

Burning monk: Mal Browne captures an icon for the ages

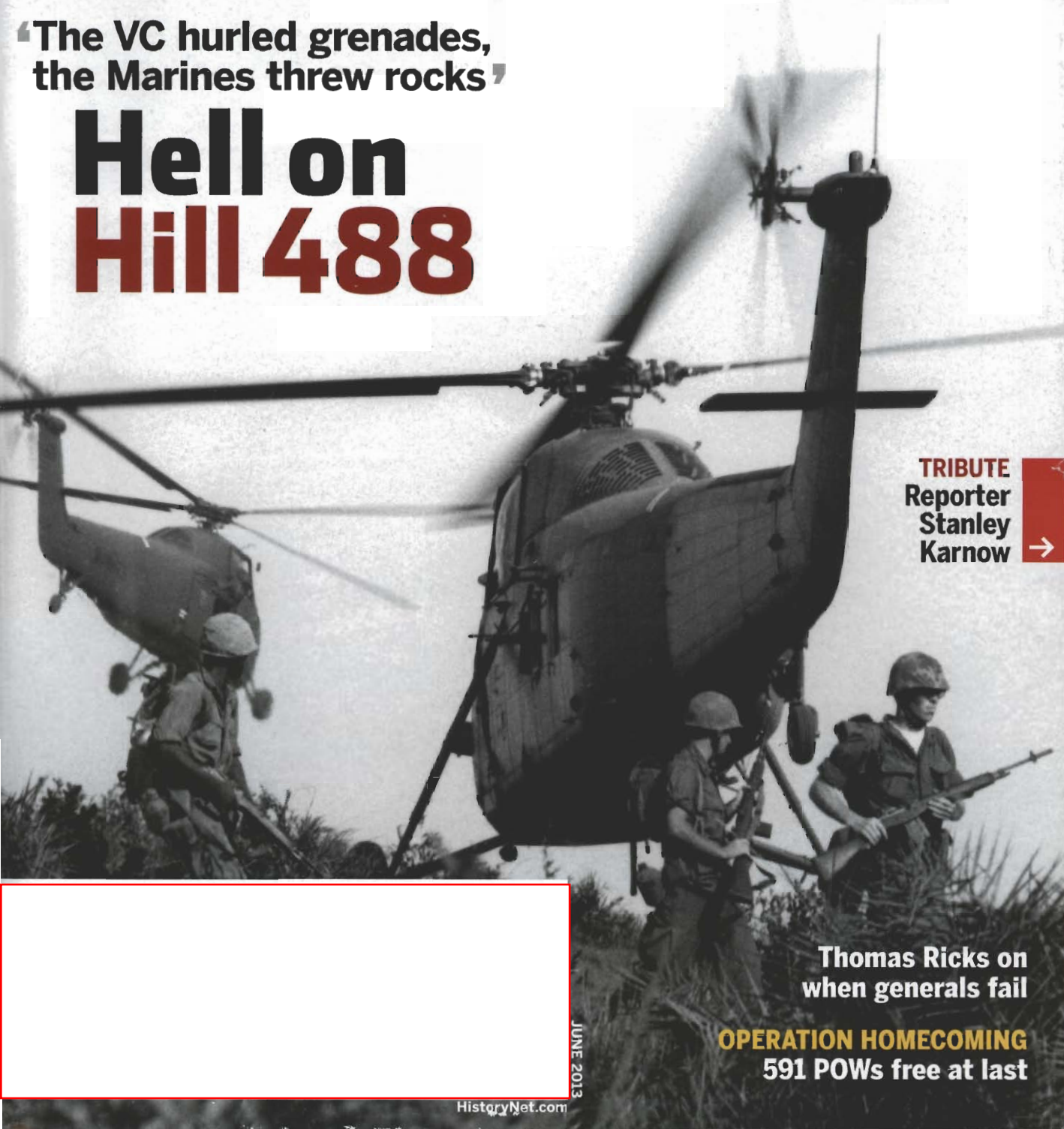
# VIETNAM



LOOKING FOR ANSWERS  
MIA search continues

‘The VC hurled grenades,  
the Marines threw rocks’

## Hell on Hill 488



TRIBUTE  
Reporter  
Stanley  
Karnow →

Thomas Ricks on  
when generals fail

OPERATION HOMECOMING  
591 POWs free at last

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# Wayne Jensen

Petty Officer Third Class, U.S. Navy  
1963-66; November 1967 – November 1968

**W**hen I joined the Navy at 17 in Milwaukee, the Bay of Pigs was a big issue, and everyone thought we were going to war. My mom didn't want my father to sign for me, but dad told her, "Look, he is going to go when he is 18 and he is going to be bitter at you for the year that you wasted of his life." My dad had been wounded in World War II, and his service inspired me growing up.

My first day on active duty, Nov. 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. I was in class at A School in San Francisco, and about noon an officer came in, tears in his eyes, and said, "Gentlemen, your commander in chief has been assassinated." And the first thing that crossed my mind was, "Mom, you were right, we are going to war."

I got orders to USS *Whitfield County*, an LST out of Yokosuka, Japan. It seems my Navy career, for whatever reason, tended to revolve around major historic events. On the way to Japan, we landed in Anchorage and departed just a half-hour before the major earthquake shook Alaska on March 27, 1964. Then, in early August, *Whitfield County* was patrolling off the coast of Vietnam when the destroyers *Turner Joy* and *Maddox* reported being attacked. I was the radarman on watch, monitoring about seven different radio frequencies full of chatter about an attack from North Vietnamese gunboats. It was pandemonium.

In October 1965, I received orders for *Stone County*, another LST, out of San Diego. While we were in dry dock in Long Beach, I was asleep in my bunk one morning when someone threw a shoe at my head. I woke up ranting and raving, and when I looked around, there

was my younger brother, Bruce! He had put in for brother duty. We used to hop trains in our youth, just to experience adventure, like Huck Finn.

In July 1966 we took a Marine detachment to Chu Lai, where it was to disembark at an LST landing. My brother was striking for gunner's mate and was assigned a .30-caliber machine gun on the ship's deck. I was on the radar gang but received special permission from the CO to man the gun on the starboard side so that Bruce and I would be opposite each other as we entered the harbor. So, I'm loaded, I'm John Wayne, got a cigar in my mouth, my helmet on, manning a .30 caliber. As we pull into the landing ramp, there stood about 100 Vietnamese with signs, "Welcome, U.S. Marines." So much for dramatics!

Come October, my term of enlistment was due to come up. Bruce carried my seabag off in Okinawa, and while waiting for my flight, I watched my ship pull out with him still on board, heading back to Vietnam. It hurt knowing they were going in harm's way and I wouldn't be there with him.

Back in Milwaukee in July 1967, we had riots, and martial law was declared. The National Guard was on the streets in jeeps, shotguns out the windows, saying, "Get off the street!" So I called the Navy recruiter and said, "If you can get me Special Forces Vietnam, I'll reenlist for two years." They said, "If you want to convert for a year or two, gunner's mate, we can put you on Swift boats."

Following intense SERE training (survival, escape, reconnaissance and evasion), I was assigned to a Swift boat crew that seemed to be in-country just to get out of country. Once, during a

mission to draw fire off the coast of North Vietnam, I was sitting in the door well when we started taking fire. Our lieutenant immediately had us headed out into the South China Sea. He said: "Jensen, get the hell out of the door. You're gonna get hit." And I said, "At the rate you're going out to sea, I don't have to worry about getting hit."

I happened to be in Da Nang at a mamasan's house the night before the Tet Offensive commenced. In the day, Da Nang was controlled by Americans, but at night the Viet Cong were in control. All of a sudden we heard over bullhorns that any civilians with Americans in their hooches would be killed. Sirens started blaring and I hurried across town to my boat just as it was pulling away. We had orders to go up to Hue City on the Perfume River to patrol a quadrant there. We were taking Marines from one side of the river to the other and, unbeknownst to us, dropping them off to fight at the Citadel. Only years later did I learn how massive the casualty rate was and the significance of Tet.

After my second enlistment, I felt I had done my duty. Later, veterans in my Legion post vilified me because we lost the war. During Desert Storm in 1991, I activated my Air Force Reserve status to join the fight in Iraq, but was sent to Mountain Home AFB in Idaho. Nonetheless, I felt redeemed at having won a war. After 9/11, I wanted to serve during Iraqi Freedom, but my time had passed; now I could only stand by and watch the young reservists leave, knowing their lives would be forever changed by war. ★

Adapted from the documentary *Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories*, by Wisconsin Public Television, [www.wisconsinstories.org/vietnam](http://www.wisconsinstories.org/vietnam).





“One morning in my bunk, someone threw a shoe at me. I sat up and there was my brother Bruce! He’d put in for brother duty”

— Wayne Jensen, right, with his younger brother Bruce