



A Great Marine Corps General Died in Vietnam

by: Gerald F. Merna, 1stLt USMC (Ret.)*



**Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth
1911 – 1967**

(Official USMC Photo)





MajGen. Wood B. Kyle and MajGen. Bruno A. Hochmuth, surrounded by VIP visitors and Division staff officers, salute the colors passing in review at the Change of Command ceremony held at 3rd Marine Division Headquarters, Phu Bai, Republic of Vietnam, 16Mar67
(Official 3rdMarDiv Photo courtesy of G. F. Merna, under arrow, center, behind civilian)



Third Marine Division Patch that was on a 3rd Marine Division "Tour Jacket."
(Lee-Jackson Militaria)

PREFACE: In May 1966 while stationed at Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps (then at the Navy Annex in Arlington, VA, now in the Pentagon), I was commissioned a (Mustang) Second Lieutenant in the U. S. Marine Corps. At that time I was 36 years old, had 19 years of enlisted service and was a year away from a 20-year retirement in the grade I ultimately attained of Master Gunnery Sergeant E-9. Without the benefit of an Officer Candidate Course or *any* formal Officer training (other than required correspondence courses after commissioning), within several months of being commissioned I began a 13-month tour with the 3rd Marine Division in Vietnam. No doubt my previous enlisted service and experience were a major factor in my being assigned as the Assistant Division Adjutant and Awards Officer, a position normally filled by someone of higher rank. During this tour I was also promoted to First Lieutenant.¹

¹ "Any Marine, after having served on active duty in the enlisted ranks of the United States Marine Corps or Marine Corps Reserve, has risen to the officer ranks, and further served as a commissioned or warrant officer on either active duty or reserve status. The title includes all such Marines: active duty, reserve, retired, and/or honorably discharged. The title of a Marine of this status is, and shall evermore be ...MUSTANG!" (Reference: Marine Corps Mustang Association: <http://www.marinecorpsmustang.org/>).

VIETNAM: Over thirty years has passed since the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. To many, it was one of the most painful periods in our history, and to this date it still is a very controversial subject. In May 1965 the 3rd Marine Division became the first major U.S. ground force in Vietnam when it opened the Marine complex at the Danang Air Base. The Division was to remain in Vietnam until November 1969, participating in operations from Danang, to PhuBai, and the Quang Tri-Dong Ha Combat Base.

THIRD MARINE DIVISION: HUE - PHUBAI: For the years 1966-1967 the Third Marine Division's forward headquarters was located in PhuBai, about five miles south of Hue ("Way"), in the northern area of I Corps ("Eye Corps"), and was considered "Marine Country" since there were very few Army units assigned to I Corps during this period. At the very Northern end of I Corps was the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and North Vietnam was just on the other side of what was called both the demarcation line and the DMZ, which divided North and South Vietnam.



During this time I had the privilege and unusual opportunity to work closely with *two* Commanding Generals of the Third Marine Division, as well as with each of their Chiefs of Staff, most of the Division's senior staff officers and many officers in the field. Of necessity I also worked with non-U.S. officers and staff in the 1st Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (1st ARVN Div.) located in the Thua Thien Province, I Corps, NNW of Hue, South Vietnam.

COMMANDING GENERALS: Major General Wood B. Kyle was the Commanding General upon my arrival on 24 August 1966. In a Change-of-Command ceremony that I witnessed on 18 March 1967, General Kyle completed his tour and was relieved by Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth. The installation officer was Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, then the Commanding General of III MAF (Marine Amphibious Force). (As a Lt. Colonel in 1952, Walt was my Regimental Commander (5th Marines) in Korea; he would complete his career as a four star General and Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps).



L: Color Guard at 3rdMarDiv Change of Command Ceremony; R: MajGen. Hoang Xuan Lam, CG ARVN I Corps; LtGen. Lewis Walt, CG III MAF; MajGen. Kyle (outgoing CG) 3rdMarDiv; MajGen. Bruno A. Hochmuth (incoming CG) 3rdMarDiv; Henry Koren, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam.

(L: Photo by G. F. Merna; R: Official 3rdMarDiv Photo, courtesy of G. F. Merna)

I worked for Gen. Hochmuth until my tour ended on 1 September 1967. By the nature of my assignment as the Division's Assistant Adjutant, and later as its Awards Officer, I was required to meet often with these Division Commanders, and Chief of Staff Colonel Alexander D. Cereghino.

While I have many positive memories of working for General Kyle and admired his leadership style, I developed an even closer working relationship with General Hochmuth, to whom I dedicate this writing.

PHUBAI: I especially remember the heavy, sticky mud in PhuBai that made it very difficult not only for vehicles, but also for walking. Vietnam is typically tropical with two main seasons: hot and dry, and hot and wet. The wet season generally begins in mid-April and lasts until mid-October. The rain begins in September and lasts through January.



Command Post Area, 3rd MarDiv, Phu Bai

(Photos by G. F. Merna)



L: 2nd Lt Joe Manz, R. Major Wayne Massey, Dong Ha

(Photos by G. F. Merna)

Marines were entrenched along this DMZ to engage the enemy and stop their infiltration by clearing out guerrilla forces' basic facilities, services and supplies, such as water, rice, and sometimes ammunition, in the villages and hamlets stretching the length of the coastline. Eliminating their long-established infrastructure within each village and hamlet was as important as defeating them in the field. Unlike most other wars, there were really no "front lines" or "rear areas" in Vietnam. The hills, jungles and swamps belonged to whoever occupied them at any given time.



3rd Marine Division Headquarters before and during dust storm, PhuBai, Vietnam 1967
(Photos by G. F. Merna)

I was regularly assigned as a leader of one of the several Provisional Platoons around our Command Post (CP) perimeter at night with a force that was responsible for assuring the command's security for my sector. I also went on occasional daytime patrols with counter-intelligence personnel to nearby hamlets to inspect for enemy infiltration efforts, and to search for their hidden supplies or other provisions.



(L): Lt. Pete Petersen, (c.) Counter-Intelligence, interrogating inhabitants of local hamlet when large hoard of rice was found in this Hamlet believed used by VC at night. (R): Patrol members and Interpreter from local CAC Unit, Phu Bai. Dec. 1966.
(Photos by G. F. Merna)

But my primary duties were assisting the Division's chief administrator, Major Wayne Massey, the Division Adjutant, with the myriad duties involved in supporting a Marine Division in a combat environment. Some of these included casualty reporting, graves registration, troop replacements, discharge boards, and the ultra morale booster, mail services. One result of the division's increased combat operations was a very heavy load of award recommendations; as a consequence I was tasked with establishing an all-important Awards Processing Program *Division-wide*. It was here that I became much more involved with not only the Chief of Staff (Colonel Cereghino), but of necessity established and maintained a close association with General Hochmuth himself.

I was not only an advisor to *both* of them, but was also appointed a *voting member* of the *Third Marine Division Awards Board*. A heavy responsibility for a new Second Lieutenant, albeit one with many years of Marine Corps service.

Major General Hochmuth: This tall Texan, two-star General, then 56 years old (*twenty years older than me,*)² was very easy to work with and for, and was an extraordinary human being and Marine. A graduate of Texas A&M, he had already been a Marine for some 30+ years with extensive combat experience in World War II, for which he was awarded *two* Purple Heart Medals.



Purple Heart Medal



MajGen. Bruno A. Hochmuth and his “quarters” at PhuBai



(Photos by G. F. Merna)



MajGens. Hochmuth and Nickerson; Col. Cereghino

MajGen. Hochmuth (2d from left) inspects the troops. PhuBai

Gen. Hochmuth was quietly religious and well respected by those who knew him. He didn't curse, smoke or drink (having never smoked I at least eliminated one of the three of these behaviors). However, while the General did not have a lot of tolerance for anyone who might practice these habits to the extremes, he was very practical and understanding of both the war situation and the times, so was never overzealous about anything except the well being of his Marines. He would often invite a small group of officers of various ranks to “dine” with him in his quarters, such as they were in those rainy mud flats. It was his personal way to get to know his officers better, at least for this brief period of time away from their responsibilities.

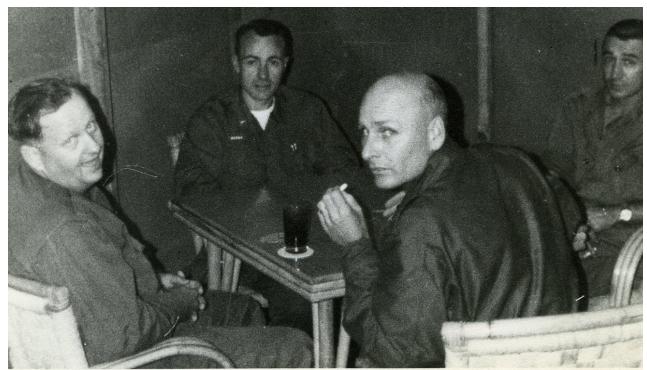
He also used these opportunities to let us know where he stood on a variety of matters, expecting we would in turn pass that information down the chain of command. He not only inquired as to how *we* were doing, but also wanted to know about our *families*. He would even ask point blank if we were writing to our wives, children, parents, and others.

² Coincidentally, at age 37 in 1987, I was much older than many, if not all, non-Mustang Lieutenants, and a few years older than some of the senior officers I worked with; perhaps this was one of the reasons why the General and I got along so well.

HANDSHAKE TOURS: One of the more interesting additional “assignments” General Hochmuth tasked me with on occasion was to be an escort officer for celebrities and other dignitaries visiting the Division CP. These visitations came to be known as “handshake tours,” so named because that’s exactly what they were, extremely informal, “one-on-one” non-staged visits by luminaries that wanted to go out among the troops and shake hands with them wherever they were, be it in the field, in their hooches or tents, and even in one case, greeting a returning combat reconnaissance patrol.

These “handshake tours” were very popular with our Marines because they were “up front and personal” visits conducted in a relaxed manner. This was in stark contrast to some of the more ceremonious USO-type visits by stars for whom large officer or non-commissioned officer (NCO) clubs were used (or outdoor stages erected), as was the case for such high profile entertainers as Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe, and others of that stature, who because of such overwhelming popularity, normally performed in front of an enormous number of military personnel gathered together for those rare but most welcomed occasions.

Since the Third Marine Division was located in a forward area, Officer or NCO clubs were that in name only. At best, they were small, flimsy huts or even temporary structures not currently being used for sheltering troops, and more often than not weren’t even officially sanctioned. Our Division’s “Club” was a hut with a couple of tables and a few chairs. Since we were all on duty seven days a week working unlimited hours, on occasional late evenings several officers would drop in and out for a quick beer or drink, to smoke a cigarette or cigar or light up a pipe (two out of three of the General’s “no no’s”) or maybe even play a hand or two of pinochle; but mostly to relax by telling and listening to a variety of sea stories.³



(L):Officer's Club," PhuBai, 1967. Center is Capt. Kolb; to his left Lts. Merna & Joe Manz; other officers unidentified.

(R): Lt. "Pete" Peterson, Lt. Jerry Merna, Capt. Bob Handrahan, Lt. Sam Kerr

(Photo by Gerald F. Merna)

Since we were so close to the DMZ, visitor’s safety was always of paramount concern. Clubs suitable for stars to entertain troops were much further south at primarily Army or Air Force bases in Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, Cam Ranh Bay, Danang and Chu Lai.⁴

3 A tale. Often containing a small grain of truth somewhere. (“Unofficial Dictionary for Marines,” compiled and edited by Glenn B. Knight.

4 It is interesting how Chu Lai got its name. In his book, Vietnam Military Lore, Legends, Shadows and Heroes,” MSgt. Ray Bows, U.S. Army (Ret.) has this vignette (pg. 498): “Although few things were named in Vietnam for living servicemen, there is a well known story of one location named for a living Marine in Vietnam. Chu Lai in Quang Tin Province was not even a town when the U. S. Marines constructed a major base there. When LtGen. Victor H. Krulak selected this site for its airfield, a naval officer accompanying him remarked that the site was not marked on the maps. Krulak replied that the name was ‘Chu Lai’ giving the officer his (own) name in Mandarin Chinese characters, and thus General Victor Krulak named Chu Lai for himself.

STAR VISITORS: On several occasions Gen. Hochmuth assigned me (and other officers) the privilege of escorting visiting Hollywood or sports personalities around the Division area. In my “luck of the draw” these visitors, on different occasions, included Western Actors and Singers Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Hollywood Actors Robert Mitchum, Robert Stack, Henry Fonda, television star Wendell Corey, and former Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World, Floyd Patterson.⁵



Western Stars Roy Rogers and Dale Evans⁶



Actors Robert Mitchum and Robert Stack (Stock Photos)



Lt. Jerry Merna with Actor Henry Fonda (Photos by G. F. Merna) Lt. Merna with TV Star Wendell Corey



Roy Rogers and his “partner,” wife Dale Evans, arrived on a cold, rainy night in 1966 completely decked out in their cowboy and cowgirl regalia, “six-shooters” and all. (Only “Trigger” didn’t make the trip). They was just a delight to be with, so good-natured, pleasant and interesting. Our Marines were completely comfortable with both of them as they spoke a little about their careers, but mostly about their children.⁷

⁵As a 21-year-old Patterson became the youngest world heavyweight champion in history. His reign lasted almost five years, during which he won the world heavyweight championship twice. He retired in 1972 at age 37 with a professional record of 55-8-1 and 40 knockouts. (Source: © Estate of Floyd Patterson c/o CMG Worldwide).

⁶Roy and Dale Rogers entertain crew members of an Air Force C-123 Provider during the last leg of their Vietnam tour in November 1966. Crew members are (left to right) Airman Second Class Cyril F. Crawly, 22, of Centerdale, RI, Staff Sergeant Francis K. Sutek, 35, of Fort Walton Beach, FL, and Technical Sergeant Eddie Miller, 36, of Rienzi, MS.

⁷Rogers and his first wife (Arline Wilkins) had three children, an adopted daughter Cheryl, and two birth children. Rogers and Evans had one child, Robin Elizabeth, who died of complications of Down's syndrome shortly before her second birthday. Her life inspired Evans to write her best-seller "Angel Unawares." (Source: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

When they left they *had* to be exhausted, but you could never tell by anything they said or did, staying as late as they possibly could so they “wouldn’t miss any Marines.”

Another “visitor,” was a very popular sports figure of that era, Floyd Patterson, the 1952 Olympic Heavyweight Boxing Gold Medalist. He later held the world heavyweight title from 1956 to 1959, and again from 1960 to 1962. By far the favorite “hand-shaker” among the troops, perhaps because many knew of his humble beginnings, including teaching boxing while in reform school. After winning a 1952 Olympic Gold Medal he became the youngest heavyweight champion and the first ever to regain his title after losing it.⁸



Former World Heavyweight Champion Floyd Patterson (center both photos) visits with the men of the 3rd Marine Division, Phu Bai, Vietnam, July 1967 (Photos by G. F. Merna)

While the *troops* favored Floyd Patterson, *my* favorite was Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, and Wendell Corey was *General Hochmuth's*. Perhaps this was also because Corey was another Texan, and he and Gen. Hochmuth were about the same age and size. (Remember, too, we were both considerably “older” than the *troops*).



MajGen. Bruno A. Hochmuth and TV Actor Wendell Corey
(Photo by G. F. Merna)

⁸ Career highlights from “official web site of Floyd Patterson.”

The General mentioned to me that Wendell Corey had been a “television hero” of his for a long time, especially for his *Harbor Command* series in which he played a Coast Guard Captain. (Some of Corey's many other movies and the roles he played were *Rear Window* [a policeman], *Alias Jesse James* [Jesse James], *Cyborg* [a sheriff], and *Waco*, [a preacher]. He also starred on the *Westinghouse Playhouse* in the early 1960's with Nanette Fabray).

Corey's visit came in August 1967, only a few weeks before my 13-month tour would end. While not complacent, I was beginning to feel fairly “safe” at that point. That is until Corey asked General Hochmuth if he could “go out with a recon (reconnaissance) patrol!”

I clearly remember my thoughts at that moment as if it happened yesterday: “*He's got to be kidding, certainly the General will laugh at this request.*” But Corey wasn't kidding and the General didn't laugh, but suggested that I “see what (I) can do to get him (Corey) ‘out in the bush’ with a patrol.”⁹ At that point I knew what Corey was thinking, “Oh Boy, Great!” That's not what I was thinking! Regardless, I knew that the General did not literally mean for us to actually “go out in the bush” putting ourselves “in harms way” and maybe even getting us both killed, but rather was assuming (if not praying) that this old Second Lieutenant understood what he meant, and had enough common sense not to, even if I could or wanted to! After “inquiring” around the Division Staff (it's amazing the cooperation you get when you work for a General), I learned that a recon patrol was due to return from a mission, and escorted Corey to the area where those Marines would be “de-briefed.”



Members of 3rd Marine Division Recon Patrol pose with TV Actor Wendell Corey
(Photo by G. F. Merna)

Not only was I able to take some extraordinary pictures of this incoming patrol but Corey, who carried a miniature camera pinned to a top pocket on his utilities, to his delight, took many as well; but more importantly, he thoroughly enjoyed meeting and chatting with these Marines, and they equally relished meeting him and answering his questions.

⁹ There's an old military cliché “An Officer's request is *your command*,” or “the *request* of your commanding officer is equivalent to a *direct order*? Such *requests* or *suggestions* are not clichés to Marines—they are *absolutes*, and the *standards* they use each and every day!



Wendell Corey queries returning members of recon patrol



(Photos by G. F. Merna) Corey thanks patrol for their service

Unfortunately I did not always have my trusty camera handy (with which I took almost 100% color slides), and especially when I took Roy and Dale Rogers around, "accommodated" Actor Robert Stack who wanted to "take a ride on an Amtrak" (Amphibious Tractor), which we did, and had quite a day with Robert Mitchum. Mitchum appeared somewhat fatigued, perhaps feeling the effects of "a few beers" he told me he had earlier that day (and I noticed he didn't turn down many offered by some of our troops later), but made it through his visit. He told me what he wanted was to "go out and see *all* the guys." We did just that, and I don't think we missed many of them!

General Hochmuth of course had *many* visitors to his CP, including high ranking Marine, Navy and Army Officers, U.S. and Vietnamese civilian and government officials and military Officers, but he thoroughly enjoyed these "hand shake" celebrity visitors, particularly Wendell Corey's; his morale was *noticeably* uplifted after Corey's visit to *his* Third Marine Division, and he spoke of it several times thereafter.

"CHOPPER" TRIPS: It was quite common for members of the Division staff, including myself, to climb aboard a helicopter, often with General Hochmuth, and take short hops to the 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Division Headquarters to meet with our counterparts on subjects of mutual interest. One of my duties was to coordinate matters related to Vietnamese awards presented to Marine Corps personnel; in turn our ARVN counterparts would visit our CP.



L: Lt. Merna (far right) with 3rdMarDiv Awards Staff
"Chief" Perkins & Sgt Holcomb (l); Lt. Jim Burie back row



R: Lt. Merna and (unidentified) Marine Major with three
members of 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

(Photos by G. F. Merna)

VIETNAMESE AWARD CEREMONY: One of my more memorable visits to Hue and the 1st ARVN Division (when I *did* have my camera) was on June 6, 1967. I was there to attend a Vietnamese awards ceremony not only for ARVN troops, but Marines of the Third Marine Division as well. On this particular occasion, General Hochmuth was honored and presented with two high level Vietnamese awards.

This very special and colorful occasion the 1st ARVN Division Band provided the customary military music, and about two dozen young Vietnamese ladies, wearing white “Ao Dais,” the beautiful traditional dress of Vietnamese Women (but without the parasols oftentimes worn with them), places individual white and yellow lei’s on all the award recipients. In attendance for this ceremony was not only MajGen. Hochmuth’s “boss,” then LtGen. Robert E. Cushman, Jr. (who earned the Navy Cross during the recapture of Guam in World War II, and later the 25th Commandant of the Marine Corps, 1 January 1972 – 30 June 1975), but also other high ranking officials, including MajGen. Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General of ARVN “I Corps” (Eye Corps) and U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Mr. Henry Koren. Speaking at the ceremony and presenting the awards were South Vietnam’s *Premier* and *General of the Republic of Vietnam Air Force*, Nguyen Cao Ky, (*win-cow-kee*), and Brigadier General Truong, Commanding General of the 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam Division.



Ladies wait to place Lei's on Medal Awardees



(L.) Premier (Gen.) Ky arrives; (R.) 1st ARVN band



At dais: BGen. Ngo Quang Truong, CG 1stARVN Division



Premier (Gen.) Ky Addresses Guests



Col. Kern, Dr. Rohrs and two 3rdMarDiv. Recon Marines receive medals



LtGen. Cushman congratulates MajGen. Hochmuth upon receiving two Awards: The Republic of Vietnam National Order 5th Class Medal and the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm.¹⁰ Gen. Hochmuth has lei placed on him



MajGen. Hochmuth, LtGen. Cushman, MajGen. Lam, Ambassador Koren

Lt. Jerry Merna observes as Gen. Ky addresses guests

(Photos and Medal images by G. F. Merna)

A GENERAL FALLS OUT OF THE SKY: Sadly, there is no happy ending to this story. I spent a significant amount of time on trips visiting forward combat units to find and interview witnesses for the highest level awards and assist unit personnel in preparing award recommendations, and expected something tragic *could* happen to me, but I never imagined it happening to our *Division Commander*.

I departed the Third Marine Division on September 1, 1967. About ten weeks later, on 14 November, General Hochmuth's helicopter crashed on one of those very same trips we frequently made. It was reported that it was an "operational" crash. Perhaps it was, but I would not have been surprised to hear it was shot down, as some allege, because we flew over hostile areas on those trips. That was one of the reasons there was normally a "chase" helicopter following the one the General flew in. When I heard the news shortly after returning home, I was extremely saddened, and reflected on our time together.

¹⁰ General Hochmuth's other decorations include: Distinguished Service Medal, Legion of Merit with Combat "V", two Navy Commendation Medals, two Purple Heart medals, two Presidential Unit Citations, China Service Medal, American Defense Service Medal, American Campaign Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with one star, World War II Victory Medal, Navy Occupation Service Medal with one star, two National Defense Service Medals, Vietnam Service Medal with one star, and the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal.



Lt. Gerald F. Merna and unidentified Major Enroute to 1st ARVN Division under watchful eye of the gunner.¹¹
(Photos by G.F. Merna)

Over the years there have been many official and unofficial reports surrounding the death of General Hochmuth, including a wide variety of stories, rumors and myths. A few that I came across concerning that fatal day are particularly interesting.

One good “find” occurred as a result of my attending a “*Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Korean War*” ceremony in 2000, at of all places, (considering this story is about the Vietnam War), the *Korean War Memorial* on the Mall, but co-located near the *Vietnam War Memorial* in Washington, D.C. At the conclusion of that ceremony I met and chatted briefly with retired Army Master Sergeant Ray Bows. He, like many other “vendors” that day, had “set up shop” between the two Memorials to sell several books he had written. One was a very heavy 1,180 page tome about the Vietnam War that after skimming through it looked particularly interesting so I bought a copy. (Since it was an extremely hot afternoon, lugging that heavy book and my camera gear made me glad I bought it *after* and not *before* the ceremony).



Unidentified Helicopter Pilot with a smiling MajGen. Hochmuth

Browsing through this book again later that evening, I was quite surprised and *pleased* to see the above photo of a smiling and pleasant-looking General Hochmuth in what appears to be an UH-1E Helicopter. The caption under the picture merely said: “U.S. Marine Corps General Bruno Hochmuth, for whom Camp Hochmuth was named.”¹²

¹¹ I do not recall the name of the Marine seated next to me. Accounts have established the identity of the five who died in the crash. One is listed as “Major Robert Andrew Crabtree, Portsmouth VA,” as an “Aide to Gen. Hochmuth.” I’ve often wondered if the Marine in this picture was Major Crabtree.

¹² Page 494, “*Vietnam Military Lore, Legends, Shadows and Heroes*” by Master Sergeant Ray Bows, U. S. Army (retired). No identification is furnished as to the name of the helicopter pilot, nor is a reference provided as to the source of MajGen. Hochmuth’s picture; however, on the page facing the title page MSgt Bows explains, “Many of the photographs in this book came from contributing families. Often times they were faded, torn or simply copies of copies of old newspaper articles. Many have been retouched and restored through the meager facilities available to the author. Previously published photos have been given credit when their source is known, although many of those photos are the property of the families who have given their consent for inclusion in this work.” (MSgt Bows inscribed my book as follows: “25 June 2000, To Jerry Merna, Best Wishes and Semper Fi! /s/Ray Bows.”)

The only other reference to Gen. Hochmuth in MSgt. Bow's book (page 498), says, "Camp Hochmuth, Phu Tai in Thua Thien Province, commemorated the service of Major General Bruno Hochmuth, the highest ranking Marine Corps officer to lose his life in Vietnam."

In another book, written by Edward F. Murphy, this interesting paragraph appears: "*The nature of the war in South Vietnam exposed all levels of Marines to danger. This was dramatically illustrated on 14 November, when the UH-1E carrying General Hochmuth (sp) was shot out of the sky (underlining supplied) seven kilometers Northwest of Hue. Hochmuth (sp) and five other Marines aboard the aircraft were killed.*"¹³ What I found most interesting in this brief passage was Murphy's statement that General Hochmuth's helicopter "was shot out of the sky." Unfortunately he gives no other details or accounts to justify that.

But I located a very interesting set of facts on a web site that *does* give much more specific and authoritative information about the crash of Gen. Hochmuth's helicopter that occurred two months after I departed Vietnam; one that is in line with the *officially listed cause* of his death. This account is most impressive, coming from members of the helicopter squadron that was responsible for ferrying Gen. Hochmuth around the Division and elsewhere. It leaves little doubt as to what happened by providing the who, what, when, where and how of that disastrous crash. Here are several excerpts:

"At about 1040 hours on 14 November 1967, Capt. Milton Kelsey, pilot, 1st Lt. Thomas Carter, copilot, and crew chief Cpl. Ronald Phelps lifted from VMO-3's mat at Phu Bai in BUNO 153757, designated Scarface 1-0. At 1145, they picked up Major General Bruno Hochmuth, CG 3rd MARDIV, his aide Maj. Robert Crabtree and Liaison Maj. Nguyen Ngoc Chuong to visit ARVN BGen. Ngo Quang Truong in Hue. The aircraft departed the hospital pad at Hue Citadel at 1145, enroute to Dong Ha and was chased by an HMM-364 UH-34 piloted by Capt. J. A. Chancey. At 1150, the aircraft was flying northwest over Hwy. 1 at about 1500 feet. At YD672266, Capt. Chancey saw the aircraft's nose yaw to the right twice and at the same instant the aft/engine section exploded in an orange fireball. The fuselage separated from the rotor and the aircraft fell in pieces. The fuselage landed inverted in a flooded rice paddy; the tail cone a short distance away. A Sparrowhawk was immediately dispatched, as well as an aircraft recovery team from VMO-3. Burning fuel on the surface of the paddy hampered recovery; however there was no evidence of explosion in the fuselage. The bodies were returned to Phu Bai and pronounced by Lt. John Parrish; all are believed to have been killed on impact.

*Immediately after the crash, and in the years since, a great many rumors circulated concerning the cause, ranging from enemy ground fire, to ARVN artillery fire, to U.S. friendly fire, and even sabotage. Gen. Hochmuth was the first and only Marine general officer to die in Vietnam, and there was a good deal of pressure to list his death as combat-related. Moreover, this was VMO-3's largest loss of life in Vietnam and it was difficult to accept that these squadron-mates could have died in anything but combat. In fact, the aircraft suffered a tail rotor gear box failure and the official findings on the incident, submitted by BGen Robert Keller in November, 1967, states "there is no evidence to indicate this mishap was caused either by hostile action or inadvertent friendly fire."*¹⁴

Finally, on the web site of the *Marine Corps Vietnam Helicopter Association* I located what I believe to be the most authentic and very detailed account of this crash, that includes eye witness statements, and they show the cause of the crash and deaths as "hostile." Here are a few excerpts from these statements pertinent to this story.¹⁵



¹³ Semper Fi—Vietnam: from Da Nang to the DMZ: Marine Corps campaigns, 1965-1975 by Edward F. Murphy
¹⁴ SCARFACE-USMC.ORG.

¹⁵ Full statements can be found on their web site [USMC/Vietnam Helicopter Association](http://www.popasmoke.com/kia/incidents.php?incident_id=101), and also on: http://www.popasmoke.com/kia/incidents.php?incident_id=101. The acronym MAG-36 stands for Marine Air Group 36.

"Incident Date 671114 VMO-3 UH-1E 153757+ Hostile Fire, Crash

CREW: Carter, Thomas Anthony Capt Co-Pilot VMO-3 MAG-36

Kelsey, Milton George Capt Pilot VMO-3 MAG-36

Phelps, Ronald Joseph Cpl Crew Chief VMO-3 MAG-36

PASSENGERS: Crabtree, Robert Andrew Maj Passenger HQCo/HQBn/3rdMarDiv

Hochmuth, Bruno Arthur MajGen Passenger CG, 3rdMarDiv

CARTER THOMAS ANTHONY : 091260 : USMC : CAPT : O3 : 7563 : 23 : FORT LAUDERDALE : FL : hostile, crash, land : Crew : body recovered : Thua Thien (Hue)

CRABTREE ROBERT ANDREW : 072796 : USMC : MAJ : O4 : 0302 : 33 : PORTSMOUTH : VA : hostile, crash, land : Passenger : body recovered : Thua Thien (Hue)

HOCHMUTH BRUNO ARTHUR : 051117 : USMC : MGEN : O8 : 9903 : 56 : HOUSTON : TX : hostile, crash, land : Passenger : body recovered : Thua Thien (Hue)

KELSEY MILTON GEORGE : 092134 : USMCR : CAPT : O3 : 7563 : 24 : MADELIA : MN : hostile, crash, land : Aircraft Commander : body recovered : Thua Thien (Hue):

PHELPS RONALD JOSEPH : 2162079 : USMC : CPL : E4 : 6319 : 20 : MENOMINEE : MI : hostile, crash, land : Crew : body recovered : Thua Thien (Hue)

Personal Narrative: Submitted by R.T. Musante, VMO-3: *The UH-1E that Phelps was in crashed as a result of tail rotor failure although I can't say how it landed. It was in our hanger for a while and they went over our maintenance procedures with a fine tooth comb. Our area was primarily the Phu Bai region; we also had a detachment in Khe Sanh that we rotated every two weeks or so. One of our duties was to ferry Gen Hochmuth around when and where he wanted to go. Ron and I were both crew chiefs and we all took turns on the Generals slick. From what I can remember we spent a week or two at a time on this duty. When it was my turn to come off the slick, Ron took over for me. It wasn't too long after that when the crash occurred and they all were killed.*

Statement of Maj. John A. Chancey: *On 14 November 1967, I was assigned to fly admin chase for VMO-3 UH-1E. My mission number was #58, and was authorized by MAG-36 Frag Order number 14-21. My event number was Swift 4-1. I was briefed by the HMM-364 Operations Duty Officer on assigned frequencies, call signs and the nature of the mission, and was instructed to stand by until further notice. I received my aircraft assignment, preflighted it, warmed up the engine and returned to the Ready Room to await further word. At approximately 0915 I received instructions from the ODO to launch to chase the UH-1E (Scarface 1-0 on a road recon down Highway #1 to the 124/13 miles from Phu Bai TACAN. I turned up on the assigned frequency and contacted Scarface 1-0. We joined up and proceeded to a bridge site at 124/13, where the UH-1E landed, but did not shut down.*

After about 5 minutes on the ground, during which I stayed at 1500 Feet, the UH-1E lifted and we returned to Phu Bai, landed and refueled. The UH-1E advised me that we had a VIP pickup at the 3rdMarDiv CG pad at 1045 and that we would turn up at 1040. I then proceeded to the HMM-364 flight line across the runway and shut down. I then changed aircraft because of an inoperative FM radio, preflighted again and turned up at 1040. I have no knowledge of the actions of the UH-1E pilot during this time because of our separate locations.

We established communications at 1040, the UH-1e called for a formation takeoff and we proceeded to the CG pad at 3rdMarDiv. I orbited overhead while the UH-1E landed and picked up General Hochmuth's party. WE then flew directly to the RVN hospital pad at Hue (about 10 minutes flight time) and shut down both aircraft for about 45 minutes. Both pilots and crew chief were with the UH-1E at this time, and I observed no other person approach the aircraft except my own copilot, 1stLt Darger.



The General's party arrived back at the aircraft about 1145 and we departed north along Highway #1 toward Dong Ha, our next destination. We leveled off just underneath the overcast at approximately 1500 feet and about 90 knots airspeed. About 5 minutes after takeoff, at 1150, the UH-1E yawed slightly right and left and at the same instant exploded in mid air. The explosion appeared to emanate from the center portion of the aircraft (engine and aft cabin area). The whole aircraft was immediately engulfed in a large fire ball and dense black smoke. The fuselage separated from the rotor, and fragments flew in all directions. The rotor appeared to remain intact and the burning fuselage fell away in a near vertical descent. Because of the dense smoke and my evasive action to fly clear of the falling debris, I was unable to observe the maneuvers of the fuselage on the way down or the impact.

I transmitted the crash position (300/12 miles from Phu Bai) and the circumstances on Guard channel and then descended to see if I could detect any survivors or assist. The fuselage was still burning though it was almost completely submerged in a flooded rice paddy. We hovered around the wreckage for 5-10 minutes but found no evidence of survivors. The crew chief spotted a hardhat about 100 meters from the fuselage and I hovered with the helicopter's wheels in the water while he debarked and retrieved it, but he was unable to find any survivors in the vicinity. We then climbed back to altitude and transmitted our observations on Guard. We remained in the area until other aircraft were dispatched to relieve us on station. I observed no weapons fire at the time of the explosion, nor did I receive any fire while hovering around the crash scene."



The UH1 helicopter, nicknamed "Huey", was the standard assault helicopter used in nearly every mission by both the Marine Corps and the Army. (Huey troop carriers were referred to as "slicks" and gunships were called "hogs"). It was a sturdy, versatile aircraft which was used for a wide variety of missions including search and rescue, close air support, insertion and extraction, fire support, and re-supply. It normally carried a crew of four.¹⁶



¹⁶ This photo became a US 33-cent Vietnam War stamp. Designed by Carl Herman of Laguna Niguel, CA, it features a photo by Sgt. 1st Class H.C. Breedlove, U.S. Army DASPO, of men of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st CavDiv (Airmobile), in Task Force Oregon, leaping from a chopper near Chu Lai in the spring of 1967. Selected by the public during nationwide balloting in May 1998 as one of 15 stamps saluting the 1960s, it was issued Sept. 17, 1999 in Green Bay, WI.



CONCLUSION:

Having served thirteen month tours of duty both in Korea *and* in Vietnam, these are among the most memorable occasions not only in my Marine Corps career but up to that time for my entire life. I was privileged to have served with some of the finest men this country has ever known, and lost close personal friends and fellow Marines in both Wars. Particularly regretful was the loss of Technical Sergeant Donald (Don) Lupo, a fellow Anti-Tank Assault (ATA) Section Leader in Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, Fifth Marines, also a World War II veteran, killed in action while we were in Korea. Although General Hochmuth and I didn't share that same *personal* relationship, his death shortly after I left Vietnam was in every other way a *close* loss; while our military relationship was bound by mutual interests and loyalties, there was also a deep affection for this man. I greatly admired General Hochmuth's low-key, steady and firm leadership of the Division during the time I was fortunate to be serving in the Third Marine Division, and being such a close member of this Commanding General's staff.

I was very proud to serve in Vietnam with General Hochmuth and the Officers and men of the Third Marine Division, and equally proud of having served with other great Officers and men of the First Marine Division in Korea. To this day, when I think of all those who gave their lives in those two wars, and in fact, all other wars as well, having had friends and relatives who served in them (including two who served in World War II, my Marine Uncle who survived fighting in the Pacific, and the oldest of six Merna brothers who made the supreme sacrifice when his LST was sunk in the South Pacific; four other Brothers, three Marines and one Navy also served in Korea, and a Marine nephew recently served in Desert Storm I and Iraq, and who will undoubtedly be returning for a second tour). The sacrifices of each of them bring back memories of very difficult times. These examples of heroism, as well as the experiences I gained fighting and working alongside such warriors are not only an important part of my life, but contributed greatly to whatever successes I may have attained.

Readers of this story can draw their own conclusion as to the cause and circumstances of the crash of Major General Hochmuth's helicopter. Regardless of any such opinions or facts, as a result of this tragedy, the United States and the U.S. Marine Corps lost *five* brave warriors, including General Hochmuth; each is equally mourned.

From the day Marines begin boot camp or officer training they are instilled with our Corps' history, traditions and heritage. It is fitting therefore that there is a building named in the General's honor, "*Hochmuth Hall*," at the "Crossroads of the Corps," as the Marine Corps Base at Quantico, VA is called. All Marines, past, current and future, and others, upon seeing or entering this building, will take time to reflect on this outstanding General Officer. They will learn of his service to Country, devotion to family, his extremely successful military career and leadership contributions to our Corps, and most importantly, the supreme sacrifice he made in Vietnam. For sure, General Hochmuth's family lost a beloved member, and the Corps a wonderful human being, Marine, and distinguished leader! He will continue to be missed!





A Great Marine Corps General Died In Vietnam!



Major General Bruno A. Hochmuth, United States Marine Corps, will forever be remembered as the *only* Marine Corps General to become a casualty of the Vietnam War. I was among the many that were honored to know him, and one of the fortunate ones privileged to work with him.



From a fellow Marine, Semper Fidelis 1stLt. Gerald F. Merna USMC (Ret.)*

*Lt. Merna served 22 years as an enlisted man and commissioned officer (Apr47-Dec68). In between two tours of Recruiting Duty (NY/NJ 1950-51, and Owensboro, KY 1955-60), he served in Korea (1952-53) with the 1stBn, 5th Marines both as a Weapons Co. Anti-Tank Assault Section Leader and Battalion Legal Chief, then as the First Marine Division Legal Chief, completing his last few months as a Platoon Sgt. with Easy Co, 2nd Bn, 5thMarines. An award-winning instructor at Quantico and Camp Lejeune, and a Legal Chief for HqBn, Quantico, and Force Troops, Camp Lejeune, Merna served in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967, retiring in 1968.

Merna then completed a second 18-year career with the U.S. Postal Service (1968-1987) as a senior executive (PCES) in Washington, DC. He attained B.S. and M.S. degrees from The George Washington University, Washington, DC. His other assignments included Acting Postmaster of Lynchburg, VA when he was appointed Postmaster of the entire Northern VA region. As Executive Asst. to the Postmaster General Merna was one of only 34 Officers in the over 800,000 employee USPS. Retiring from the USPS, for the next 12 years he was Director of Advertising for SIGNAL Magazine (the Journal of the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association AFCEA), and Vice President of the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA), and Associate Publisher of National DEFENSE Magazine.

In retirement, Merna writes a variety of articles and stories and is a frequent contributor to various military and non-military publications. In 1951 Merna married his former Tappan Zee High School, Piermont, NY classmate Dorothy Sedlack Merna; they now reside in Potomac Falls, VA near their son, Gerald T., daughter Linda Merna Figura, and two Grandsons, John and Max.



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