

**DeCraene, Alan Charles (Al), 2nd Platoon**

9 May 1945 - 16 February 1970

Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Kewanee, IL

First Lieutenant Alan Charles DeCraene of Kewanee, Illinois was a member of the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 161, Marine Air Group 16, 1st MAW, III Marine Amphibious Force. On 16 February 1970, he was aircraft commander of a CH-46D flying a night time emergency resupply mission in inclement weather in or around Thua Thien province South Vietnam, when the aircraft crashed into a mountain top killing him. First Lieutenant DeCraene is honored on Panel 13w, Line 19 of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial.

**Personal Reflections about Al DeCraene:****From Ray Norton, TBS 1-68, 4th Platoon, 12 Apr 2015:**

I recall that Al had grown a pilot's mustache. It was always neatly groomed and apparently in exact compliance with the Regulations. Al was one squared away Marine. It was an honor to be a Basic School Classmate and a member of his Vietnam combat unit, HMM 161 call sign Cattle Call.

**From Randy Crew, TBS 1-68, 2nd Platoon, 31 Mar 2015:**

In the Corps, some things never change. The exception to that truism is "The Word."

Summer, 1967. Across the grounds outside our second-floor window of O'Bannon Hall, a white hot sun eased into the sky. Inside, already perspiring, my roommate and I broke starch. Meanwhile, through our open doorway, tense voices grumbled, boots pounded the floor, and wall locker doors and foot locker lids slammed. Five minutes to morning formation.

"The word is one canteen!" someone up the hall screamed over the noise. "ONE!"

From down the hall in the 1st Platoon area, "TWO canteens you guys!"

From near me in the 2nd Platoon, near the center of the hall, "Ponchos?"

From the original voice up the hall to my right, apparently our 2nd Platoon acting Platoon Leader for the day, "YES, ponchos and ONE canteen!"

From the 1st Platoon area again, apparently their acting Platoon Leader, "No ponchos, the word is NO ponchos!"

I looked at my roommate, Mike Connor of the New York City area and Holy Cross University. "Here we go again," I said. "First there was the word, then for forty days and forty nights the word was changed."

From near the center of the hall, "Green side out?"

From the original voice up the hall to my right, "YES, green side out! I think."

Same voice from the center of the hall, "Hard covers?"

Same voice that had answered the first question, "If it's green side out then it's got to be hard covers, Numb Nuts! Wake up damn it! Let's go!"

By that time a few of us had stepped into the hallway or stood in our doorways fully dressed in utilities with green-side-out hard covers on our heads, web belts and ponchos in our hands, and a hard look of confusion and frustration in our eyes.

All around me angry voices echoed up and down the halls with accusations being made and the acting Platoon Leaders defending themselves. No one wanted to be the only guy in the company formation that had two canteens instead of one or a utility cover on his head instead of a helmet. Non-conformity was intolerable to Major Angus and all of us remembered the wrath Angus had wrought on Terry Deggendorf the day Terry showed up in formation wearing store-bought green jungle boots instead of spit-shined Marine Corps issue black leather boots.

At that point, with the anger and frustration at a mutiny pitch, a very loud and very commanding voice screamed, "Alright, alright, ALRIGHT!"

I looked to my right just as Al DeCraene leaped from his doorway into the hall. Wearing only a jock strap but accessorized with a soft cover under a hard cover, a loose brown side out camouflaged cover draped half tucked-in over the hard cover, two web belts around his waist with a single canteen on one belt and two canteens on the other, a spit-shined boot on one foot and a tennis shoe on the other, a poncho under one arm, an M-14 rifle in his hands, and a bayonet in the teeth.

The din in the hallway stopped immediately.

Al snapped the bayonet from his teeth, waved it in the air, and screamed, "WHAT'S THE DAMN WORD?"

When the laughter subsided we filed down the stairs and into formation in front of our parked cars in the parking lot. Somehow, and I still don't know how, we all ended up in formation on time and wearing the same proper gear. Even Al.

Yes, The Word may change daily in the Marine Corps but one of the things that never changes is the quality of the young men, and now young women, who choose to be Marines. Such a young man was my friend from TBS 2nd Platoon, NAS Pensacola, and Vietnam—Alan Charles "Al" DeCraene. Born 9 May, 1945, in Kewanee, Illinois, the middle child of three, Al was a NROTC graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a degree in Social Studies. His plan was to finish a 20 year career in the Corps then teach in a Catholic school. But first he married his college sweetheart, Becky, and headed for TBS. After TBS he checked into flight school in Pensacola, Florida, where he and Becky had a son, Kevin, in 1968. He received his wings, transitioned to the CH-46 at MCAF Tustin, CA, and reported to HMM-161 in Vietnam in July, 1969.

Al loved being a Marine and loved everything it stood for. While some of us grudgingly wore the Marine high-and-tight haircut, Al *was* that haircut; he was all Marine all the time. But he never lost his sense of humor about it. He was as playful as he was tough and that's why my lasting memory of him is the one above in the 2nd floor hallway of O'Bannon Hall. Well, that plus a high-and-tight haircut under an impeccably starched and shaped utility cover.

We lost Al in Vietnam in one of those bizarre accidents that sometimes happen in aviation, particularly in a combat setting. [Editor: While enroute to the USS REPOSE on an emergency blood

resupply mission on the night of 16 February 1970, his aircraft crashed into the side of a hill while in inadvertent IFR flying conditions. The crash resulted in the death of all five crew members.]

Yes, Al would have gone far. But as far as he got was far enough to leave behind a lot of good friends with a lot of good memories. I'm proud to be one of those friends.

Randy Crew, TBS 1-68, 2nd Platoon

Postscript: Becky went on to marry one of her fellow classmates from her high school in Centralia, Illinois, and have two more children. She has had a rewarding career teaching computers in a Catholic girl's school in Missouri. Kevin, whom Al would introduce in Pensacola when Becky was pregnant (before ultrasound) by saying, "This is my wife Becky and my son, Kevin" is an electrician and doing well. Becky tells me Kevin was blessed with his father's personality and sense of humor. Those, my friends, were major blessings.

**From John Narney, TBS 1-68, 4th Platoon, 15 Apr 2015:** Al and I were NROTC Midshipmen at the University of Illinois from 1963 to 1967. Even in college Al could be considered driven--driven to be the best Midshipman in the Battalion. Always Impeccable in appearance, with razor sharp creases, high-and-tight haircut, and spit shined shoes; Al set an example for all. His performance on the drill field earned him a place on the Battalion's very successful exhibition drill team, which he commanded his First Class year. He was no less driven in the class room, always giving over 110%. He was a professional; he was a Marine! He was so much of a Marine that many of us were surprised that he went to aviation instead of becoming a Grunt. Al was also very personable and fun to be with. I never flew with him, but I am sure that he approached flying with the same intensity that he displayed both in NROTC and TBS.

I was included in the wedding party when Al and Becky were married. After the rehearsal all of the guys in the wedding went to a bar/restaurant that belonged to one of Becky's relatives. There was some beer drinking and general camaraderie. At closing time we retired to a motel where one big room had beds for all of us. The group included Al's brother, other relatives, and several of us who were with Al in NROTC. Everyone went to bed, and the lights went out. Everything was quiet for a minute and then pandemonium broke out. Someone attacked Al with a pillow and then we were all involved, all still in the dark. After a few minutes, someone turned on the lights and we found Al unconscious on the floor. How were we going to explain to Becky that we had killed the groom? Luckily Al had a tough enough skull that he came around quickly and was not too much the worse for wear the next day.

Al's death was a great shock for all who knew him. He was a great guy and outstanding Marine.