment when M/3/3 radioman Don Hossack frantically searched for help as he cradled his dying friend, James Randall. But there was no help for Randall. And there was no help for Hossack. Alone and badly wounded, Hossack made his way back down Hill 881S then spent three months in the hospital before returning to the field.

To me, this statute symbolizes the frustration and futility that must have been felt by the men of 2/3 and 3/3 as they faced a determined foe dug deep into the hills northwest of the Khe Sanh Combat Base.

I say frustration because this was a fight the Marine Corps did not want to have. They did not want to be at Khe Sanh. General Lewis Walt, commander of the Marines in South Vietnam, did not want to hold one of that country's most isolated and difficult to reach bases. But General William Westmoreland, the overall commander, wanted them there. Westmoreland viewed Khe Sanh as the primary base for his long-hoped for invasion of Laos that would cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

I say frustration, too, because the Marines attacking the enemy were using a newly issued rifle, the M-16. Right from the start the young Marines complained about the new weapon jamming after just a few rounds. Rather than listening to their complaints, the NCOs and officers simply told the troops to do a better job of cleaning their pieces. Unfortunately, cleanliness was not the issue. The core problem was in the manufacturing of the powder in the cartridges, but it would take a major congressional investigation and many more lives before the problem was corrected.

I say futility, because the veterans in 2/3 and 3/3 knew that after taking the hills they would leave and let the enemy reoccupy the ground their buddies had died for. But that was the way of the Vietnam War. Occupied terrain didn't matter, only body counts did.

But despite these feelings, the Marines followed orders. Why? Because that's what Marines do. And they've been doing it for over 200 years, from Tripoli to Fallujah. They follow orders. They complete their mission. They take their objectives. They fight. It doesn't matter to them the why's and wherefores of a battle. They do what they were trained to do – fight.

But still, many wonder if it was all worth it. Especially the Hill Fights. Was it the most decisive battle during the Vietnam War? No. Was it the most costly? No. 168 Marines and Navy personnel were killed during the Hill Fights. The Siege of Khe Sanh the following year cost over 275 Americans their lives.

And then despite those losses, in June 1968 the Khe Sanh Combat Base and its hilltop outposts were abandoned. Westmoreland was gone and the mission had changed. Again, Marines followed their orders and tore down the base.

But I don't think that the legacy of 2/3 and 3/3 is about who held what ground in the end. When I think of the men who fought at The Hill Fights, I cannot help but think of what President Theodore Roosevelt said in 1910 speech. This is what TR told his audience: "It is not the critic who counts. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Those words ring just as true today as they did one hundred and seven years ago.

The true legacy of the men who fought and served at The Hill Fights is measured in their devotion to duty. Their legacy is the stubborn determination and heroism of the young Marines and sailors who defeated the enemy in and around Khe Sanh. They were the ones actually in the arena. They were the ones covered in dust, sweat, and blood. That's what will be remembered for generations to come. That's what will continue to bring honor to the veterans of The Hill Fights. Let that be how you are remembered. Let that legacy contribute to the outstanding reputation of the U.S. Marine Corps for completing its missions and doing its duty. Semper Fi!!!! Thank you and welcome home!