

Heavy Fighting, “Light” Casualties

Newspaper headlines in August of 1968 told of more than six thousand enemy casualties over an eight day span of heavy fighting in Vietnam. The heaviest combat occurred in the I Corps area of operations. The 1st Marine Regiment was one of the American units engaged in this action. Since recapturing Hue after the surprise Tet Offensive, the 1st Marines had been involved in a number of combat operations large and small. Marine casualties were reported as “light,” but they weren’t light enough.

Stephen Randolph Hilton of Winnsboro was an economics major, a member of Kappa Sigma Nu fraternity and the Canterbury Club, the Episcopal student organization on campus. Steve Hilton was a good athlete who enjoyed baseball, football, golf and swimming. He was also a musician, playing the piano and saxophone. While at Clemson, Hilton met Evelyn Elkin and they were married on December 27, 1966 following Steve’s graduation. His sister, Lois, remembered Steve as someone who was easy to be around and who was a lot of fun.



He was also loyal and patriotic, traits that no doubt helped steer him toward the Marine Corps. Hilton graduated as a second lieutenant from Officer Basic Training School at Quantico, Virginia on November 1, 1967. His cohort, Class 6-67, would send more lieutenants to battle and suffer more officers killed or wounded than any Marine basic school class since the Korean War. One of Hilton’s classmates at Quantico was Clemson classmate Richard Kapp, Jr., who, like Steve, was bound for the 1st Marines and Vietnam.

Before shipping out to Vietnam, Steve spent Thanksgiving 1967 at home. By this time, Evelyn was pregnant and Steve was “on cloud nine,” according to his sister. “I had a feeling it would be the last time I saw him,” Lois recalled, “but I prayed I would be wrong.”

Hilton and the 1st Marines were in the thick of the fighting during the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive in the winter of 1968. They helped wrest control of the ancient city of Hue from the enemy.

On August 25, First Lieutenant Hilton was leading his platoon to the aid of a surrounded reconnaissance team near Gio Linh when he was struck by enemy small arms fire and killed. His daughter, Elizabeth Anne, whom he never had a chance to hold, was two-and-a-half months old.

Hilton was awarded the Purple Heart, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, National Order of Vietnam, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation with Palm, and Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal.

In addition to his wife and daughter, Hilton was survived by his parents, his sister Lois and a brother. He is buried in Winnsboro's Episcopal Cemetery.

