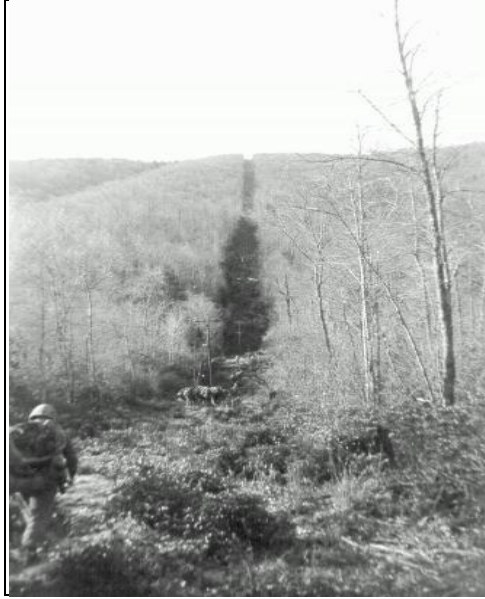


Twas said, “They had the *climb* of their Lives.”

Written by Ed Shea for Post Solant Amity

The sixteen hour ascent in the sub-freezing



weather of Smokey Mountains, February 1960.

Someone at 2ndMarDiv concluded that “Cold Weather and Mountain Familiarization Practices” would make for an interesting thing for east coast Marines to learn. Thus, Echo Company, 2nd Battalion of the 6th Marines was chosen to move, with sea bags by six-by, to the Ashville region of North Carolina in January 1960. The objective being the preparation of all hands for a march to the highest mountain peak on the east coast: Mt. Mitchell at 6,684 feet.

The troops, including Ron Smith...still recuperating from broken ribs and worse sustained in a car accident only a month before, Frank Schmidt and myself slept in four-man kerosene heated...and occasionally destroyed by fire...tents. With tidiness being next to Marine Corps Godliness, the small hill adjacent to “tent-city” was cleared of brush. When next it rained, the company street became *Mudville*. Supply had to provide pallets as a walkway atop the mud.

Daily, the troops with their 782 gear, weapons, cold weather parkers, sleeping bags and wearing heavy rubber boots humped uphill and along a two lane, rural public roadway and then far more quickly, because it

was downhill, returned to the camp.

The nights were bitter. Sometimes as low as sixteen degrees. But, ensuring that the rocks and trees remained safe, sentries were posted from dusk till dawn. Taking a shower was a gamble. If the heating unit broke down while you were still lathered up, you rinsed with REALLY COLD water or just wiped the soap off and returned to your tent.

In the field, every meal was hot “soapy-soak-then-rinse” water field mess or C-rations. When not hiking, fire and maneuver or ambush exercises were practiced endlessly.

There was but one weekend of liberty where most everyone got a chance to fight the Ashville lumberjacks, in THEIR local watering holes, and the never to be forgotten ride over hill and dale in the backend of a vomit filled six-by.

But, there were lighter moments. For example, a military funeral with a mock seven gun salute for the utility cover of one Private Nick Conda from Connecticut, who owned not one single garment bearing his name...despite regulations to the contrary...but, instead, hand-me-downs and throw-a-ways from anyone he might have served with in the 6th or 8th Marines. The platoon sergeant, weary of telling him to replace the utility cover, formed the platoon, had him remove and bury it, accompanied by appropriate commands and the clicking of empty weapons pointed skyward.

At the near end of this month-long frolic in the woods came the final exam; simply, hike and climb to the peak of Mount Mitchell. The day started normal enough: fallout, line up and route march up the same road traversed every day since we’d arrived. Around 0800, the company reached an area situated at the base of the mountain, in a state park facility. Then, everything began to go very, very badly.

The scheduled path was to zigzag its way up the mountain face and the next day, as we hiked *down* the trail, took little more than an hour and a half. But unable to find the trail, the Captain chose for us to proceed up a firebreak located on the other side of a stream adjacent to where the company had been standing-by. His decision would result in a dangerous, mind-numbing sixteen hour climb, a number of bone-breaking injuries and the Captain losing his command.

At 0930, we crossed over the stream via a fallen tree trunk, except for myself who managed to stupidly *step* into it. I stopped just long enough to wring out my socks, re-don the rubber boots and joined the platoon.

The first impression had by all was that we would walk across the plateau on the mountain side of the stream, then up a slope of perhaps 50 degrees to a hill crest and be finished. But, with each crest we found another plateau and slope. Again and again we would hear, "Your almost there. Just a little farther." But they had LIED! No one had any idea of where we were or how far we had yet to go.

Sometime after dark the temperature tumbled to well below freezing. Still again and again we heard, "Your almost there. Just a little farther, Marine." By mid-night we were breaking footholds in the ice face of the slope with our rifle butts and continued to climb.

An office poge broke his forearm and reports of still more injuries started filtering through the ranks. At 0145 of the following morning, after nearly 16 hours, we came upon what was our last bit of flatland, a road frozen over with ice. As we climbed single file off the slope onto the road, a light colonel appeared and congratulated us on our ascent. A moment later, I paused and asked my squad leader, a Sgt. Strong, for permission to put my parker on. Before Strong could answer, the Colonel approached and in a comforting, supportive tone quietly repeated the expression already heard for hours and a SERIOUS source of agitation for all, "Your almost there. Just a little farther, Marine."

I lost it. Ripping my BAR from my shoulder, I grabbed it by the muzzle and flung it across the ice covered roadbed. Then, I jumped up and threw my legs up at an angle of 90 degrees from my torso and flopped on my ass, shouting that I was not moving "another f***ing inch." About me, faces cringed. Sergeant Strong nearly turned white. The Colonel? Well, he looked down at me, walked across the ice, retrieved the BAR, walked back to me and said, "Marine, the camp for the night is about 200 yards from here" as he returned the rifle to my, by this time standing, ass.

No one ever said another word about that incident. But it remains indelibly etched in my mind as one of only two reasonable personnel management decisions of the kind I saw a leader make in the Corps. Realizing the 16 hour jaunt had maxed-out my willingness to be further manipulated by platitudes or the powers of "chain-of-command," the Colonel saw a better way and did the right thing. He made a compromise with the absurd practices we were all too familiar with.

The next day, after nearly reaching base camp of "Tent City," I was diagnosed with 2nd degree trench foot by the corpsman but otherwise, like Frank Schmidt and Ron Smith, I survived the adventure.

A life shaping experience, the climb tested our mettle more than anything endured on Parris Island and I'm ever-glad that I made it.