

# **Pfc. Danny Eugene Nicklow** **Mission accomplished**

## **PREFACE**

*My memory of Danny Eugene Nicklow of Friendsville, Maryland is intensely personal, elusive, and incomplete. Personal, as to the bonding together like brothers in our days of youth. Elusive, as to the people who never had the privilege to have known him. Incomplete, as to the great destiny that awaited him.*

*The purity of Danny's intentions to serve his country in a time of uncertainty will never be forgotten. He was the first to give his life from his hometown. Like all the unknown who have stepped forward and answered the call in a time of crisis and have fallen for us, they stand alone eternally as the TRUE AMERICAN HEROES. We stand as a free nation on their shoulders of courage, commitment and sacrifice. This story is dedicated to one of them to whom God granted me the honor to have known.*

## **IN SEARCH OF HEROES**

It was a cold and wintry day in February, 2007 when I received a phone call from Keith Price, a former Navy Corpsman. He told me he was responding to my request on the First Battalion, Ninth Marines, Third Marine Division website for anyone who knew PFC Danny Nicklow during the time of his tour in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967. After exhausting all previous efforts I had made during my search to find the answers to the ending of my personal hero's life, I thought it wouldn't hurt to give this website a try, not expecting any real results.

Keith proceeded to tell me that he was with Danny the day he was killed, March 16, 1967 in Quang Tri Province, on Hill 861 near the KheSanh Marine Base almost forty years ago. I was completely stunned and became incapacitated for a moment to answer back. Here for the first time I had come full circle with the man who answered my hopes and prayers over the last four decades when I first started my search for Keith in 1967. I had been determined to find the answer to the question that had lingered over that time span. Was it really Danny who came back to us in late March of

1967 or was it another unknown Marine who was part of the now famous "Walking Dead" Marine Battalion? Finally here was the person who had survived that day long ago and knew the answers to all my questions.

My feelings for this young man from the farmlands of Western Maryland developed over a brief moment in time. The story of my relationship with Danny and his effect on me has lasted a lifetime.

## **BOND**

After I graduated in 1964 from high school in southwestern Pennsylvania I went to Deep Creek Lake, located in the mountains of western Maryland for a stay with my great aunt who had a mobile home at the lake. With her determination she found me a summer job at a local marina. I felt a new life beginning as I was about to venture into the freedom of being on my own. Little did I know I was about to meet my life long hero.

Danny Eugene Nicklow just didn't walk into your life, he bounded into it. His infectious smile and energy charged personality dominated his presence with everyone he met. I was no exception. He had come to the marina later that spring because of the commitment he had with the Maryland Boys State Association. He had been selected in the state as one of the most outstanding young men in Maryland, and had just gotten back from Annapolis.

Danny and I hit it off instantly as we not only bonded together in our job at the marina, but also in our competitive nature in sports. I never forgot the first time we had a one on one basketball game with the victor having to win by two baskets. The game was played with the first one reaching twenty points declared the winner. Neither of us could get a two basket advantage. Danny finally left me exhausted after playing non stop for what seemed like an eternity. His determination and commitment to go to any level to win was unbelievable. He told me as we were playing there would be no time outs, no water breaks and no fouls called. He wanted no excuses from me as we hammered each other endlessly. Just play until there was one man standing. This was the indomitable spirit and attitude of Danny Nicklow, which has never left my memory since.

The summer of 1964 was a time and place that seems like yesterday. The country was just getting over the tragic death of our

beloved President and just like me; Danny missed his spirit and vision. Danny always was discussing politics and the country's future. Here was a seventeen year old ball of energy who loved to talk about politics just as much as sports. I was being challenged by a new friend not only to compete in the typical outlets for a young man, but to challenge myself in discussing the political and social events of the day.

He had principles and feelings that were going to be defended by him at all costs. He talked about the social injustice of segregation in the South. He mentioned the name Medgar Evers and his courage that cost him his life in Mississippi. I had no clue who he was.

He talked about a country called Vietnam in a place halfway around the world. This was the first time I had truly discussed this war with anyone. He told me how President Kennedy had sent advisors to Vietnam to fight the Communist insurgency. He asked me what we should do as a country in this freshly debated issue of the day. I had no idea on how to respond.

That summer I vividly recall how Danny would swim across a channel on the lake approximately two hundred yards wide. He would swim to the Peninsula on the other side to go to a Lodge that served hamburgers for lunch. On his way back one day cramps set in about half way across the channel. I was on the marina dock at the time looking for an item for the marina showroom and saw Danny struggling in the water. At first knowing the practical jokes we played on each other I started to yell at him to swim back underwater. Realizing it was no joke I motioned a nearby boat to pick him up. The man in the boat reached him quickly and hauled him in. Would you believe that only a few days later he swam across that channel again, ate those hamburgers at the Lodge, and swam back again unfazed. But the destiny of this young man remained to be written into an American legacy of extraordinary sacrifice and heroism.

It was an unforgettable summer. I had for the first time a real job at a beautiful location, with the girls of Pittsburgh and the surrounding area swarming the lake. It was paradise for an eighteen year old coming of age. And of course Danny Nicklow was the main coordinator of all the great gatherings on the lake. One weekend while we were working at the Marina dock a large Chris

Craft boat approached us. Danny said to me, "watch this" as he proceeded to tell the four bikini clad girls that there was a big party going on that night, and everyone within a five hundred mile radius was coming. Every boat containing any young female that pulled up to the marina for gas that Saturday was told about this party. I looked at him not knowing about this big party. He looked at me wide eyed and said, "there is one now". This was vintage Danny in all his boldness and audacity that he constantly displayed.

The summer went much too fast as I had to return to the reality of attending my first year of college. I had to literally be dragged back mentally from this paradise of the summer of '64.

The only goal I had was to stay in college and return to the lake the next summer and live another dream-like existence with Danny Nicklow leading the charge. Little did I know that world events in the spring of 1965 would change my life and Danny's forever. That March the Marines landed in DaNang, South Vietnam as the first full size operational combat unit committed to the defense of South Vietnam. I never really gave it much thought as I left for another summer of adventure at the lake with Danny.

When I first saw him that day in June of 1965 he burst upon me and told me about his High School football team that went undefeated. I felt badly about not seeing him play and told him that I doubted he missed me among all his fans. He laughed it off and we went on our way to another memorable summer, even more so than the previous one.

Now with the Marines committed to Vietnam, this topic came up constantly. He was steadfast in his belief that this was another show of force by the Communists to take down another government. He proceeded to tell me the history of Vietnam and made the argument that many people fled the North after the Communist takeover from the French in 1954. He said the Communists purged many of the Nationalists that helped defeat the French so they could have total political control over the North. He knew about the background of Ho Chi Minh and his total commitment to Communism. He believed that this was a time of great challenge for the United States from any and all Communist threats. My responses to the discussions about Vietnam were always couched in terms of being neutral on the subject. His response to me was, "if you never take sides what is the purpose of living."

One of most unique moments that summer of 65' was the time Danny, I and a group of locals played a basketball game with a team of High School basketball stars from Western Pennsylvania. The beautiful lake and surrounding mountains of Western Maryland was picked by a group of sponsors from Pittsburgh to host a Basketball Camp for all the up and coming athletes from the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League. The Peninsula across from the Marina we worked at became a basketball Mecca for athletes from Western Pa. Five individual courts were set up next to the Lodge to accommodate all the young stars. Hank Kuzma the head coach at Midland High School, which had won the State basketball championship that year, was the Director of the camp.

We didn't have nearly the talent that these High School stars possessed, but I knew with Danny leading the way we would give them a street fight of intensity and in your face defense minded basketball. It was probably the first time in the history of Garret County, Maryland that an all white team played an all black team on a basketball court. The three games we played were packed with local spectators not knowing what to expect. We gave them all we had but lost two out of three games. Defeating them in that one game was the thrill of the summer. Ironically within a year an all black team from Texas Western University would win the NCAA basketball championship against an all white Kentucky team.

Watching Danny though after these games was the real treat as he talked to each opposing player literally for what seemed like forever. Before he was done I think he came to know their entire family including their grandparents. Here was a great athlete in his own right who fought tooth and nail on the court, yet showed sportsmanship and respect beyond his years. This incident and others always reminded me as I grew older of how most men especially young ones lead with their ego. Danny Nicklow led with his heart, passion and humility. With all the things he had already accomplished in his short life as an athlete and concerned citizen he never mentioned once in my time with him how good he was. He always talked about today and what lay ahead in the future. He never talked about himself to anyone I ever met him with. It was always about the people around him and getting to know everything about what made them tick. Learning about their family, aspirations, beliefs and principles were his driving source of

nourishing his insatiable curiosity about others. I have never seen anything like it before or since.

That summer moved faster than the one prior and before we knew it Danny was off to Youngstown State in Ohio on a football scholarship and I was back to my college in Pennsylvania for my second year. I had no contact with Danny that school year and just assumed I would see him again at the lake for another summer of fun and adventure.

It was now the summer of 1966. I had successfully completed my second year of college and was ready to attack the lake with Danny again for another exciting summer. As I drove toward the lake I stopped at Danny's house since it was on the way. I met his stepfather at the door and he proceeded to tell me that Danny was not home, and that he wouldn't be home until September. I looked at him with a puzzled look and he responded by saying, "Oh, you didn't know, he joined the Marines."

I was speechless for a moment, and then told his stepfather I would see Danny in September. I left his home thinking; doesn't he realize there is a war going on in Vietnam and he is headed straight for it? I tried to analyze what had come over Danny to leave college and join the Marines. How could he have made such a decision when a college deferment for the draft was in place at the time? Danny had everything a young man could have, a full college athletic scholarship, a loving family, a beautiful girl friend and most of all an unlimited potential to achieve anything. All of the questions I wanted to ask him would have to be put on hold until Labor Day weekend when Danny would be home on leave. I was beside myself. I tried to work at the marina again, but it was not the same without Danny there. I lasted a few weeks and then went to New Hampshire for a sports camp counselor position. I couldn't wait to see Danny and tell him he was nuts for leaving college and joining the Marines.

Danny called me in September when he arrived back home on leave. He was eager to tell me about his first eight months in the Corps. I met him at his home that Labor Day weekend and we proceeded to go to the lake and enjoy the last holiday of the summer. It was just like old times as we went from place to place visiting friends and taking in all the hot spots. We discussed all the basic subjects of the day including the Pittsburgh Pirates and the

outstanding season Roberto Clemente was having. Like me, Danny grew up with Clemente and marveled at his athletic skill and pride that he displayed.

Unfortunately I never got serious enough to ask him the burning questions regarding the reasons he joined the Marines. We just enjoyed the whole night with all of Danny's friends at the lake. I was wishfully thinking to myself that this moment in time would never end. I have never felt even to this day anyone with the charisma and magnetism that Danny possessed. His presence gave you a sense of well being and the best of Life itself.

The next day we headed to Frostburg, Maryland, a small college town close to the lake. We met up with some of the local football jocks who were getting ready for the new season at a local watering hole. Danny had played with and against some of these local players in high school. The respect I saw from these players for Danny was incredible. These farm boys and coal miner's sons whose parents had put themselves squarely in harm's way just a generation before in both World War II and Korea knew what patriotism was all about. We had all grown up with it. In the coal mining and farming towns of Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Maryland, where the states form a confluence in geographic terms and values, the blue collar attitude of sacrifice was paramount. Whether for family, job, or the military, the roots of this area were all about giving, hard work, and commitment.

After quite the day and most of the night in Frostburg we headed home to Danny's house hoping the night would never end. We made one last stop at a small bar and restaurant on Route 40 just west of Frostburg. This would be a moment in time that remains embedded in my memory forever. We finally started to have a serious discussion about the war and the reasons Danny joined the Marines. He was firm in his position about America's responsibility in the struggle against Communism and the fact he was not going to sit on the sidelines and not take a stand.

Just about the time we were ready to leave Danny and I noticed two young black men walk into the bar. Keep in mind this was 1966 and this locale was not exactly downtown Pittsburgh or New York City. The bartender didn't pay any attention to these two individuals. On my part I just thought about leaving this place before trouble started. But Danny on the other hand strode up to

the bar, ordered two beers, proceeded to talk to the two young men, and then offered them the beers he had just ordered. Everything went down hill very quickly as some of the locals did not take kindly to Danny's motives. A near riot started and the four of us were lucky to leave the bar unscathed. As we left in our respective vehicles the two young men clenched their fist and gave us the thumbs up.

That again was the essence of Danny Eugene Nicklow. He had no patience for intolerance or prejudice. He always respected the dignity of everyone he met and stood up always for what he thought was right.

We laughed and joked as we convinced each other that we could have cleaned out the whole bar and for that matter any other problems that existed in the world. The fact that we had a few too many that day and now seemed invincible; we then proceeded to plow through a farm fence and ended up in a cow pasture as dawn approached. Danny was driving his stepfather's new Grand Prix and we finally realized we had a problem. He drove the car into the garage backwards since most of the damage was on the rear drivers' side of the vehicle. Of course the next day the ruse was noticed by Danny's stepfather immediately since the car had been backed into the garage. But somehow it was hard to spoil Danny's homecoming and we made up some story of how a huge tractor had forced us off the highway. Forgiveness was granted and we took off on Danny's next assignment.

We headed for the local hairdresser's shop and Danny had his hair colored the brightest color of yellowish blonde I have ever seen. He looked like a human caution light as we headed back to the house. Of course his mom Bernice thought it was another spectrum of Danny's personality that was irresistible. She was a very beautiful and young mother, and was so proud of her only son who she bore at the age of seventeen. This was to be a time of celebration with him, and Bernice was going to have the best time possible during this last leave before he left home.

I had the privilege and honor of being invited to stay with Danny that Labor Day weekend at his home. I was with him and his family for the last formal holiday dinner he would ever have again. Besides inviting his girlfriend, he also invited his cousin, Sharon to the dinner. He was thinking of me as usual as he did with all of his

friends by making sure I would have a date for the dinner and an attractive one to boot. We laughed and carried on at the dinner table talking about the hopes and dreams that Danny had after his tour in Nam. This included his goal of attending West Virginia University where he would finish his education. After a great and memorable afternoon with his family I left early that evening for home. I had said my goodbyes and told Danny I would write him. He hugged me and said, "I will see you too in the Marines someday." Sure, I thought to myself, I'll just play it safe and finish college.

As I drove home that night I thought to myself that the future was without limit for Danny Eugene Nicklow. With his thirst for life and positive attitude, there was nothing that could stop him. It was Monday, Labor Day 1966. This was the last day I would ever see him again. That fall I started my junior year of college and dove into my studies and social life. I knew I would see him back here in no time and we would catch up on his experiences in Vietnam. I called his home for his address and his mom gave me the Unit and Address. It was the first time I heard Bravo Company, 1st Marine Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, FPO San Francisco. I never wrote.

### **UNWANTED NEWS**

It was late March 1967. I had just come home as always for the weekend so my mom could wash my clothes; and I had planned on going out later to the local bar and dance hall. I had just turned twenty-one, my father had just bought me a brand new 67' Camaro, and I was ready to celebrate. Life was good and I was cruising through it. After arriving home that Friday afternoon my mom asked if I had seen the local newspaper that day. She handed me the paper. On the front page it stated that PFC Dan E. Nicklow from Friendsville, MD had been killed in action in Vietnam. I just stared into nothingness and was numb.

I couldn't go anywhere that weekend. I walked around aimlessly, thinking how selfish I was for not even writing Danny one letter. I called his home and talked to his stepfather who told me they expected Danny's body to arrive back home by the following week. I went back to school and went through the motions, skipping a few classes and not attending much spring football practice. I wondered how this could ever happen to the one person who was

destined for a future of greatness. How could God take away this young spirit with so much potential? I had found a friend who I felt would be with me for a lifetime; someone who inspired me to take on life without fear or prejudice. Someone who always thought of others first and was willing to put his actions into reality. He had that golden touch that I would never see again.

As I drove to Danny's home the following Thursday for the wake I felt this must all be a mistake. They must have misidentified the Marine who was killed. It couldn't possibly be Danny. I felt that once I actually saw Danny's mom Bernice; she would tell me it was a misunderstanding and he was just wounded or that it was another Marine. As I entered the house the truth hit me square in the face.

The scene was heart wrenching. A Marine stood guard next to the coffin. Bernice was sitting on a chair with her head slightly down and her body language in total denial. She looked up at me and could barely speak, only uttering my name. I did not want to be here. This was not right. I clenched my teeth as hard as I could, fighting the pain deep inside of me. This was the first time I really had felt a close relationship to someone who died tragically. I returned home that night thinking about all the times we had traveled the same road; together, on old Route 40 in our summers of adventure.

Going through the daily routine the last three months of school, I tried to move on with my life, trying not to think about my lost friend. As much as I tried to forget, his spirit grew inside me, constantly asking the same question. Who are you? I tried to answer that question every time Danny would ask me. Was I the good time Charley? Was I the frustrated athlete? Was I the average student? Was I always going to do enough to just get by? Was I someone who would never cause waves? Was I always taking and never giving? Was I going to go through my entire life without challenges? Would I always give up at the first sign of failure? Who am I? Danny's spirit would not let go. It was determined to drive me to answer all those questions and more. I traveled straight to his home after my junior year of college ended.

## **AWAKENING**

I arrived at Danny's home unannounced that summer of 1967 and met Bernice at the door. She instantly gave me a big hug and kiss and told me I must stay the night. She looked much better since the funeral and seemed like she was as busy as ever. Bernice and Homer, Danny's stepfather, treated me as if I was their new son. We went out to eat that night and the following day we went on a picnic at a lake in Pennsylvania. The one night stretched into a week and every day I found myself doing something for Bernice and Homer. Mowing the lawn, running errands, cleaning out the garage; doing everything that a son was expected to do.

The last night I stayed with them I laid awake in Danny's bed thinking to myself, where do I go from here? Was I going to finish college and teach in a local high school and stay safe in my own little world I had created? Or was it time to challenge myself?

As I said goodbye to Bernice and Homer the next day I thought to myself; I need to travel the rest of the summer and see a little bit of the world. What better place to go than California. I had also promised Bernice that I would go to Camp Pendleton and try to help retrieve some of Danny's personal effects. She was told by the Marine Corps that everything coming back from Vietnam was being stored, separated, and eventually sent out to the appropriate family from the Marine Base in California. As soon as I arrived in San Diego I headed for the Camp.

I had no problem getting on the base. I was directed to the proper storage warehouse where all items from Vietnam were being sent. I met a Gunnery Sergeant who told me that nothing had come in yet under PFC Nicklow's name and that he didn't expect anything for some time. I asked him why the delay. He looked at me with an answer which I have never forgotten. He said the casualty list of Danny's unit was so great that it made him sick. And that any items coming in from First Battalion, Ninth Marines were coming in slower than any other unit in the Corps due to the circumstances they were in. He told me they were engaged with a superior number of enemy forces and many of his old buddies were coming back in body bags.

I thanked the Sergeant for his time explaining the situation and left the base with my stomach in knots. This was not the news I expected. Later that day I was sitting at my favorite fast food restaurant in San Diego when a young man walked in. I only

noticed the side of his face. His profile looked just like Danny's. I thought to myself, it could be him. Maybe he had come back to California and had amnesia and didn't know who he was. My instant wishes were repulsed when he turned around and I saw his face. This wishful hope would last a lifetime unless I met someone who was with Danny the day he was killed. In my mind it was the only way I would ever have closure. Little did I know at the time but Danny's mother Bernice was in doubt as well, and would remain so for years to come. DID THIS PERSON EXIST?

After a great summer in San Diego I headed back to Pennsylvania looking forward to finishing my senior year of college. On the flight back we experienced a terrific thunderstorm near Chicago and the plane was hit by lightning. As the plane got through the storm I thought about commitment to others, not just myself, for the first time. I thought about Danny and the many others who had given their lives for something as old as the nation itself. Freedom from oppression, freedom from fear, freedom of self expression, freedom of religion, freedom from prejudice, all of the freedoms imaginable that only this country represented in its short history. And the 60's represented a rebirth of many of those original aspirations of the founding fathers. It was time for me to get involved personally in a commitment that would change my comfortable and easy lifestyle.

When I got back from California I called the Marine Corps Recruiting office in Pittsburgh. My choice was clear, determined and without hesitation. I would become an Officer in the United States Marine Corps. I would commit myself to becoming an involved American. In my own way I would enter the breach of the 60's maelstrom. And of course I had help with this decision. It came from my best friend and my personal hero, Danny Eugene Nicklow. If I would never have met this young man I doubt if I would ever had made this decision. I would have more than likely went through life never creating waves, never getting involved, never taking risks; just being safe and going with the flow. The commitment was the easy part. Getting into the Marine Corps was another matter.

## **JOURNEY**

After I took my first physical for the Marines in Pittsburgh in September of 1967 I got a call from the Recruiting Sergeant, Staff Sergeant Beem. He told me there was a problem with my X-ray and that I needed to come back in for another one. This was the same spot on my lung that the local Draft Board had categorized me as not acceptable for induction. This condition was typical for a young man who grew up in the Coal Fields of Western Pennsylvania. I thought it would be different when you volunteered for the service and they would ignore any small defect. Later that fall I went back for a second physical. I knew that I had time to pass this physical since I wouldn't have to report to the Marine Officer Candidate School until after I had graduated in May. Again the same results after the second physical. The holidays passed and in January I went back for another try. Again the same spot, the same rejection. The spirit of my fallen friend would not let go as his voice kept telling me, "don't ever quit in life again."

Finally I felt I had to convince Staff Sergeant Beem that there was a determination in me to get into the Marines no matter what it took. I proceeded to tell him about my friend Danny Nicklow and how his loss had made me think about commitment and accountability in life. I would do anything to walk in his footsteps and enter the Marines. He called me literally the next day and told me my lungs were clear of any spots and I was good to go into the Marines after I graduated. Funny, that nodule or spot on my lung has reappeared on every x-ray I have taken ever since!

Anyway I had gotten my wish and was off to the Marines. My quest to be a Marine was not only a challenge for me, but a journey that would lead me to answers about myself and answers about how, where, and under what circumstances my hero perished. I would now as a fellow Marine get to know the entire history of the now famous Marine Battalion who were still in sustained combat in Vietnam. After my own training I would be headed straight for the answers; right to Vietnam as a Marine Infantry Officer.

After approximately eight months of training I got my orders. After two weeks of leave I would be off to the Nam. During the whole time of my training at Quantico I tried to find out as much as I could about First Battalion, Ninth Marines. Every one of the Marines I came in contact with had similar stories of the brutal campaign that

1/9 was fighting against the enemy. I met several Marines who came back to Quantico that had served with other Battalions of the Ninth Marine Regiment. Their story of what happened during the mid-March period of 1967 was that they didn't know anyone who survived the mortar attack that fateful day of March 16th. Here for the first time I learned it was mortars that hit Danny's group that day. Other than that I really couldn't find any eyewitnesses to his death. WAS HE SOMEONE I WOULD EVER MEET?

When I arrived in the Vietnam I was assigned to the Second Battalion, First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division. I was disappointed since I had requested to go to 1/9, but was told they were being ready to be pulled from the field due to their sustained period in continuous combat operations. Thus I was put in charge of a rifle platoon in E Company 2/1. Now I would walk the hallowed ground where my friend had fallen nearly two years prior. I volunteered to stay with my platoon beyond the first six months required in the field if you survived as a Marine Lieutenant. I wanted to give them all I had to help them survive. It was an honor to lead these Marines, who like Danny and others had come from the farms, inner cities, and coal and steel towns. Most were barely out of high school and none came from privilege. But they were tough, straight forward and fought for each other. I couldn't ask anything more from them.

With my own responsibilities in place it was difficult to do much investigation into what actually happened to Danny. However when I went to DaNang to go on a seven day R&R leave I met an older Gunnery Sergeant who was attached to 1/9 during his last tour in Nam. He distinctly knew of Danny reporting into the Battalion initially and told me about another Sergeant named Donald Harper, who apparently was very close friends with Danny. I asked where I could find Sgt Harper, and was told that he had been killed the same day. This would be the first of several times I would hear the name of Sgt Harper and his association with Danny. I thought I had seen or heard that name before. Of course I had; I had seen his name at Quantico under the casualty list of 1967 who served in 1/9. Now I knew he was killed the same day as Danny. This would be the link to what happened to Danny. If I could find someone who knew Sgt Harper they must have known Danny also. I HAD TO FIND HIM.

After my tour in Vietnam I reported to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I was so proud of the young Marines that I had led into combat. I had the distinction and privilege to lead a Marine infantry unit into combat. Nothing in my life would ever come close to this experience again. But the memory of my Marines and all those who had fallen in this conflict convinced me to begin the vigil; the continued determination to honor and never forget all who had given the ultimate sacrifice. Especially the unit of which my hero, Danny Nicklow served.

When I got back to Lejeune I found the time to research the recent history of this now famous battalion. I learned they had gotten the nickname the "Walking Dead" from Ho Chi Minh himself, who in 1966 determined that his forces, which had been battered that year by 1/9, would seek revenge. And that this battalion was already considered deceased, just not buried yet by the Communist leader. I found out that Danny and his fellow 1/9 Marines were sent to the far reaches of Northern I Corps in 1967 where they faced the best of the North Vietnamese Army regulars. They were engaged in the beginning of the greatest battle of the Vietnam War; the Battle of KheSanh. The start of this epic battle was called "The Hill Fights". The first major engagement of this period was on March 16, 1967 when fittingly, Danny and his unit were coming to the rescue of another unit on Hill 861. After many fierce engagements and operations against the enemy 1/9 was pulled from the battlefield of Vietnam on July 14, 1969. The results were staggering in terms of bravery, sacrifice and honor.

The battalion endured the longest sustained combat and suffered the highest killed in action rate in United States Marine Corps History. The battalion was engaged in combat for 47 months and 7 days. The battalion sustained casualties of 748 killed; 3,645 wounded in action and 2 missing. A 93 percentage rate per battalion killed in action alone, not including wounded or missing. This casualty rate approaches almost 600 percent when you include the wounded in almost a four year period of continuous combat. If Danny had ever chosen a destiny of legacy in the United States Marine Corps, he chose the unit that would live forever in the annals of American military history.

One of the many facts that I uncovered about the Vietnam experience was that the average amount of time in combat for a

Marine would be in excess of 180 days in the field, whereas the WW II Marine averaged around 45 days of continuous combat. All of the numbers haunted me, but the number that always stood out was the 2 MIA's of the battalion. In my dreams I always felt that Danny could be one of the MIA's and there could have been a mistake in identifying him as killed in action. This could only be verified by someone who was with him the exact day he was killed and saw it happen. I pledged to myself and to Danny's family I would find the answers if it took the rest of my life. WHERE WAS HE?

### **PLEDGE**

Leaving Marine Corps active duty in 1972 I decided to stay in the Reserves with plans to attend law school. After my tour at Camp Lejeune I was pleased to see Bernice on several occasions and shared with her the wonderful experience of her newborn son Jeff. I never brought up any discussions about my discoveries of the battalion that Danny was in. I felt she was determined to lead a brand new life with her new son and was ready to move on.

It was time to carve out my own place in life as well. My newborn son, Robert arrived at the end of 1972 and my desire to enjoy life to its full measure would take my family to California. Arriving in San Diego the next year I remembered the wonderful time from my trip in 1967 and was determined to live there. One of the characteristics of the city was that it was a Navy town which meant a lot of Marines past and present lived there. I knew of all the place in the world to live this was not only paradise in 1973 but also a place I just might find that one person who knew about my lost hero and how he left this world. Life goes extremely fast once you commit to it totally; raising a family, going to school, working full time; all of the things Danny and all the heroes like him never came back to experience.

One thing I found time to do was send flowers to his gravesite every anniversary of his death. It was a constant reminder of never forgetting the sacrifice of Danny Nicklow, and also the pledge to find the answers about his last days. Just as important it was a reminder to lead a life that Danny would have lived; always getting involved, staying positive, being there for others and making life a beautiful experience.

I started going to Vietnam Vet reunions shortly after I arrived in San Diego. I also tried to help Vets get upgraded discharges while attending law school in a Veterans Outreach program at San Diego State. I went to Camp Pendleton every summer for active duty to train Marine Reservists from all over the country. HE WAS OUT THERE SOMEWHERE.

In the early 1980's the Ninth Marine Regiment was having a reunion at a hotel in San Diego. I attended the function and was pleased to meet several members of 1/9 that remembered Danny and Sgt Harper. They told me the same general story of how they were hit with mortars and how no one could get to the bodies for at least a day or so. Again, close to the details but no eyewitness to that fateful day in 1967. WAS I EVER GOING TO FIND HIM?

During the summer of 1986 I headed back home for a reunion with my family and also to see Bernice and her son Jeff. We decided to have a dedication at Danny's gravesite with my brother-in-law who was a Catholic priest, presiding over the ceremony at the site. While talking to Bernice I got the impression for the first time that she felt just like me; both of us always had doubts whether it was really Danny that was buried there in Friendsville. She told me about her brother and Marine Pete Frazee who was reported missing in action in World War II, and the anxiety that the family went through before he finally returned home from the Pacific. Without closure I believed like Bernice that the possibility of him coming home was always there. Then again it may have been wishful thinking that Danny was always alive in our minds as well as our hearts.

Ten years later we would have a dedication in Friendsville to honor Danny and the other soldiers from the town who were killed in Vietnam. I was honored by Bernice to give the eulogy about Danny. It took all of the strength I had in me to complete that speech. I felt then as I have always felt the shining example of Danny Nicklow's life. I also found out about the sacrifice of this small farming town. It was one of two towns in the country that had the highest number of servicemen killed per capita during the Vietnam War. Danny was the first to fall from Friendsville. He was followed by Ross Fike, Charles Hook, Roger Garlick, Norman Thomas and lastly Thomas Fike. I have always sensed a feeling that these young men followed the footsteps of Danny. The memorial today in Friendsville reflects

the sacrifice of these men. It states "When the bell tolled for these brave men in Vietnam it tolled for thee."

The years were passing quickly with only a few contacts that knew Danny, and my wish to find that one Marine who was with him that fateful day was slipping by. During these years I had written letters, went to various reunions, and sought information from official Marine and declassified military records. MAYBE HE NEVER EXISTED?

## **CLOSURE**

By now it was getting close to forty years since Danny had perished. I looked back on all of those years and thought about some of the strange occurrences that happened in my quest to find someone who could tell me more. One of the more bizarre incidents occurred around 1990 while I was back in Pennsylvania for a visit. I had just picked up a hitchhiker on old Route 40. When he got into the car I noticed that he looked about my age, but he was distant and very quiet. I asked him where he was going and he replied, "Nowhere in particular." I asked him if he was from the area and he said he forgot where he was from. Then he startled me by saying he was a former Marine who was constantly traveling the country. I asked him what unit he was with and he stated, "The Walking Dead." I immediately pulled the car over and started to give him the third degree. It was obvious from his answers that he had no clue as to whom or what 1/9 was all about. I didn't know whether he couldn't remember or if he was a total fraud. Either way I felt sorry for his state of mind. As I left him off at a truck stop I asked him his name so I could match it to any Marine survivors that I knew from 1/9. He left the car without any answer.

In the last several years I began using the internet to correspond with Marines from different parts of the country. A mistake I had made in the past was that I only looked for Marines who knew Danny. I never thought of checking Navy personnel records for Navy Corpsmen who may have served with 1/9. In January of this year I found the website for the First Battalion Ninth Marines. In addition to the casualty list of the fallen Marines from 1/9, there was also a list of the Navy Corpsmen. The number totaled 35 Corpsmen who were killed while serving with 1/9. Could this be something that I overlooked? Could it have been a Corpsman that survived that day? WAS I CLOSE?

I immediately put a post on the website asking for anyone that knew Danny Nicklow to please respond. Through the efforts of the fantastic fellow 1/9 Marines and Corpsmen who set up and ran this website they immediately put my request into their site. I expected the same responses I had in the past; they knew of Danny, but were not with him the day he died. Several weeks went by; then on February 23, 2007 I got a call from former Navy Corpsman Keith Price. The previous day I had received an e-mail from another Corpsman, Tom Stubbs, who thought he knew of a Corpsman who was with 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, B Company, 1/9 when Danny was there. With Tom's efforts Keith had responded. His first words to me were, "I was with Danny Nicklow the day he died." Keith said he was no more than 20 feet from Danny when the mortar round came in that hit him. I was frozen. I could not respond. I gathered my senses and asked him who Danny's closest friend in the platoon was. Without hesitation he said Sergeant Harper. He told me they had died at the same time. This was the person I had been looking for the last forty years. This was unbelievable. I FOUND HIM!!!

We talked for what seemed like forever. He told me in detail all of the missing pieces that I had sought. He told me about Danny's personality that all who knew him would never forget. He told me about how Danny and Sgt Harper were like two close brothers. He told me about the reunion he had with Sgt Harper's family several years after the war. And most importantly he told me there was not a day that went by that he didn't think of Danny. He told me he put a wreath of flowers every year at his church to remember Danny the day he died.

What do I do? Do I call Bernice and blurt out the news? I stopped and tried to make light of all this. Finally I realized this was a message that had to come from within the family. I called Danny's cousin Jack Frazee, who I had known for years and had grown up with Danny and were like brothers. When I reached Jack at his office in Florida I asked him if he was sitting down. I relayed the news to Jack. Like me, Jack was stunned. He had heard all of the stories; but like me he felt he would never find an eyewitness to the actual events and reach final closure.

Jack wanted to meet this man personally and see for himself. He was going to be traveling to North Carolina the following week on a renovation project in Charlotte. This was not far from Keith Price's

residence in South Carolina just across the state line. He wanted to make sure we had the right person before he would tell Bernice. And if it was the right person he wanted to tell Bernice in person. I agreed with him, and gave him Keith's phone number.

After Jack's meeting with Keith there was no doubt in Jack's mind that we had found the answers to our long sought prayers. Especially when he first drove into Keith's property and saw the same type of John Deere tractor parked on the lawn that the Frazee family had when he and Danny grew up together in Maryland. We planned on meeting Bernice later in March when the weather got a little better to travel to Friendsville. Jack arrived first and told her of the news. I arrived later that day and met Jack, Bernice, Jeff, and the rest of the immediate family. I told Bernice of the annual reunion that 1/9 was going to have in Florida in late April. She was ecstatic and was determined to go and meet Keith Price and the rest of the members of the 1/9 association. Now for the first time she could have final closure. I called Keith later that weekend and told him of Bernice's desire to go to the reunion. He responded that it would probably be just as difficult as the time he met the Harper family, but I knew he would do it for Danny as he had done it for Sgt Harper.

Reality had finally set in. There was always a piece of me saying Danny would appear someday. I finally surrendered to the fact he was gone to the Ages. But he will eternally remain in the Sun, shadows, dreams and joys of my life.

My time in this world has been dedicated to the memory of men and women like Danny Nicklow; people of action and commitment. Veterans of this country who are the true American heroes that gave the ultimate sacrifice. Veterans, through the people who loved them like me and millions of Americans, will tell their stories to succeeding generations to come.

The story I will tell for as long as I breathe, is of the legendary "Walking Dead" Marine Battalion who simultaneously fought overwhelming odds against both a vicious insurgency and one of the best Armies to take the battlefield. And of course my eternal hero, Danny Eugene Nicklow, Private First Class, United States Marine Corps. Right in the middle of the battle, and right in the beginning, like he was in all aspects of Life in his brief time on God's Earth. Oh, Almighty GOD do I miss him.

Bernice, Jeff, and Jack attended the 1/9 Reunion in Melbourne, Florida on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of April, 2007. It was their time and especially Bernice's moment that she richly deserved. Keith Price and the 1/9 members greeted her with open arms.

Mission accomplished.  
SEMPER FIDELIS,  
Captain James Kyle, USMC  
Annapolis, Maryland  
5/25/07

### **POSTSCRIPT**

*I personally went to the San Antonio reunion of the First Battalion, Ninth Marines during the period of August 21<sup>st</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008. I met not only Keith Price, but also Steve Weldon, Richard Huff and Mike Seale. They walked the same hallowed ground with Danny Nicklow and told me additional stories about him. It was an honor for me to speak at the Saturday night banquet and express my memory of Danny and my feelings I have for his legendary battalion. I will never forget this coming together of the best of my generation and the brotherhood of true American Heroes.*