

MARINES FROM MARS



The Dong Ha Nerd Club -- operators at the south side of the station, call sign NOEFA – November Zero Echo Foxtrot Alpha -- had been through a tough day with the station's bunker getting destroyed. Top, L-R: Ray Gross, Barry Weathersby and Harry Boggs. Bottom: Bill Biggs & Jim Elshoff.

By Elaine Zimmer Davis

During the Vietnam War, there were no cell phones, computers, Skype or the Internet, but many servicemen were able to connect – at least, occasionally -- with family members back home, thanks to the Military Affiliate Radio Service (MARS). Each branch of service set up its own MARS stations, manned by licensed ham radio operators, at strategic locations in South Vietnam. Had it not been for the MARS operators, most of whom served a normal, 13-month tour with the Army, Air Force, Navy or Marine Corps, many of us would not have spoken to our husbands, fathers, sons, or brothers ever again after they deployed to Southeast Asia.

This blog is a tribute to every MARS operator who patched our guys through to the states, coped with the happy and sad calls and put up with bad radio protocol – namely, from family members like me, who never said “over” at the right moment! When I eventually became a boater and learned proper radio speak, I cringed at how I’d screwed up every MARS call from Jerry, which were few in number. I still remember his words and frustrated laugh: “Elaine, you have to wait for me to say ‘over’ before you say anything.” MARS operators, who served in Vietnam, undoubtedly heard this over and over again -- no pun intended!

I recently spoke to Barry Weathersby about his 23 months (overall) in Vietnam - primarily serving as a MARS operator -- and he summed up his extended tour this way: “It was the most important time of my life,” said Barry, an Alabama boy, who dropped out of college at 18 and enlisted in the Marine Corps. “Eighteen to 21 is a pretty formative time in your life, and it felt like I was doing something – I was in a decision-making role, where I could be of some benefit to people.”

A self-professed geek with no athletic ability, Barry still laughs about his decision to enlist in the Corps, where he was “so out place” and had no thoughts that his ham radio experience would play a pivotal role during his time in Vietnam with the Marine Corps. At that point, the Marines had no official MOS for its in-country MARS program, begun circa 1965, but the pickings for ham operators in the Corps were slim, anyway. “We didn’t have many hams, but the Army and Air Force had a lot more,” said Barry. However, the Marines did receive support from the Navy’s MARS operators, serving aboard ship, offshore.

A communications specialist, Barry arrived in Danang in 1966 and was attached to an infantry unit as a radio operator. After three or four months in the field, his soon-to-be mentor, Sgt Bill Biggs, learned that Cpl Weathersby was a licensed Ham Radio Operator. The USMC was looking for a few good men to setup a MARS station and Biggs brought Barry into the fold. Barry “locked and loaded” for the last time and spent the rest of his tour as a MARS operator at I Corps stations in Phu Bai, Dong Ha and Con Thien.

For ham operators, like Barry, the Vietnam gig was a dream in some ways. “We had Collins equipment –top of the line in the world – and all we wanted,” said Barry, who earned his ham license at age 15 and never could afford store-bought gear. “I walked into the Phu Bai station, and someone put a \$100,000 radio in front of me, and said “go play” and then he left to get a beer,” said Barry, remembering that he was still a teenager – yet sitting behind a desk, playing with the Ferrari of radio equipment.

There were other perks, too, such as the living quarters, which were built by the Seabees to accommodate three to five Marines. Essentially, three typical hootches were strung together with one serving as a waiting room for the guys coming in to make calls; another for the radio

equipment and the last for sleeping quarters. "Everything we got, we got as a trade," said Barry, who went from eating in the field to a mess hall – food was tops on the trading list for calls. But for geeks, like Barry, the real coup was that his time in country coincided with the top of the 11-year, sunspot cycle. On a good night, they were able to run 50 patches – every once in while they ran 100 a night. It was always a crapshoot, but single sideband had been perfected, and the MARS guys were in the right place, at the right time.

The calls were supposed to be limited to three minutes; however, if a guy was being told by his girlfriend or wife that she no longer wanted to wait for him, the MARS operators usually let these calls run their course. And from Barry's experience, most of the sad calls were the "Dear John" ones. I did read about an incident, involving a MARS station in one of the services, in which a Dear John call ended horrifically. Apparently, a young soldier tried to salvage his relationship with a girl back home, but it was to no avail. She wanted out, and he told her that he was going to kill himself if she left him, and before they hung up, he made good on his promise.

Barry remembers one potentially sad call as having a happy ending – at least for the caller, but maybe not the Marine Corps. The MARS guys were sitting in their hootch during the monsoon season of 1968. It was dark outside and the visibility was nearly zero, when all of a sudden they heard a plane crash and knew it had happened close by. "An H-34 helicopter had crashed outside our door in the middle of the night," said Barry. "A couple of guys needed help, and we ended up pulling out a Marine Captain and a 1st Lt., neither of whom wanted medical care. Instead, they wanted to find another aircraft right away and get back to Danang Air Base to the MARS station -- the Captain's wife was having a baby." Barry and the other MARS Marine told the guys that they didn't need to get to Danang and proceeded to bring the two slightly shaken officers into the station.

They cranked up the MARS system and reached someone in the states who was willing to canvas all the hospitals in the area of Florida where the Captain's wife was living while her husband was overseas – the Captain didn't know where his wife was delivering. Each call required a team of three operators, beginning with the MARS operator, a ham operator stateside and a PAC Bell operator, all of whom were privy to every MARS conversation. This one was special, and they were all on a mission to find the Captain's wife for a Marine who was about to become a father for the first time. The plan was perfectly executed. The Captain talked to his wife, immediately after the delivery, and everyone involved in the call, cried right along with his newborn baby. It was a watershed moment - literally.

A day or two went by before the guys at the MARS station were questioned about the helicopter that had crashed outside their door. "We told them that we knew it crashed," said Barry, but that was about it. A post script to this incident: Apparently, the guys were fighter

pilots who thought they could remember how to fly a helicopter -- my guess is that there is a lot more to this story somewhere in the annals of Marine Corps history.

After Barry left the Marine Corps, he didn't return to Alabama but rather headed for San Diego, where he married a young lady by the name of Delrae, who worked on the switchboard at Pacific Bell. She was one of his favorite operators, who handled many of his patches from Vietnam, and over four decades later, Delrae is still a favorite! Barry ultimately finished college, became a policeman, went to Law School and eventually became a Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State, spending most of his career in Africa. He and Delrae have two grown children, and Barry continues to be involved with MARS.

MARS has a rich history that even predates the Vietnam War era – Google lists several excellent MARS sites. MARS is still being used in remote areas of the world, when other types of coverage are not suitable. It is also an important source of communication during disasters.