

Cpl William T. Perkins:

Combat Photographer and Medal of Honor Recipient



By LCpl Aidan Hekker, USMC

Editor's note: The following article is the second-place winner of the 2021 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines through the Marine Corps Association. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the third-place winner and honorable mention entries.

Many people in the world serve their time on this earth as if getting through a prison sentence, not knowing the impression they leave. They work, eat, sleep and socialize all while attempting to build a foundation for their lives and perhaps stumble upon an innate sense of purpose. In the modern age of information, the legacy of individuals can be established through their creativity, wealth, or their action. As Marines, we are held to the highest standard of character in both the words we say and the actions we take. Our legacy is instilled from the souls of Marines who didn't necessarily die for their God or their country, but for the men and women fighting beside them. Corporal William T. Perkins Jr. established his legacy with a little bit of courage—and a camera.

Born on Aug. 10, 1947, Perkins grew up hearing the exciting history of his family's military service. He was an eager young man who found a love for photography in high school and was determined to exercise his talents as a Marine Corps photographer. After boot camp, Perkins was stationed at the Marine Corps Supply Center in Barstow, Calif., where many of the photos he took were of parades and other events—hardly the kind of thrilling service Perkins thought he signed up for. This assignment motivated him to apply for motion picture photography training in the U.S. Army Signal Center at Fort



Monmouth, N.J. He was thrilled to finally be able to do exactly what he wanted. The next step for Perkins was to follow his passion to the Republic of Vietnam.

On July 17, 1967, Perkins landed in Vietnam to document the war for the American people to see. War typically consists of engaging the enemy with rifles and explosives, but Perkins did his shooting with a camera. He was initially assigned to 3rd Marine Division in the mountainous region of Phu Bai in central Vietnam. He documented local culture, terrain and the American endeavors that were taking place. This documentation was important for American history because it allowed for the unseen to be seen. It shows the American people where we were and what we did there. Believe it or not, the American objective in Vietnam was not to destroy our opponent but to show the enemy they could not win. That important distinction



Cpl William T. Perkins, second from left, films a medevac on the afternoon of Oct. 12, 1967, during Operation Medina. *Leatherneck* correspondent SSgt Bruce Martin was also covering the operation and he took this photo about two hours before Cpl Perkins was killed. To learn more about this final photo of Perkins, see *Saved Round* in the March 2018 issue of the magazine.

SSGT BRUCE MARTIN, USMC

combined with a vague understanding of why we were there in the first place made American citizens show little support for the war. However, due to a clash of communism and political interests in the West, our involvement was provoked to secure the independence of the Vietnamese nation.

On Oct. 11, Perkins was assigned to “Charlie” Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, to document the ongoing engagement and destruction of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), in Operation Medina. The operation was taking place in the Hai Lang Forest Reserve in the Quang Tri Province of South Vietnam. The forest was considered a base area for the NVA and had not been engaged yet due to a lack of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. The day after his arrival, the NVA ambushed Co C at Landing Zone Dove, the headquarters for 1st Marines, battering them with a cluster of rounds and grenades.

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Operation Medina began on Oct. 11 as two battalions of the 1st Marines made a helicopter assault into LZ Dove in a III MAF drive to clear enemy base areas in the thick Hai Lang forest south of Quang Tri City.



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While protecting themselves from a storm of rounds, a grenade caught the eyes of Perkins and Antal as it landed only a few feet behind the log protecting them. With his camera strapped to his chest, Perkins yelled out, “Incoming grenade” as he dove over the explosive to protect his fellow Marines.

All morning, Co C repelled the enemy assault and cleared the landing zone for medevac helicopters to fly out the injured. Amongst the consuming chaos of the assault, Perkins documented the last helicopter leaving the landing zone. The echoing blades grew quieter as the sun fled past the horizon and Perkins took some of his last photos, though he was unaware of that fact. Without a moment to relax, three companies of Vietnamese insurgents ambushed the command post from multiple sides. The amount of pressure instilled by the enemy was 10 times the force endured earlier that morning.

In the disarray, Perkins found cover behind a log with three other Marines: Corporal Fred Boxill, Lance Corporal Michael Cole and LCpl Dennis Antal. While protecting themselves from a storm of rounds, a grenade caught the eyes of Perkins and Antal as it landed only a few feet behind the log protecting them. With his camera strapped to his chest, Perkins yelled out, “Incoming grenade” as he dove over the explosive to protect his fellow Marines. Shrapnel wounded Antal and Boxill but the blast instantly killed Perkins.

Perkins was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by President Nixon on June 20, 1969, the only combat photographer to receive the Nation’s highest award. His citation states, “Through his exceptional courage and inspiring valor in the face of certain death, Corporal Perkins reflected great credit upon himself and the Marine Corps and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.” Along with Perkins, eight other Marines died that day.

The legacy Perkins wanted to leave may very well be a mystery

now lost in the fog of war. Perhaps he had always imagined giving up his life to save someone else, but who dies for someone they’ve only known for a day? What drives a human being to operate outside of themselves? There is an innate sense of responsibility and connection in every Marine—fighting the same battle, against the same enemy, with the same risks. There’s a beauty in that. It’s a beauty that most people will never comprehend in their entire lives. You could fight all of your natural instincts in order to save the lives of your comrades.

This concept is trained and instilled in the minds of Marines. This is a legacy. It’s our legacy. It provokes motivation, humility and a sense of understanding about why Marines do what they do. It isn’t just a sense of responsibility or duty that compels us to perform courageous acts, but a desire to protect and surrender ourselves to each other. We do this because we are a hive, a single entity composed of many different men and women. We’re not individuals, but a unit. In that, our legacy is secured, and if we embrace our training, values and heritage, instead of living a prison sentence, we’re living an honor.



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Marines and journalists wait in the safety of a trench beside Con Thien’s landing zone until the arrival and touchdown of the helicopter that will take them from the base back to Dong Ha on Oct. 2.

Author’s bio: LCpl Aidan Hekker joined the Marine Corps in September 2019. After graduation from recruit training, he attended the Defense Information School in Fort Meade, Md., where he studied photography, videography, graphic design, writing and public affairs. He is currently stationed at Camp Pendleton, Calif., with I Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group.