

Don Hamblen accomplished what no one else has in the history of the Marine Corps

One Of Kind

BY MAJ, BRUCE H. NORTON, U , S , M , C , (RET.)
NOVEMBER 7, 1993 • PARADE MAGAZINE

Even among U.S. Marines, known for their toughness and courage, the story of First Sgt. Don Hamblen, now retired, is noteworthy and inspiring. He recounts his life and astonishing career in "One Tough Marine," a new autobiography written with the retired Marine Maj. Bruce H. "Doc" Norton and published this month by Ballantine Books. In the following article, Norton describes the biggest challenge of Hamblen's life.

THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT Don Hamblen was one tough Marine. He enlisted in the Corps at 17 and within months was serving as a rifleman and sniper at the height of the Korean War. During his tour in Korea, enemy mortar fire hit Hamblen's squad. When a stretcher team came to their rescue, they were ambushed. Hamblen was shot and left for dead, but he managed to get to a battalion aid station. Eleven days later, he returned to his platoon and was promoted to squad leader.

Throughout a 20-year career in the military, Hamblen displayed a remarkable ability to rebound from serious injury. While serving in Vietnam, he participated in more than 80 covert missions and was wounded twice. To this day, he carries a .32-caliber bullet in his left arm. But most serious was the loss of a leg. As far as is known, Don Hamblen ended up doing what no other Marine in the 218-year history of the Corps has done—fighting in combat with a prosthesis. In fact, he served 30 consecutive months in Vietnam.

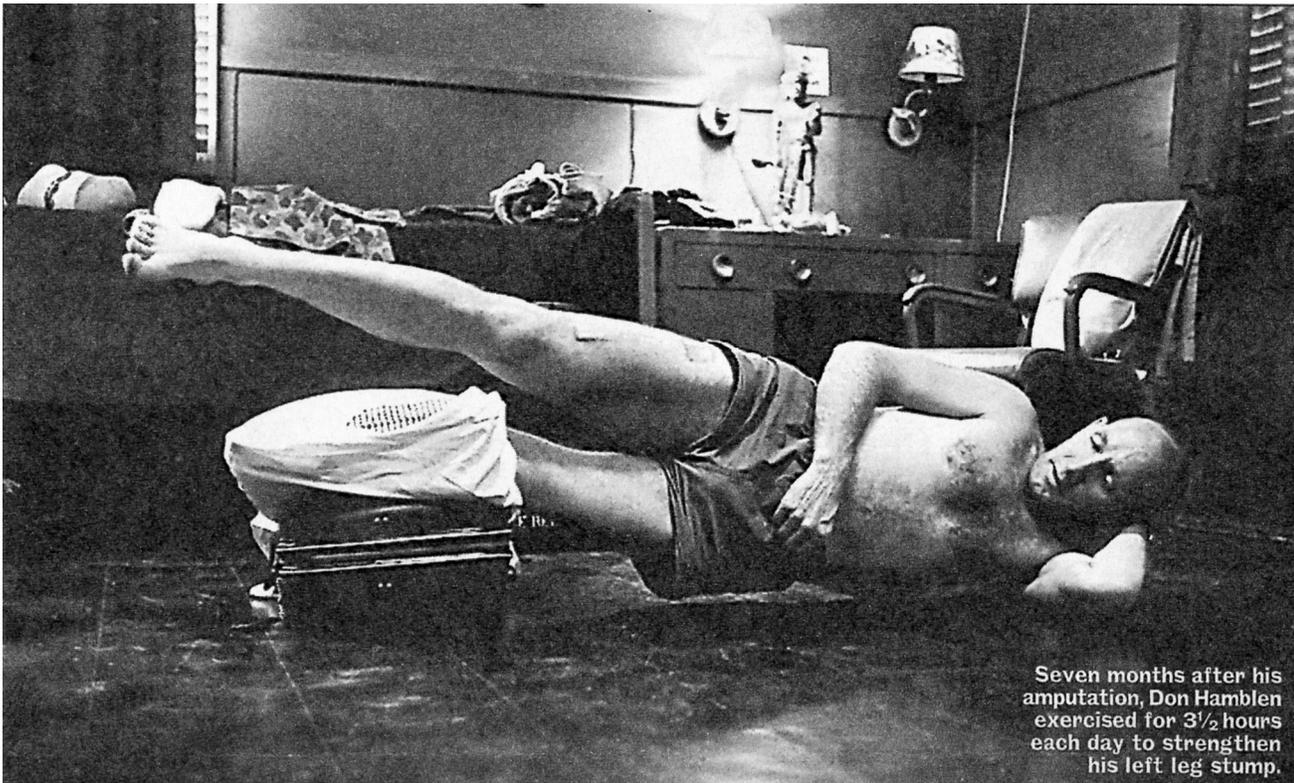
The most difficult challenge of his life began on Sept 21, 1962, when Hamblen and 12 men in his platoon made a parachute jump over Camp Pendleton in California before leaving on a one-year deployment to Okinawa. As jump-master, Hamblen was the last to exit the C-130 aircraft, at a height of 1800 feet. Less than 50 feet above ground, the wind suddenly changed direction and blew his chute upward and backward into some high-tension wires. His canopy became entangled in the lines, leaving him suspended above three 12,000-volt auxiliary lines. As the winds caused him to sway, the canopy slipped, and his left foot caught the middle line, causing an explosive contact. "I felt the shock as it came racing up from below," he recalled. "Everything turned a bright, flaming yellow. Thunderbolts seemed to ricochet through me."

As electrical current and flames engulfed his body, Hamblen's nylon canopy melted, and he dropped 30 feet to the ground, still smoking. "I remember lying on the ground, trying to move, but I couldn't," he said. "One of the electrical lines snapped and fell to the ground, igniting grass fires everywhere. Our training had been so repetitive that it was instinctive for me to try to get to my signal flare and let someone know I was alive, but I was just too weak to do it."

Help finally arrived, and Hamblen was flown to the base hospital nearby. There, doctors informed him that third-degree burns had destroyed the flesh on his lower left leg and foot and a gangrenous infection had set in. Four days after the accident, his leg was amputated several inches below the knee. Hamblen's future as a Marine looked dim.

"My worst moment," he said, "was the realization that I might be forced out of the Marines because of my injury." But Hamblen resolved to continue to serve in combat as an amputee.

In January 1963, Hamblen was transferred to a naval hospital in Oakland for rehabilitation and to be fitted with a prosthesis. There, he taught himself how to stand, walk, run and even dance on his artificial leg. Only 58 days after being admitted, Hamblen was discharged from the hospital and reassigned to limited duty with his reconnaissance company.



Seven months after his amputation, Don Hamblen exercised for 3½ hours each day to strengthen his left leg stump.



1962: Hamblen's platoon visits after his near-fatal parachuting accident. "My worst moment," he said, "was the realization that I might be forced out of the Marines."

"I was angry at what I found at the hospital," Hamblen recalled. "Too many patients had given up and were trying to make their injuries look as debilitating as possible, so they could get a settlement and, I guess, sit around and vegetate the rest of their lives. I knew that if I ever quit trying to walk, I would end up like them. That fear was my motivation to recover. Never letting myself feel that I have a handicap has made all the difference."

After his recovery, Hamblen had to prove to skeptical Marine Corps officers that he could perform his duties without any difficulty, so that he would be allowed to return to full active duty.

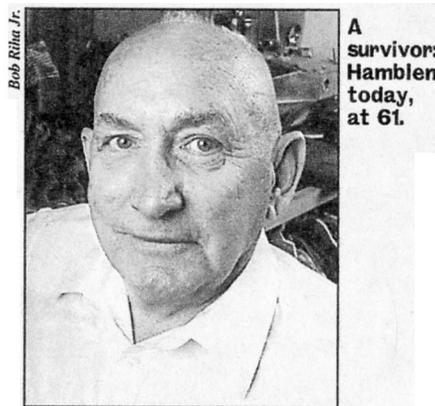
His chance came that same year, in July, when he took the grueling Physical Readiness Test—a 2-minute uphill climb, 2 minutes of deep-knee bends, a 20-foot rope climb, a leap over an 8-foot trench and a 3-mile run while carrying a full combat pack and rifle. After completing the run, Hamblen removed his artificial leg and poured out a cup of blood. His scar tissue had split open.

If anyone still had doubts, Hamblen made his 216th jump in September 1963. He was returned to "full-duty" status, resuming his position as platoon sergeant, company jumpmaster and—after having his prosthesis fitted for a swim fin—scuba diver.

"Combat was the final test of whether I was the equal of any other Marine," said Hamblen, "Surviving in the most difficult times is what really binds Marines."

In the spring of 1965, Hamblen volunteered for the Naval Advisory Detachment, operating out of Vietnam's coastal city of Da Nang. He was assigned as military adviser to a secret 37-man team. "My team's primary mission was to conduct nighttime prisoner snatches of North Vietnamese officers," Hamblen explained. "That combat, was the final test of whether or not I was the equal of any other Marine."

Hamblen served in Vietnam from June 1965 to November 1967. After a year at Camp Pendleton, he was assigned to the U.S. Strike Command at McDill Air Force Base in Florida. In 1969, he was promoted to first sergeant and returned to Camp Pendleton, where he completed his career with the Fifth Force Reconnaissance Company.



Bob Rihra Jr.

A survivor: Hamblen today, at 61.

Hamblen retired in 1970, settled down with his wife, Reiko, and returned to his first love: guiding fishermen and hunters in the Pacific Northwest. He is now 61. Since retiring, Hamblen has been flying a Cessna 170 and has remained fit by swimming a mile or more three times a week. "I credit the doctors and staff for helping me after I retired," he said. "They encouraged me to continue my adventurous lifestyle, and that enabled me to overcome many obstacles."

What advice would he give to young adults who want to join the Marines? "Surviving in the most difficult times is what really binds Marines and makes the Corps a brotherhood," said Hamblen. "Join if you have something to offer."

Asked what he'd say to the physically challenged, Hamblen replied: "Denial, anger, self-pity and rejection can be overcome by hope, because hope is stronger. The strength, determination and courage to recover comes from within, and that is the best foundation we have to build on."