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Ken Fernandes, Newman, IL

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Ken Fernandes

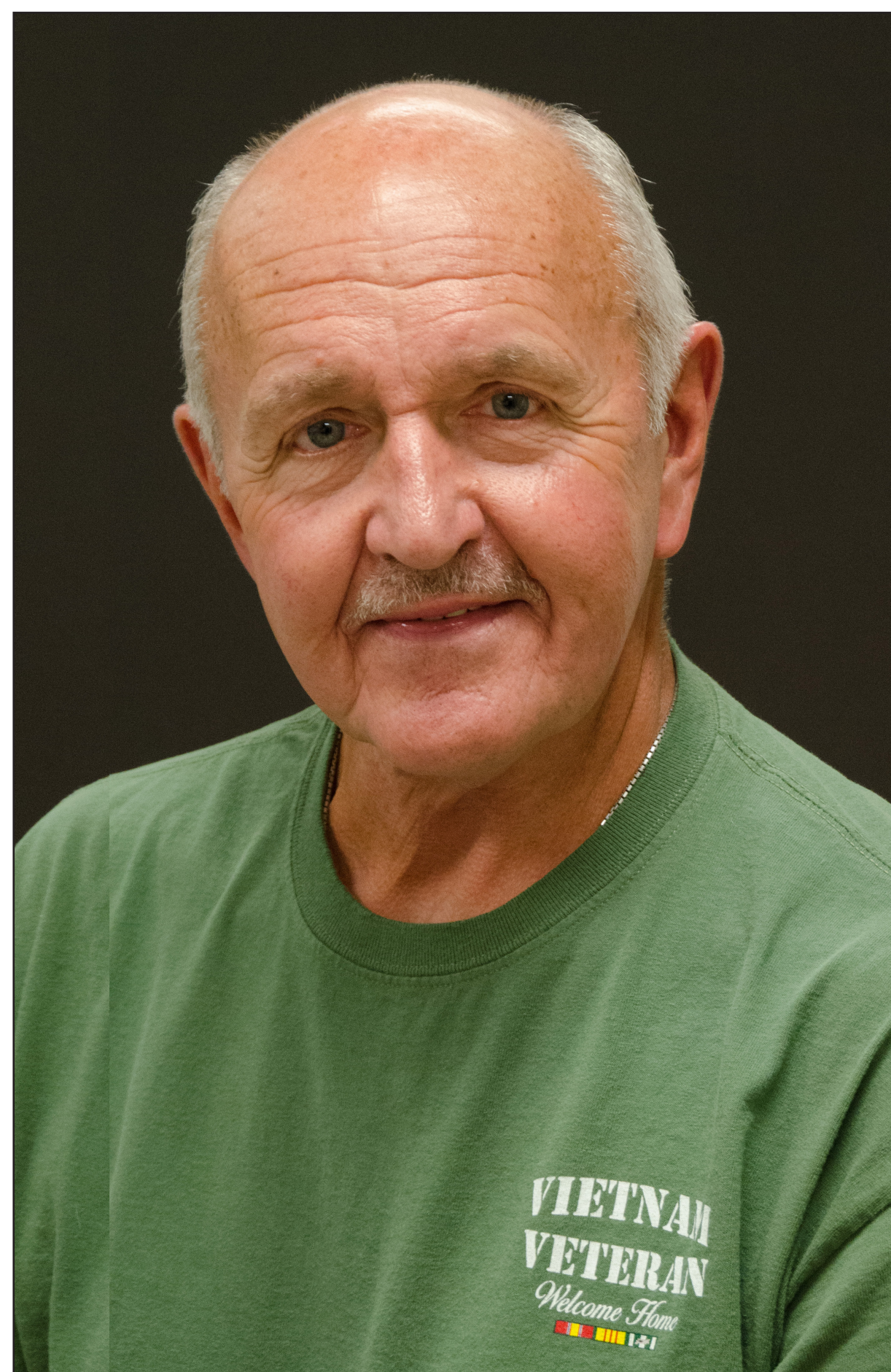
Age: 68

Branch of Military: U.S. Marine Corps

Rank: Sergeant

Dates of Service: November 1966-August 1969

Deployments: Vietnam, August 16, 1967-September 15, 1968



Ken Fernandes

Newman, IL



“1968 was the bloodiest year of the Vietnam War, and I just happened to be there for it. Some people have all the luck.”

“It was a very unpopular war. We weren’t thought of, you know, very well when we came home. But now we’re getting some recognition 50 years later, but a lot of those guys aren’t around to see that, you know, so.

“I’ve been out to Washington, D.C., the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Every time they have something going on out there, like the nurses statue they dedicated, and the wall and the statue of the three soldiers, every time they had a dedication I was out there to go to that.”



The Three Soldiers, a bronze statue on the Washington, D.C., National Mall commemorating the Vietnam War.

Fernandes is a member of the Urbana VFW 630, Marine Corps League Detachment 1231 in Champaign-Urbana, and has 49 years’ membership in American Legion Post 201 in Newman, where he has served as commander numerous times.



Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.



“I got this when I turned 60 years old. I was in Gulfport, Mississippi. My wife said, ‘I’m going to get you a tattoo for your birthday,’ so we went tattoo shopping. It’s an eagle, globe and an anchor. The eagle’s sitting on the globe, and I had the American flag just pieced in the middle there.” Fernandes said the tattoo serves as both a remembrance and an honor.

“I was in the infantry, so in Vietnam I went to Da Nang, and from Da Nang I went to an outpost south of Da Nang... In October of that year we moved to Quang Tri, then from there I went to Con Thien, which is right at the DMZ in the north part of South Vietnam. Then I went to Hill 881. My outfit, Bravo Company 1st Battalion 1st Marines, was the last American troops on Hill 881. Once we left 881, I went to 689, and that’s when I got shot. Tom was on my mind. I probably didn’t have my head where it was supposed to be and should have been, but anyway. I had some shrapnel in my leg and in my back.” After two to three weeks of recovery in Cam Ranh Bay, he went back to his unit.



Fernandes said he thought about the military the whole time he was in high school, so when he was 18, he enlisted. *“My dad was in the Marine Corps. He tried to talk me into going into some other branch and I said, ‘No, Dad. I’m going. I got my mind made up; I’m going.’ So I went.*

“I went in out of high school. I meant to make it a career, but after I spent 13 months in Vietnam I decided to get out, because I would’ve went right back.

“I have four cousins that came from Newman. We’re all first cousins, we all went to Vietnam, and we all came home. Out of a town of a thousand people, Newman, a little bitty place, we, five of us went, at different times, to Vietnam, and all five of us came home.”



Image by Bettmann/CORBIS
Soldiers await supplies on Hill 881 near Khe Sanh, South Vietnam, in March 1968.



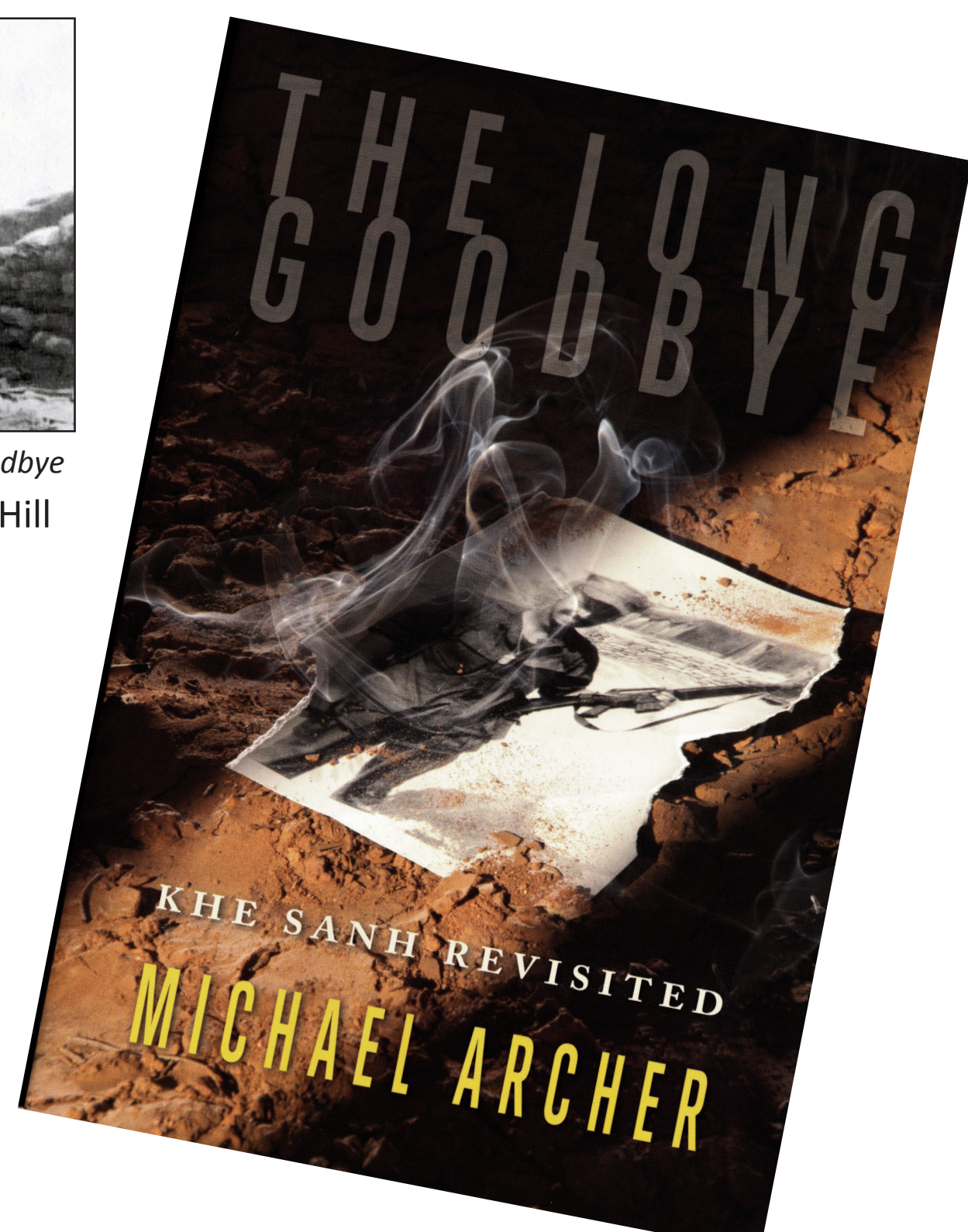
Hill 689, where Fernandes was injured.

“I was one of the last American troops on Hill 881. That’s where I lost my friend, Tom Mahoney.”

The story of Tom Mahoney is chronicled in *The Long Goodbye*, by Michael Archer. Fernandes, described in the book as “a tall, athletic, nineteen-year-old from tiny Newman, Illinois,” served as Mahoney’s squad leader.



Reprinted from *The Long Goodbye*
Ken Fernandes is pictured on Hill 881 South in Vietnam in June 1968.



“You see, Tom Mahoney, he got a Dear John letter from his girlfriend, and we had blown our bunkers that kept us safe on the perimeter because we were going to be helicoptered off the hill early that morning, but we were fogged in. Tom had to go to the bathroom. He went outside the lines without his weapon, they shot him, drug him down the hill, we went after him three times, lost more people, so we had to leave him, and that’s taboo.” That was July 6, 1968. His body was never recovered. *“They’re still looking for it. They’ve gone numerous times, and they’re gonna do a dig where they think his last remains were seen.*

“Come to find out from the intelligence report we got, to make even things worse than losing my good friend, he was a sacrificial lamb for Bravo Company 1st because they were going to overrun us.”

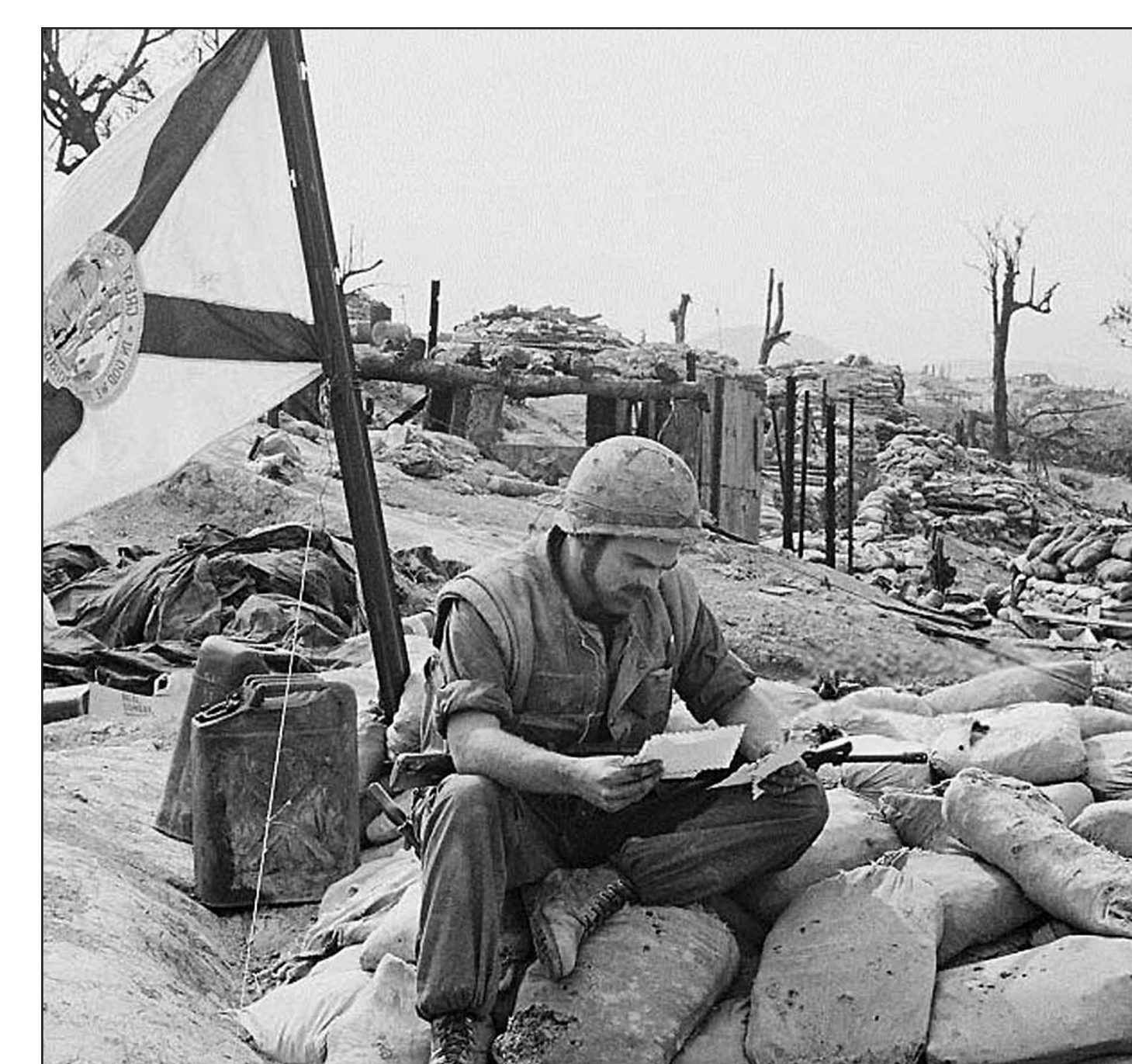


Image by Bettmann/CORBIS
A soldier reads mail atop his bunker on Hill 881 near Khe Sanh, South Vietnam, in March 1968.