



## Newsletter Sign up



*The Eisenhower workshop I attended was fantastic. At the conclusion of the workshop, I left feeling empowered and inspired. I highly recommend everyone attend one of these workshops even if you're not directly in a leadership role.*

*- Sara Laird*

## IS YOUR INTEREST PEAKED BY THE SECOND WORLD WAR?

Gettysburg Tours, in partnership with Historic Leadership Training, is offering half-day tours of WWII sites and stories of the people involved. Scheduled dates are Aug. 19 & Sept. 17.

## An Act of Patriotism

by Bolling Williamson, US Marine 1960-67, VMI - 1960



Early one morning in mid-February, 1968, three men prepared to perform a ritual which is routinely conducted on Marine installations around the world: raising the American flag. For these men, however, the exercise would be anything but

routine: they knew that they had less than 30 seconds to complete their task and take cover before coming under enemy fire.

These Marines were members of a rifle company occupying a hill overlooking the Khe Sanh combat base and critical to its defense. After making several unsuccessful assaults to capture the hill, North Vietnamese troops surrounded it and resorted to artillery and mortars to blast the Marines off. The company was under siege; after pulling in their patrols and outposts, the men dug in.

They were completely surrounded with no hope of reinforcement or withdrawal. There was a shortage of water and rations (but not ammunition) because bad weather hindered helicopter resupply flights. Those factors, plus the combination of crowded living conditions, daily salvos of artillery and mortar rounds and frequent attempts by the enemy to penetrate the defensive lines at night created a sense of helplessness and frustration.

Company commander Capt. William H. Dabney, a native of Gloucester, VA, VMI graduate and seasoned troop leader, knew that such circumstances would have a devastating effect on morale and he looked constantly for ways to keep spirits up. One idea he had was to conduct the traditional ceremony for raising the flag each morning – a gesture of defiance and “stick in the eye” for the North Vietnamese to let them know that the Marines were still there and that their spirits were not breaking.

Someone at Khe Sanh came up with a battered bugle and shortly after daybreak several days later, three men bolted from a bunker: while two men clipped a flag onto a 15' radio antenna, Lt. Owen Mathews of Richmond, VA blew a hasty rendition of “To the Colors” on the bugle. After rendering a crisp salute, they raced back to the bunker just as the mortar rounds began falling – the men knew from experience that after appearing in the open, they had about 20 – 25 seconds before the rounds would land. That evening, they reversed the procedure: lowered the antenna and unclipped the flag while the bugler blew “Retreat.”

See a different side of Gettysburg, with stops at two Prisoner-of-War camps. Tickets may be ordered on-line from the Gettysburg Tour Center.

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When a national wire service ran a story about the ceremony, donated flags and letters poured into Khe Sanh from across the country. Dabney said one came from the widow of a WW II vet who sent the flag which had covered her husband's casket, along with a note that said she knew he would approve of its being put to good use instead of gathering dust on a shelf. Letters of support were received from a couple of veteran Marines who had fought on Iwo Jima when the flag was raised there in 1945.

The men decided to send the flags they took down in the evening, some of which had been torn by shrapnel, to the families of their former comrades who had been killed on the hill. "We were never without volunteers for that ceremony," recalled Dabney. "They were proud of the flag and of themselves."

He and his men spent 77 days on Hill 881 before the siege was broken in mid-April. They raised and lowered the flag every day until the morning they left – a seemingly routine ritual that had taken on a special meaning.

*References: "[Hill 881-South](#)" and "[Hill 882S and the Super Gaggle](#)"*



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