

An Old Soldier Fights A New Battle — On The Homefront

BY ERIC CARLSON

After 24 years in uniform and three tours of duty in Vietnam, the recent battle to prevent Martin-Marietta Aggregates from opening a limestone mine near Southport seemed vaguely familiar to Lt. Col. Robert Quinn (U.S. Army-Ret.).

When he heard the company assure county officials that the mine would not adversely affect the local environment, it gave him uneasy memories about the dangers of complacency. It reminded him of "getting caught in the big blue circle."

Back in 1964, Capt. Quinn was head of an Army Special Forces "A Team" unit advising South Vietnamese volunteers fighting guerrilla forces in the jungles outside Saigon. He had arrived early in the war, back when the Green Berets were still betting on who would be the 100th American killed.

The area around ASF Camp Bearcat was hot. There were casualties expected whenever they ventured out on patrol. The Viet Cong were in such firm control of the area that they had set up roadblocks to collect tolls from passing vehicles. Quinn would see most members of his team die within the next year.

Consequently, he was a bit shocked when he left the jungle for the provincial headquarters to hear a briefing on operations in his area. There, in a palatial French villa with high ceilings and polished marble floors, he saw a big map of the province. It had been overlaid with large fields of blue and a few smaller splotches of red.

The senior province adviser explained that the blue portions were areas where the government was fully in control. Only in the smaller, red areas was there a threat of Viet Cong activities.

Quinn raised his hand.

"Sir, I came here from Camp Bearcat and you've got us in the middle of a big blue circle," he said. "There ain't nothing pacified about that area."

"Our information is accurate, Captain," the adviser said. "Next question."

Sitting in his office at home in Southport last week, Quinn recalled how he felt that day, and how he got the same sinking feeling when he heard Martin Marietta insist that its proposed blasting and de-watering operation would not dry up wells or cause sinkholes or threaten the nearby nuclear power plant or endanger the Sunny Point military ammunition terminal or the massive Castle Hayne aquifer or the Walden Creek estuary.

"I wanted to tell the county commissioners and the planning board and anyone else who would listen: Don't get caught in the big blue circle!"

Quinn is as modest about his leadership role in the Brunswick Mining Awareness Committee (BMAC)—the group that prodded the county commissioners into passing a law banning the mine—as he is regarding his activities with the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).

He deflects praise for his anti-mining activities by pointing out the hard work done by others in the movement. He avoids questions about his wartime decorations—in-

cluding the Bronze Star and Legion of Merit—by noting that many of his comrades deserved as much recognition or more. They just weren't in the right place at the right time, he said. Or they didn't live to accept the honor.

Serving in the military in a time when appearance and reality rarely coincided gave Quinn a healthy skepticism about government, a distrust of bureaucracy and a bloodhound's nose for subterfuge. It also thought him the value of logistics.

The battle against Martin Marietta (round one, at least) was won by assembling data, enlisting experts to interpret it and presenting the facts over and over again to county officials, to state regulators, to the media and to the crowds of local residents who attended public hearings on the mining proposal. Quinn was often applauded at those gatherings, but sometimes not.

"I didn't mind the boos. I didn't mind being called a communist," he said. "You can call me an idiot if you want. But you can't hurt my feelings. I've got the paper to back it up."

It's not easy to rattle a guy who's been blown through the wall of a sandbag bunker by a rocket blast. Or who's watched an enemy mortar shell bury itself in the mud a few feet in front of him (luckily without exploding).

Quinn has fond memories of his Army career, especially about the men he served with and the leaders he respected. But many of his reminiscences illustrate the tragic mismanagement that contributed to the failure of America's involvement in Vietnam.

As the troop buildup began in earnest during 1965, Quinn was sent on Special Forces missions to other Asian hot spots like Malaya and the Philippines. In 1967, his second Vietnam tour took him to the fiercely contested tri-border area near Laos and Cambodia, where he served with the 4th Infantry Division. He remembers taking part in 30 combat assaults in 30 days during that period.

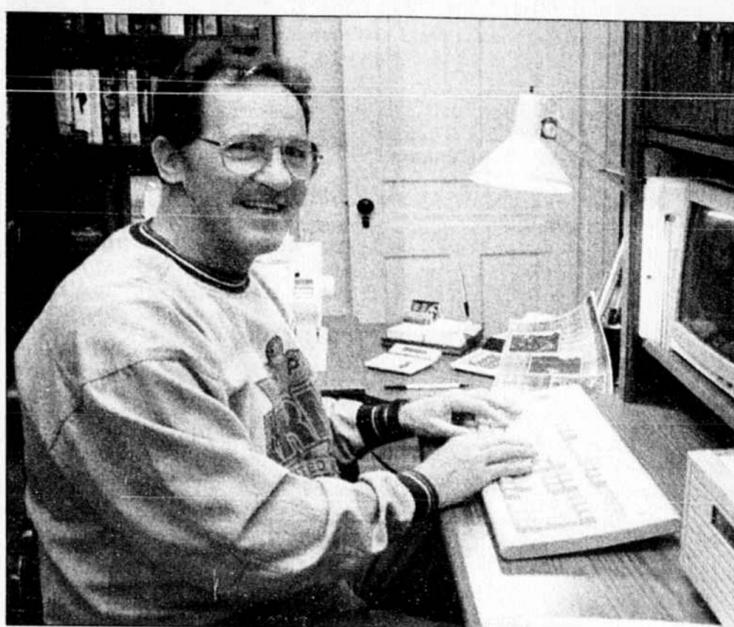
In January 1968, President Lyndon Johnson declared a cease fire in honor of the Vietnamese New Year holiday.

"We had seen cease fires before," Quinn said. "It just meant that we had to pull back and stay in camp while the VC set booby traps so we could go back out and get killed."

At night, Quinn noticed a strange shimmering glow "like the aurora borealis" in the western sky toward Laos. When he asked what it was, another soldier said, "It's been a long time since you've been home, hasn't it? That's traffic!"

Quinn began plotting artillery fire. But headquarters ordered him to stop to avoid violating the cease-fire agreement. So, night after night, they watched the lights as hundreds of truck loads of troops and supplies made their way south along the Ho Chi Minh trail toward what would come to be known as the Tet Offensive.

His third Vietnam assignment, in the early 1970s, brought Quinn "full circle" to the job he was doing nearly a decade earlier. Most American troops had been pulled out and



DISTANCE RUNNER Robert Quinn (left) competes in the 1982 Columbus, Ga., Marathon. Political activist Quinn (above) works at the home office word processor he uses in his efforts as a leader of the Brunswick Mining Awareness Committee. Public speaker Quinn (right) urges county officials to enact regulations to stop the proposed Martin Marietta limestone mine.



GREEN BERET officer Robert Quinn (without hat) poses with the South Vietnamese troops he advised as captain of a U.S. Army Special Forces "A Team" unit in October, 1964. Most of those shown, including the other American, were killed in the fighting.

Quinn was once again an adviser to the government of South Vietnam.

As part of the "Vietnamization" of the war, Quinn was implementing a land-reform program with the Montagnard hill people of the Central Highlands. One of his duties was to prepare monthly reports on activities in his area. Talking about it reminds him again of his dealings with Brunswick County government.

"One of the reports they wanted me to do was a whale boat report, telling how many whale boats were in my district, their condition, how many new ones were being built and so forth," he said. "I called headquarters in Nha Trang and told them we were in the mountains. We didn't even have a lake, much less a whale boat."

"Just fill out the report," he told me. So it was nothing more than an academic exercise. Which seems to be the way our zoning ordinance was written," he said. "The zoning ordinance was (county planning director) John Harvey's whale boat report."

Quinn makes these 20-year transitions faster than most listeners. He explains that he is "100 percent in favor" of county-wide zoning, but insists that the ordinance as written is "a flawed document."

That's a point Quinn tried to get across to commissioners and planners long before the recent flare-up over Martin Marietta. He was one of a handful of people who attended a series of joint workshops in 1992, when the zoning ordinance was finalized.

His message then, as now, is that the county does not need to allow such things as heavy mining operations, hazardous waste treatment facilities, slaughterhouses and chemical storage operations. And as he has said over and over again, the zoning law is the tool that can prohibit undesirable land uses.

"The way the zoning law is written now, it's like buying the best guard dog in the world and having all his teeth pulled out," he said.

Quinn and other Mining Awareness

Committee members were expected to turn out in force Monday night (March 21) to ask the county commissioners to overrule a planning board decision that permits such activities in the zoning law.

Although he won his battle for a local anti-mining ordinance, Quinn's fight against Martin Marietta is far from over. The BMAC is also working with state legislators to lobby the N.C. Mining Commission for a regulatory change that would set a deadline for approving or denying a state mining permit. Otherwise, he fears the process will go on indefinitely as the company tries to come up with more evidence to support its application.

One thing seems certain. Quinn is not likely to accept anything short of victory. He and a lot of his friends were asked to do that once before and he didn't like it.

It's also doubtful that he will tire of the effort. As a marathon runner for more than a decade, he's proven one thing to himself: Bob Quinn can go the distance.

Some Choice Programs for Grange Members*

North Carolina State Grange and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina are names you can trust. Send us this coupon, and our agent will contact you about special programs for Grange Members.*

• Individual • Family

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Telephone _____



Mail to: Coastal Insurance & Realty
P.O. Box 1238
Shallotte, NC 28459
754-4326

*Non members may apply by making application for membership.

© 1993 Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina

Irrigation Maintenance Service

Complete system checks twice each month from April through October.

Protect your investment!

Call Mike today
754-4197

©1994 THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

Shallotte Glass & Mirror

For All Your Glass Needs

Where The Workmanship Makes The Difference

IS MOVING

We will be closed Saturday, March 26 to move our inventory to our new location at

BRADSHER'S AUTO GLASS

6456 Ocean Hwy., 5 minutes south of Shallotte on Hwy. 17
579-6778 • 1-800-579-6778 • FAX # 579-7862

© 1994 THE BRUNSWICK BEACON