

SHOT THROUGH THE HEAD:

STAYING ON BOARD

By Colonel John C. McKay '68, USMC (Ret.)

I write to inspire, not to awe, nor to elicit sympathy or pity. Those who fully embrace life, those who wholeheartedly commit to overcoming and prevailing, through the harsh travails, the vicissitudes and the verisimilitudes of life, are a minority. Certainly among this group are those who suffer and overcome grievous bodily injury and shine thereafter.

This applies in any walk of life, but especially in the military. Unlike Admiral Lord Nelson, my name will never grace the annals of history. As Nelson has inspired me over many years, I desire to inspire those who knowingly and enthusiastically elect to throw their lot in with those who choose to sail in harm's way.

Staying alive is paramount though problematic. From 15 meters out, the AK-47 round enters my skull just above the left eye, scarring the left frontal lobe of the brain, plowing through frontal sinuses, skimming the back of the right eye, exiting just below, a tad to the front, of the right ear. It blows out the jawbone.

A bandaged hole in the skull, blind, what's left of the jaw wired, tracheotomy incised, I am medevaced from Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam, through the 249th Army Field Hospital, Fort Drake, Japan, onto CONUS. It will take two-plus years to put me back together.

Remaining on active duty, much less as an infantry officer, is inconceivable. The extent and severity of the wound dictate mandatory medical retirement. I am assigned to Headquarters and Casual Company, Marine Barracks, USNS Treasure Island, San Francisco, CA, while skull restoration is carried out. On 2 December 1969, a physical evaluation board convenes at Oak Knoll Naval Hospital to recommend level of disability and corresponding monetary compensation.

In a sense, the board is to determine my future. Three officers make up the board. The senior member is Captain Charles S. Hascall Jr., Medical Corps, USN. The other two are Marine Barracks officers, Captain Mike Malone '65, USMC, and Captain Charles E. Curtis, USMC. My counsel, Captain Victor T. Balaker, USMCR, also a Barracks Marine, is a combat-tested infantry officer like me, not an attorney.

The judicial protocols of a physical evaluation board are less stringent than those of a court martial. For example, I have the right to challenge any member of the board for cause.

I am told it's never been done. Vic is, as am I, pugnacious. He's very smart. He approaches the hearing with the intent of querying each member for their impartiality, their willingness to keep an open mind. The senior member is successfully challenged off the board, for prejudice. His replacement is



Captain John C. McKay, USMC, at USNS Treasure Island, San Francisco, CA, upon return to full duty in March 1972.

OFFICIAL USMC PHOTOGRAPH

Captain W. M. Weber, MC, USN. He, too, is smart, of good humor, and open-minded. Vic is firm that I desist from frequently wiping the left eye prosthesis.

The bullet took out the left lacrimal duct. I tear up often.

My testimony, as that of called witnesses, is crucial. Lieutenant Colonel Euclid Paris, USMC, is the executive officer, Marine Barracks, Treasure Island. He is an infantry veteran of the Korean War. He has one eye. As a major, he lost an eye in a handball match. He testifies on my behalf.

My mother is the senior nurse at Pan American World Airways at San Francisco, CA, airport. She introduces me to one of the airline's consulting ophthalmologists, a former Luftwaffe flight surgeon. In conjunction with a former RAF flight surgeon, he wrote an article for an aviation medical journal in the late 1960s on two Luftwaffe and three RAF fighter pilots who each lost an eye during aerial combat but were returned to active flight status.

After return to fighter pilot status, each pilot achieved ace status, i.e., shot down five or more enemy aircraft. I am not a fighter pilot, but have been told by those who are, that given World War II aircraft technology, it's almost inconceivable how a one-eyed pilot could successfully calculate a deflection shoot down. The two authors delve into being able, or learning to, read shadows with one eye, compensating for the loss of stereoscopic vision. That, indeed, is my own experience when calling artillery fire or directing close air support. The article is entered as evidence on my behalf.

I would be remiss in not recognizing Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson during testimony. Admiral Nelson lost his right eye during the capture of Corsica, in 1794. His right arm was amputated at the battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (1797). He went on to win significant victories at Battle of the Nile (1798), Copenhagen (1801), the year he was promoted to rear admiral before a transcendent victory at Trafalgar (1805).

Admiral Nelson was mortally wounded aboard flagship HMS Victory during the battle. He was posthumously promoted to full admiral.

The PE board's deliberations are lengthy. The vote is two to three for retention on active duty as an infantry officer. Disappointing but not a showstopper. The severity of the wound, an unprecedented majority vote for retention on full duty, require further deliberations, up to the Secretary of Navy.

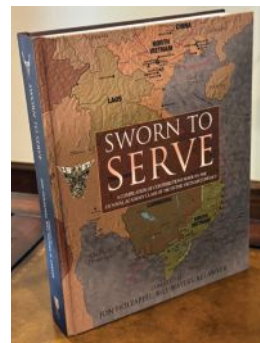
In March 1972, I receive notification from HQMC that I am retained on full duty as an infantry officer of Marines. PCS orders are forthcoming in June 1972.

I remain indebted to Vic Balakar, my staunch counsel during a period of uncertainty in my young life. The two sequential COs of Marine Barracks, USNS Treasure Island, Colonel Terry Lynch, USMC, and Colonel Thomas Mulvihill, USMC, and their executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Euclid P. Paris, were inspiring advocates for my return to full duty as a Marine Corps infantry officer. As with challenging the initial senior member off the board, my retention on full duty as an infantry officer was unprecedented. 📌

Col McKay enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1962 at age 17. As a PFC, he was among the Marine forces designated to invade Cuba during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. He was appointed from the ranks to the U. S. Naval Academy in 1964. Twice wounded during the Vietnam War, he lost his left eye. He served with distinction until retirement in 1998.

CLASS OF '67 DOCUMENTS VIETNAM EXPERIENCES IN NEW BOOK

After two years of gathering input from our fellow Class of 1967 graduates, we meticulously compiled their recollections from the Vietnam War into the new book, *Sworn to Serve*. When the three of us, Captain Al Lawver '67, USN (Ret.), Captain Bill Waters '67, USN (Ret.), and Commander Jon Holzapfel '67, USN (Ret.), recognized the participation of members of our class during the Vietnam-era was almost completely unknown amongst our class and rarely discussed at reunions. We embarked to rectify that omission and have compiled the experiences of more than 300 classmates into the book.



Dedicated to the nine brave men in the class who sacrificed their lives in the conflict, there are contributions from aviators, SEALs, Marines, surface warfare officers, Seabees, submariners and Brown Water Navy sailors (and an Air Force officer too!).

Many stories are from service members with boots on the ground, in country, in the mud, in the jungle, in close air support or on the rivers and canals, while others made and describe their years of service from offshore, above or below the South China Sea, which were equally harrowing and heroic.

Included are contributions from outstanding classmates such as Deputy Secretary of State Ambassador Richard Armitage '67; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace '67, USMC (Ret.); Lieutenant General Michael DeLong '67, USMC (Ret.); NASA astronauts Colonel Jim Buchli '67, USMC, and Captain Michael Smith '67, USN; Secretary of Veterans Affairs The Honorable Anthony Principi '67; Admiral Bob Natter '67, USN (Ret.); POW Lieutenant Commander Frederick Masterson '67, USN (Ret.), and many others.

The book is available in limited numbers for the hardcover edition and unlimited for the soft cover (paperback) version. All profits go for the repair and expansion of the U.S. Naval Academy Columbarium. For more information or to order, visit <https://shop.booklogix.com/product/sworn-to-serve-copy-hardcover/>. 📌