



LANCE CORPORAL ABRAHAM MIKE ALI UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS VIETNAM

Mike Ali was born in 1948 in the Lower East Side of New York City. As a young child, his family moved to the Kingsbridge area of the Bronx, a “giant melting pot... with a very ethnically diverse community.” Growing up in the Marble Hill housing project with two thousand other neighborhood children was “a lot of fun. We were kids being kids. I had a good childhood.” Mike attended Public School 143 in the Bronx. The school had wonderful teachers who built a lasting foundation for his life. “It was all about neighborhood. We had Irish, we had Italians, all mixed races and ethnicities.”

At Manhattan Vocational High School Mike ran for the track and field team, running the 880-meter relay, and the 220-yard race, placing first in the city. He was later a contender to compete in the 1968 Olympics, held in Mexico City when he was in Advanced Individual Training (AIT). He came in just a quarter of a second behind his track mentor John Carlos, who went on to win the bronze medal in Mexico.

Having decided to volunteer to serve his country, Mike went to the recruiting booths set up along Fordham Road. He first tried the Navy, but was told their quota was filled. He went to the Army booth. “They told me I’d probably never come back alive.” The Marine Corps recruiter looked at him and said, “‘if you listen and pay attention to everything we tell you, there’s a 50/50 chance you’ll come back home alive.’ He was right. I came back home with one leg, one [good] arm, and one [good] eye.”

Boot camp was challenging, but, as a varsity athlete, Mike had little difficulty. The drill instructor found out that Mike was an athlete and so doubled his



push-ups. His drill instructor was tough on him because he knew what Mike needed was to learn how to survive. Discipline was key. “They were great trainers. Each one of them had served one or two tours in Vietnam. They taught you your job. The bottom line is, that’s what makes you a real Marine.” There were often battalion intramurals, and Mike won most of the races. From boot camp, he was sent to AIT to hone his skills, before being shipped to Vietnam.

He flew to Vietnam in a Pan American airline, in an air-conditioned plane. Arriving in July 1967, he was met with the stifling heat of the tropics. His first thought: “I am not getting out of this plane.” But he did. A rifleman, he was assigned to the Bravo Battery, 2nd Battalion, 1st Division, stationed a few miles south of Da Nang, with its 105 mm cannons. They were sent to patrol the bottom of Hill 55. The area was swarming with Vietcong. “We were involved in fire-fights every day protecting that hill.”

Were they told where they were going next? “The private does not ask the lieutenant ‘where are we going, sir?’ It is not the private’s business to know

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where he is headed.” They moved north as part of a reactionary force, “the NVA fighting us tooth and nail.... We were given two or three days rest, then they gave us a lot of ammo, a lot of C-rations, then they put us in choppers and we took off.”

They landed in Con Thien. “Then all hell broke loose.” The NVA (North Vietnamese Army) siege of Con Thien, the northwest anchor of the McNamara Line, saw some of the heaviest fighting of the entire war. Lance Corporal Ali and his division fought to push the North Vietnamese back towards their border, into the jungles. “We hit them hard.”

It was October 18, 1967, 1600 hours, 4:00 in the afternoon. Ali had the last watch of the afternoon before they moved out. They walked straight into an ambush. The firing started out with local guerillas, then the NVA joined in the fighting. The firefight quickly escalated.

The Marines knew they had to take the high ground. There was a ridge along the top of the hill. Ali was the last to leave their position at the bottom. As soon as he crested the ridge Ali was shot. “I got up, and kept on running. I couldn’t kneel. I was pausing to fire when I got shot again.” Enemy mortars and rocket rounds started landing around the troops. One landed right next to Ali. “There was a tremendous blast. Then everything was happening in slow motion. I was thrown through the air.... I had several broken bones, and lost consciousness....” Under cover of smoke grenades, medevac helicopters rushed in, their heroic pilots heedless of their own lives to rescue their wounded buddies.

Ali was critically injured. He had major wounds to his legs, arms, face, and side. The chopper rushed him to the naval hospital in Da Nang. On the way, he passed out from blood loss, and entered a coma for four days.

In the hospital he dreamed he had died. “I saw my body lying on the field and I thought, ‘well, it’s done’.” Then I woke up.” He kept on losing large amounts of blood, had major infections throughout his body. He had to undergo several major surgeries in Da Nang, the surgeons amputating progressively more and more of his mangled right leg in a desperate bid to save his life. He was airlifted to the Philippines for more operations. He went into another coma on the airplane, waking up in another hospital. “They

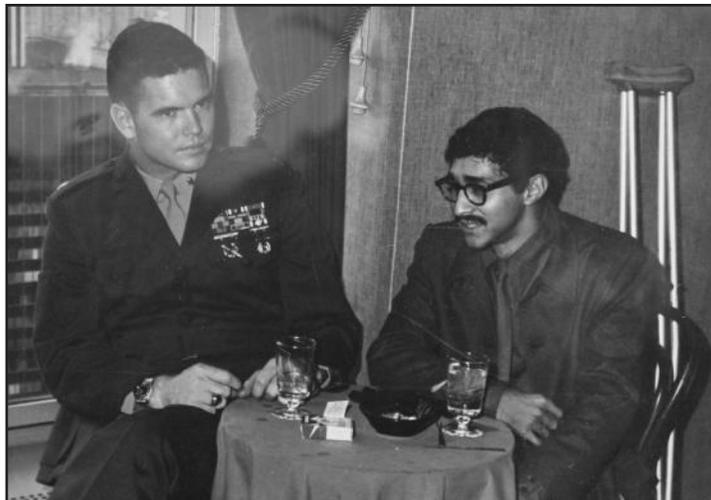
told me I would probably not make it back home. They tell you that so you can be prepared to make your peace.” The doctors, still unsure whether or not he would survive, sent him back to the States for more treatment, first at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, before transferring to St. Albans Naval Hospital in Queens, New York, where he had yet more surgery.

Despite his injuries, uppermost in his mind was the welfare of his parents. “Are they going to be able to handle this? My mother had a cardiac problem and I was afraid she’d have a heart attack when she saw me...if it was tragic for me it was twice as tragic for them. Imagine seeing your son or daughter like that....” His high school track coach came to see him, and brought him a book by H. Somerset Maugham as a gift, which he still cherishes. Groups of friends from the project tried to visit, but “I didn’t have the energy. I had a collapsed lung, other problems.” After three months the doctors, still unsure whether or not he would live, sent him to the naval medical center in Philadelphia, which specialized in caring for amputees. “The doctor warned me, ‘that’s going to be a tough place to be in’ and he was right, it was tough....they couldn’t control the bleeding, kept getting gangrene infections and they finally amputated the whole right leg.” They managed to save his right arm from amputation, although there is permanent damage. Mike since then has undergone many years of rehab and therapy. Fifteen years ago he was diagnosed with TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury).

It was in the hospital in Vietnam where he woke up with the Purple Heart pinned onto his pillow. “They thought it was going to be posthumous.” He believes it was his lieutenant who recommended him for the Purple Heart, as well as the Bronze Star with the V for Valor, although he never received the medal.

During Christmas 1968 Ali was one of three other patients staying over in the hospital. Despite the open wound on his side, the doctors wanted to

send him home to his family. “I just wanted to get better.... It was the wrong choice to make in my condition.” Luckily for him, a nurse that lived upstairs from Ali volunteered to take care of him while he was home. Every four hours, she had to clean his wounds and change the bandages to prevent infection from setting in.



After three days with his family, Ali went back to the Naval Hospital in stable condition. He was discharged to the Bronx VA, where he was an outpatient in rehab for the next five years. He had more surgery on his arm, including a tendon transplant, almost unheard of at the time.

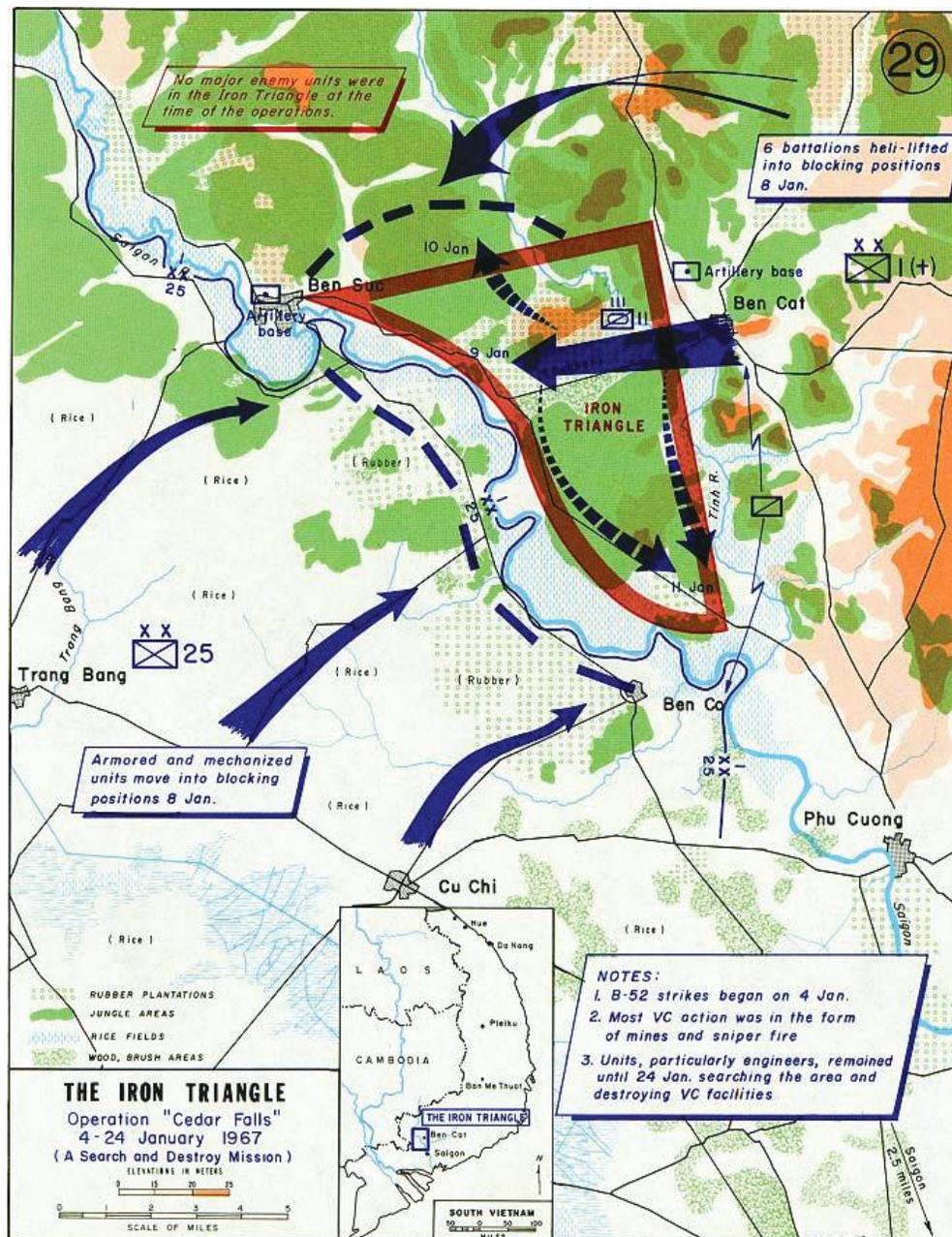
Mike later went to work for the Military Order of the Purple Heart advocating for veteran's affairs, challenging the handling of the issues today's service men and women are facing, due to a lack of understanding by the public and elected officials of the social and medical needs of our country's returning warriors. Many veterans are not receiving the care they need upon their return home.

Ali knows what it is like to be in their shoes. "The adjustment was hard. The question was, 'what now?' I had been a great athlete... and now I'm broken down, and so I asked myself, 'What happens to me now?'"

"I had really good parents. Very humble parents, very loving people. I learned from them a lot, my entire life growing up.... My childhood sweetheart never left my side. In fact I asked her to leave because I felt she should be with someone else. I didn't marry her, but she and other friends, my brothers, were a great help.

"It is always great to do just a little bit more for somebody else. You don't have to die to experience patriotism.

"Honoring veterans is a very important endeavor so that our country never forgets the sacrifices they made for our country. I don't believe in blind patriotism. I respect different opinions and the right to have them. But people must never forget that the freedom we enjoy is only possible because of our veterans."



Maps courtesy of Department of History, United States Military Academy at West Point.