

Marine Sniper Study Guide

Marine Sniper by Charles W. Henderson

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Plot Summary

Carlos Hathcock, the subject of the biography, was born in 1942 and died in 1999. He was a United States Marine Corps sniper with a "service record of 93 confirmed kills and hundreds of probable kills during the Vietnam War." Beyond combat, Hathcock was a championship shooter and a respected instructor in marksmanship and sniper skills. His sniper career ended when he received extensive third-degree burns during a rescue operation. Later in life he suffered from multiple sclerosis.

The biography begins in medias res, and subsequently features a straightforward series of flashbacks to prior periods of time. The flashback sequences provide biographical data about Hathcock's life prior to joining the Marines. There is an appropriate and obvious focus on his skill at, and love for, hunting and the outdoors. An additional area of focus is Hathcock's competitive shooting career, and this is presented in accessible detail with perhaps an over emphasis on the military organizational aspects of competition at the expense of Hathcock's personal involvement. The dominant aspect of the text, however, is a consideration of Hathcock's sniper activities during the Vietnam War. The bulk of material presented considers his initial approximately six month deployment as a sniper during 1966-1967. Several anecdotal scenes are provided which illustrate Hathcock's methodologies and successes.

Most of the situations discussed take place in or around Hill 55, Hathcock's primary base of operations, but the sense of place is poorly developed and the setting devolves to a generic Vietnam landscape. Hathcock lives and operates in close proximity to areas of strong enemy operation and is under daily threat. Significant sniper targets discussed include a woman known as the Apache, an unnamed Frenchman operating as an interrogator for the North Vietnamese, a particularly accomplished enemy sniper known as Nguyen, and a North Vietnamese general. Hathcock is generally most-known for two of these kills—in shooting Nguyen, Hathcock's bullet is said to have penetrated the length of the other sniper's telescopic lens, killing him by entering the brain through the sighting eye; the shooting of the general required a four-day stalk across 1,200 yards of open field under constant observation, culminating in an 800 yard shot.

After his first tour of duty Hathcock returned to the United States and worked briefly in a civilian job before again enlisting and competing in military marksmanship. This was followed by a second deployment to Vietnam where Hathcock was seriously wounded, by being burned extensively. The resultant scar tissue and damage effectively ended his competitive shooting ability. Hathcock spent the next several years as a marksmanship instructor for the Marine Corps before being forced into retirement by multiple sclerosis. After a brief period of depression, Hathcock took up sport fishing.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Carlos Hathcock, the subject of the biography, was born in 1942 and died in 1999. He was a United States Marine Corps sniper with a service record of 93 confirmed kills and hundreds of probable kills during the Vietnam War. His record and extraordinary missions made him a living legend in the Marine Corps. Beyond combat, Hathcock was a championship shooter and a respected instructor in marksmanship and sniper skills. His sniper career ended when he received extensive third-degree burns during a rescue operation. Later in life he suffered from multiple sclerosis.

The text opens with a series of novelistic action scenes. The first scene presents Hathcock behind a .50 caliber machine gun, mounted with a telescopic sight. Hathcock is positioned on a prominence near Duc Pho and is supporting a prolonged Marine operation there, circa February, 1967. Through his scope, Hathcock watches the approach of a twelve-year-old boy, pushing along a weapons-laden bicycle. When the boy walks within range, Hathcock fires a warning shot that demolishes the bicycle and scatters weapons and ammunition in the road. Instead of running, the boy grabs up a rifle and begins to shoot blindly and wildly. Hathcock kills him with a second shot. The second scene presents Hathcock supporting the same operation in the same locale with the same weapon, but operating in support of a larger maneuver. The marines use helicopters to land a striking force that sweeps through enemy-held terrain while a second marine blocking force is positioned in a hidden draw. The marines move together like a hammer to an anvil, causing the enemy to maneuver through large open areas—Hathcock is positioned to overlook one such open area, and as two enemy soldiers make a run for it he kills them. Later that day Hathcock kills another enemy soldier by shooting him through the head at 2,500 yards—the longest confirmed shot of his career and, for many years, the longest confirmed sniper kill. At the end of the day Hathcock kills a fourth enemy soldier. The end of the day concludes Hathcock's tour at Duc Pho, and he returns to Hill 55,

Hathcock is described as a skinny marine with a wiry build and average height. He wears typical combat clothing but uses a North Vietnamese pack. He sports the notable addition of a scraggly white feather tucked into his helmet's headband, a symbol which gains him notoriety among the enemy and the epithet of "Long Tra'ng," or "White Feather." The book then briefly describes the general terrain of Southeast Asia and notes that snipers usually worked in teams composed of two men—a sniper and a spotter. The early portions of the text occur in the vicinity of Duc Pho, but Hathcock subsequently returns to Hill 55 which is his standard base of operations. Hill 55 overlooks Elephant Valley to the north, Antenna Valley to the south, Marble Mountain and Da Nang—friendly locales—to the east, and Charlie Ridge and Happy Valley to the west. Thus, Hill 55 is surrounded by enemy-controlled territory and overlooks vast swaths of potential targets. Hathcock, like most snipers, routinely uses two weapons during combat—a U.S.-made Model 70 Winchester .30-'06 Springfield sniper rifle with



10-power Unertl scope and walnut semi-Monte Carlo stock is the standard sniper weapon. Hathcock pioneers the use of an M-2 .50 caliber Browning machine gun with an extemporized scope mount to bear the 10-power Unertl scope. The .30-'06 had a nominal effective range over 1,125 yards, whereas the .50 had a nominal effective range over 2,500 yards.

After the initial sniper scenes, the book presents a large amount of biographical data on Hathcock. Born in Geyer Springs, Arkansas, Hathcock grows up in rural Arkansas with his grandmother. From a young age, Hathcock is an avid hunter and shooter. Many of his childhood days are spent in the woods with an inoperable Mauser rifle that his father brings back from prior military service. Hathcock's childhood is a blend of practical hunting for the table and imaginative stalking of Nazis. At the age of seventeen, in 1959, Hathcock enlists in the Marine Corps. He marries Josephine Winstead in 1962. The Hathcocks' marriage is made difficult by shortage of money and Hathcock's dedication to target shooting. Prior to Vietnam deployment, Hathcock wins numerous shooting championships including the prestigious Wimbledon Cup for long-range shooting, at Camp Perry, Ohio, in 1965. In 1966, Hathcock deploys to Vietnam with a military police unit, and is later recruited as a sniper. Hathcock initially does not inform his wife of his reassignment duties and for several months she believes him to be a military policeman in a rear area while in fact he is operating as a sniper. She reads of his exploits in the local newspaper which occasions numerous letters of explanation and apology. Chapter 1 concludes with Hathcock contemplating eight years spent in the Marine Corps and his own twenty-fifth birthday.



Chapters 3, 4 and 5

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 Summary and Analysis

Hathcock and Burke, operating as a sniper team, accompany a long-range patrol into enemy-held terrain in Elephant Valley, near the Ca De Song River about ten miles northwest of Da Nang. As the patrol turns back, the snipers detach and work their way silently forward. Hathcock, uninterested in politics or global news, thinks back on his early childhood. He had wanted to be a Marine since age eight, and as a youth had spent many hours pretending to be a marine. Hathcock and Burke make their way to a prominence which affords an extensive field of fire overlooking the river and a roadway running alongside it. Meanwhile, an NVA company of about 150 new conscripts—mostly sixteen- and seventeen-year-old boys—make their way along the roadway. Young and idealistic, they are short on competent leadership and combat experience, though they are well-dressed and equipped and have good weapons. The company commander and senior NCO are combat experienced, but even so lead the company by marching at the head of the column, secure in the erroneous belief that no enemy soldiers are nearby. The NVA company marches toward Hathcock and Burke. The sight is so bizarre to them that they initially fear some trick, but Hathcock aims at the company commander and Burke aims at the rearmost recruit—nearly simultaneously, both soldiers are killed. Before the NVA column reacts, Hathcock kills the senior NCO. The company then breaks and shelters behind a long dike, about 100 yards in length, though several more men are killed in the mad rush for cover. Hathcock and Burke displace and Hathcock kills another NCO who peers over the dike. Eight NVA soldiers boil out of hiding and charge toward the snipers—six are killed before the remaining two flee. They are killed, shot in the back. Another NCO flees from the dike, seeking the safety of the jungle, about 1,000 yards away. He is shot and killed. Having suffered about 10% casualties in only a few minutes, the NVA company survivors cower behind the cover of the dike. The day passes and the trapped soldiers suffer from the direct sun. As night arrives, Burke calls in an order for periodic illumination rounds. The first round reveals the NVA company, in column, retreating toward the jungle. Hathcock and Burke open on the front of the column, killing several men, and the NVA soldiers rout back to the protection of the dike. The third illumination round reveals a squad of soldiers running toward some huts to the east of the dike—the men are killed as the remainder of the NVA company opens fire and then charges the snipers' position. The snipers return fire and kill enough men to break the rush—the survivors again shelter behind the dike, as many as thirty casualties lying dead across the field. Throughout the remainder of the night, illumination rounds come in one after the other, and the NVA soldiers do not move. Throughout the next day, the soldiers do not move. The second night and third day pass also without incident.

Hathcock kills the time by telling Burke about becoming a distinguished marksman and winning the 1965 Wimbledon Cup at the National Match Championship at Camp Perry. The discussion of the 1965 National Match Championship consumes all of Chapter 4, which forms a sort of narrative ellipsis, and the sniper encounter narrative of Chapter 3



resumes, and concludes, in Chapter 5. The Chapter 4 material presents a fair amount of technical information about match shooting and is informative, accessible, and interesting. Competitive shooting in the United States comes to a climax at the annual Camp Perry, Ohio, championships. Various competitions are held in a prolonged event, but the single most-desired title is the Wimbledon Cup—gained on the 1,000-yard National High-Power Rifle Championship competition. The match is shot over a 1,000-yard course at a 36" 5-point bull's-eye with a 20-inch "V" ring. Most competitors shoot a possible 50 out of 50 points, and the championship is thus determined by the number, or count, of rounds landing in the "V" ring. Hathcock, along with one other marine, beat out 3,000 other competitors for a position on the 20-man line for the final's sudden-death showdown. Shooting a service bolt-action rifle chambered in .300 Winchester Magnum, Hathcock scored a "V" on his first shot—seven other competitors did not, and were eliminated. Hathcock scored a "V" on his second shot—six of the remaining thirteen competitors did not, and were eliminated. On the third shot Hathcock again scored a "V"—but three of the remaining competitors did not. With only three men on the firing line, two of them Marines, Hathcock began to feel as if he might win. On the fourth shot, Hathcock waited through nearly all of the three minutes allotted for the wind to calm, losing his round in the final seconds. His being the only "V," he claimed victory.

Chapter 5 returns to the sniper narrative. The NVA Company has been pinned down for four days and Hathcock reasons they must be desperate, out of food, and likely out of water. During the next night, illumination rounds again come in. The NVA Company makes another escape attempt—Hathcock and Burke kill several of the front-runners and many of the remainder of the platoon hits the ground while the bulk of the survivors returns to the dike. The snipers kill the men huddled on the ground, and then displace a good distance to get another angle of fire. Another rush toward the huts ends with at least two dead soldiers. As the night passes, two more abortive attempts end in additional casualties. The remaining men—probably about seventy-five survivors—huddle in panic behind the dike. After shooting a final soldier in the head, Hathcock and Burke then bug out, calling in an artillery barrage followed by a large infantry unit sweep through the area. The snipers return to Hill 55 and later learn that the artillery barrage wiped out dozens of enemy soldiers but also obliterated the shooting fields. The recon patrol had been unable to discern individual kills from artillery kills.



Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9

Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 Summary and Analysis

Hathcock frets about Jo learning of his activities by reading a news column in the local paper. He decides that when his tour of duty ends, in only a few weeks, he will not reenlist and will instead look for a civilian job back home. He reminisces about his first days in Vietnam, five months earlier, when he had become acquainted with Captain Jim Land. Land has been a proponent of Marine scout-sniper teams since at least 1960, and has organized a school which graduated its first class in 1961. Hathcock had been in the first class. In 1965 American forces were taking ever-increasing casualties from enemy sniper action and throughout the period Land argued that counter-sniper operations could best be conducted by Marine snipers. In 1966 Land briefly served as commander of Ordnance Company before being reassigned to lead a sniper group in Vietnam. Land's first task was to organize a cadre of sniper instructors, and for this he selected Sergeant Hathcock, Master Sergeant Donald L. Reinke, Gunnery Sergeant James Wilson, and Staff Sergeant Charles A. Roberts. Later, Land added a few other sniper instructors including Lance Corporal Burke. Land organized the snipers into teams of two, each equipped with an M-14 for the spotter and a bolt-action rifle for the sniper. Land used various rifles and scopes as standard equipment which were not yet available. As news of the sniper organization based on Hill 55 spread, a request came in for counter-sniper operations to be directed against a particular enemy sniper known as the Apache. The discussion of Apache consumes Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

Hathcock, Land, Reinke, Wilson, Roberts, and Burke are assigned to a Marine contingent headquartered on Hill 55. The prominence overlooks a vast expanse of flat country and is well-suited to sniper operations. The North Vietnamese have fielded a large contingent of snipers in the area and, although they do not control the heights, they have been very successful in killing Americans. The enemy snipers are led by a woman known to the Americans as the Apache. About once a week, Apache will capture an American soldier and torture him to death over the course of a night. The torture is carried out close to the American positions, so that the tortured man's screams can be heard for hours on end. The effect of this behavior is, to say the least, demoralizing. Apache has worked in the region for a long time and moved about with seeming invulnerability; her observations and frequent communiqués are highly valued by her commanding officers. Note the detailed description of Apache's physical appearance—a nearly singular attention within the text. Coupled with later speculation about her sexual orientation and her propensity for sexualized torture, the description of her good looks serves to strangely sexualize her. The sources listed at the conclusion of the text are insufficient to establish many salient items presented as factual, regarding Apache.

Shortly after arriving at Hill 55, the snipers kill several enemy soldiers—alerting Apache of their presence. On one of their first assignments, the snipers are ordered to resume identical positions one day after using them to successfully kill enemy soldiers. Land strenuously objects, stating that this will place the snipers in great danger. He is



ignored, however, and the snipers resume the same positions two days in a row. As predicted by the snipers, the enemy is far more observant than generally credited. Within minutes after the first sniper shot, crew-served weapons barrage the sniper position. Hathcock and his buddies slog through mud and slime in a pell-mell flight to escape a hail of .51-caliber bullets. Thereafter, Land is given more leeway in selecting his area of operation. Over the next days several more kills are made. Then, an American patrol is ambushed and one soldier is left behind for dead—in fact, he is unconscious and lightly wounded. He is captured by Apache and then tortured to death. The Marines at Hill 55, including Hathcock and Land, listen to the Marine's screams throughout the night and the snipers vow they will seek revenge. The text is quite graphic in the description of torture and graphically details the emasculation of the Marine. The language quoted in dialogue contains numerous gross profanities. Many of the scenes presented in this section are more akin to fiction than biography—for example, the conversation between the tortured Marine and Apache are presented as verbatim dialogue, and the precise nature and order of torture is presented. Interior thoughts and motivation of Apache and the tortured Marine are provided. Obviously, none of this material can be anything except a fictionalized presentation of an event known only in vague details to any surviving person. In any event, after being tortured the Marine is released and dies of blood loss while attempting to cross the American perimeter.

Subsequently, Hathcock and Land make killing Apache their primary goal. They spend several days in observation and sniper activity, killing a few more enemy soldiers. During one of these kills, Hathcock picks up a white chicken feather and sticks it in the band of his helmet—it will become his legendary symbol. On another night, Hathcock experiences the fatigue and dizziness of an early episode of multiple sclerosis, though he will not be diagnosed for decades. Meanwhile, Apache continues to send valuable intelligence to her superior officers. On one critical event, Hathcock is in the process of switching roles with Land—handing over the rifle for the spotting scope—when an enemy is spotted. The two men tussle for the rifle and the enemy escapes and reports the comedic scene to Apache. She mistakenly concludes that the American snipers are less competent than previously thought. Finally, Hathcock and Land observe a sniper moving through cover and, as Hathcock sights in, Land spots the sniper being followed by Apache. The enemy snipers are adjacent to a registered artillery point so Land calls in an artillery strike. As the artillery shells begin raining down, Apache and the man flee in fear—and happen to flee down an open road directly toward Hathcock's position. He shoots Apache through the lower neck, shattering her spine, and she collapses. Moments later, he sends another round through her chest. The man turns and flees back toward the artillery barrage but is killed by a single shot through the center of his upper back. Hathcock has killed the local bugaboo known as Apache.



Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary and Analysis

Land's sniper platoon is deployed to assist in a larger operation called Operation Rio Blanco. A few snipers remain on Hill 55, but most—including Land, Hathcock, and Burke—relocate to Hill 263 near Song Tro Khuc. The operation is considered successful. Early in the operation, a fifty-year old farmer causes considerable consternation by repeatedly shooting at the American positions. The man, who is not named, is an elderly Vietnamese farmer who has been threatened and intimidated by the Viet Cong into shooting at the Americans. He uses a decrepit, rusty, K-44 rifle and shoots twenty rounds toward the American position every other day. He does not aim, and merely sends the bullets in a general direction. However, even so, the sporadic gunfire into the American compound is objectionable. Interestingly, the unnamed man's biography is presented in more detail than most of the more-prominent individuals in the text; it is unclear how these biographical data could be accurate, however, and the hapless farmer's plight appears to be a fictionalized amalgamation of facts. In any event, Hathcock spends a few days stalking the man and finally shoots him in the head. Hathcock and a few Marines watch the man's corpse kicking around for a long period of time—the gruesome sight affects at least a few of the Marines but to Hathcock appears normal. The text suggests that Hathcock, at least subconsciously, objects to the shot because on this occasion—unlike his many other kills—Hathcock forgets to unsafe his rifle and for a moment cannot figure out why his weapon will not discharge. Over the next few days, the snipers' successes fully convince the local Marines that snipers are an effective weapon. In an expository-dialogue technique reminiscent of bad fiction, Land and Hathcock hold an extended personal discussion wherein dialogue provides much factual information known to both men—this could have been more-effectively presented as standard text in the biography.

A few days later a high-ranking officer requests the assistance of the platoon's 'best' sniper, and Land sends Hathcock, who must accept a secret mission without knowing any of the details. Hathcock, intrigued by the cloak-and-dagger request, readily agrees. Soon, he and Burke are whisked away by helicopter to points unknown in order to shoot a "white man" (p. 132). Very little data is offered beyond what appears to be speculation among the troops. The man is said to be a French officer who is working with the North Vietnamese forces as an interrogator. He is said to be a homosexual pederast who enjoys sadistic torture, apparently little more than a routine characterization of the enemy. Other men indicate recent helicopter losses which have resulted in prisoner captures of pilots, and Hathcock speculates that the man must be killed before he can interrogate the pilots. The cloak-and-dagger aspect of the mission is increased by a man who is apparently in control but has no military rank—presumably a CIA official. All of this, however, is speculative. In brief, Hathcock and Burke work their way to a position overlooking a trail where the man is known to walk every day. They are in position when the man takes his morning walk, and Hathcock makes the shot, killing the man. He and Burke then retreat under heavy fire to a helicopter which takes them back



to base. Later, an unnamed pilot meets them in the base club and buys them a case of beer, offering vague thanks for a job well done.

Operation Rio Blanco continues and begins to wind down. Land relocates to Hill 55 but leaves Hathcock in charge of a handful of snipers. They patrol effectively for ten days, then Hathcock believes the men are too worn down to be combat effective and he sends them all back to Hill 55; Hathcock remains alone and for several days operates as he sees fit, developing a sort of mystique and wearing himself down in the process. On one extended solo trek, Hathcock spots a series of river boats resupplying an enemy position. He waits and sees a field-grade Chinese officer being transported by one boat—he kills the man and one of the Vietnamese rowers before returning to base. An exasperated Land finally sends a man forward to retrieve Hathcock—by arrest if necessary. Hathcock, worried and troubled, returns to Land to receive a fairly mild reprimand and stern orders to remain in his bunk and the chow hall for an extended period of time. Land restricts Hathcock to the base and forbids him to conduct any sniper operations. Hathcock gets a lot of sleep and eats a lot of food and recovers his strength. Land discovers that a huge reward—a bounty—has been placed upon his head and upon Hathcock's head. Their likenesses are included in a flyer announcing the impressive reward.



Chapters 12, 13, and 14

Chapters 12, 13, and 14 Summary and Analysis

With Hathcock still on restriction, a North Vietnamese sniper—the text refers to him only as Nguyen in the title chapter and Nguyen in the text—starts to inflict casualties on the Marine base. Hathcock, in fact, watches one wounded soldier die. After receiving Land's blessing, Hathcock starts observation duties near the camp. Land and Reinke team up and patrol the area, hoping to kill the enemy sniper. On one occasion, Land enters a nearby shrine, long thought deserted, only to discover an enemy scout hiding within. Fortunately, Land is an accomplished pistol shot and kills the enemy by snap shooting him with a .45 Colt. Meanwhile, Hathcock keeps a distant village under observation and sees two enemy soldiers—he believes they are snipers—conversing with a local woman. He takes a long-distance potshot and misses, scaring all three people behind a big haystack. After waiting, Hathcock decides to take a random shot through the haystack, and it sends both men—but not the woman—running. A few minutes later an American patrol moves through the town and picks up the woman. Hathcock rushes to a nearby intelligence officer to report that the woman is working with the enemy. Later, the intelligence noncommissioned officer stops by Hathcock's bunk to thank him for the information. He asks how Hathcock can achieve such spectacular accuracy at huge distances. After rambling around, Hathcock playfully states he often sights in by using a "Swag...Scientific Wild-Ass Guess" (p. 166). He later tells Hathcock that the woman has provided a great deal of non-corroborated information. She claims that an entire sniper platoon has trained in terrain modified to look like Hill 55; their special mission is to locate and kill Long Tra'ng—White Feather. That is, the entire platoon is trying to kill Hathcock. Hathcock takes the situation seriously, but is confident that he is far superior to the North Vietnamese; he is confident that he will be victorious.

Land approaches the end of his tour of duty and one day entertains a group of reporters who have been drawn by the snipers' nearly legendary successes. As he shows them a .50-caliber machine gun emplaced as a sniper weapon with scope, he draws fire from an enemy sniper—presumably Nguyen. Land's commanding officer is disgusted with Land's lapse in battle sense, and confines the man to quarters, the mess hall, the latrine, and the chapel through the end of his tour. Land spends his last few days in Vietnam writing letters to his wife and wrapping up administrative details about his sniper platoon and the sniper training program. Like Land, Hathcock is beginning to approach the end of his tour of duty. His wife Jo requests, via letters, that he return stateside and get a civilian job.

Meanwhile, Hathcock and Burke hunt the enemy sniper, occasionally following a trail to what appears to Hathcock to be a deliberate ambush site. They do not approach these sites but instead skirt around them, looking for the sniper's real hide-out. One day, Hathcock causes a deliberate disturbance and awaits developments. The enemy sniper approaches and makes too much noise—Hathcock and Burke bug out, the enemy in pursuit. A tense standoff occurs around a small clearing. The enemy sniper sees



Hathcock's white feather and shoots—hitting Burke's canteen and momentarily convincing the spotter that he has been shot in the buttocks. The enemy sniper flees, Hathcock and Burke pursue and another prolonged search begins. Again, the enemy sees Hathcock's white feather and tries to sight in on it; Hathcock sees the enemy's scope flash in the sun, and shoots toward the pinpoint of flickering light. Burke observes as the enemy sniper is shot and slumps over, dead. Hathcock grimly smiles and announces "One shot—one kill" (p. 183). They approach the dead sniper and Burke incredulously announces that Hathcock's bullet has penetrated the enemy sniper's scope, killing him through the sighting eye. Hathcock reports the kill to Land who receives it as a sort of going-away present. Note that the factuality of the shot-through-the-scope account offered has been extensively questioned—field testing has indicated such a shot would be practically impossible due to ballistic trajectories and sighting lines. Hathcock has stated he was using standard ammunition—not armor-piercing—during the shot, and even if the trajectories could be explained, a standard bullet would not penetrate an enemy scope in the method suggested. Even so, the shot as claimed has sparked the popular imagination and multiple similar shots appear in fictional media around the world.

Chapter 15 presents what many consider to be Hathcock's preeminent sniper kill—the stalking and killing of an enemy general at his own compound with no assistance. The general, a depersonalized representation of North Vietnamese leadership, is presumed to be the same general directing the Apache's activities and issuing rewards for Hathcock's death; it is unclear how the biography establishes these connections as factual. The general's compound is in a distant area of extensive flats, and a huge field around the compound has been cleared of vegetation and mowed so that it consists only of dried grass extending to a height of about eight inches. After Hathcock accepts the assignment, he receives all available intelligence and retires to plan the mission with Burke. It will be a solo mission and Hathcock leaves behind almost all his gear, including his by-now legendary white feather. Burke fears Hathcock will not return; and Hathcock puts his personal affairs in order. After setting up the details, the remainder of the chapter is divided into the activities of four separate days. On day one, Hathcock approaches the compound's clearing and crawls through several yards of grass during several hours of slow movement. On day two, Hathcock continues his nearly imperceptible motion across the open plain, under observation. He moves slowly enough that he is not noticed, even by patrols that pass all around his position. On day three, he continues his stalk and has a brief but inconsequential encounter with a poisonous snake. Hathcock begins to become disoriented, having spent three days without food or sleep, and with very little water. He considers changing his plan but realizes the original plan must be sound as he and Burke created it while well-rested and well-fed: he is smart enough to stick to the original plan. Hathcock finally reaches his objective—a six-inch deep gully about eight hundred yards from the compound. On day four, Hathcock is in position, having crossed about 1,200 yards in three days of constant slow crawling. Hathcock spends the morning watching conditions and when the enemy general finally appears he takes aim and fires, killing the general by shooting him through the chest. The compound erupts in confusion and Hathcock makes his escape without being seen. He makes his rendezvous spot and naps until his escorting patrol picks him up, and he returns to base. Remaining true to principles, he cleans and

stows his gear and weapon before finally falling asleep. Hathcock's tour in Vietnam has extended through approximately six months at this point in the narrative.



Chapters 15, 16, and 17

Chapters 15, 16, and 17 Summary and Analysis

Chapters 15 and 16, dealing with Hathcock's approximately year-long break, are two of the shortest chapters in the text. Hathcock returns home and the war in Vietnam passes through the peak activity period of United States involvement, with 543,400 American servicemen committed to combat in April, 1969. At home, Hathcock obtains a routine civilian job but detests the daily grind and is unable to assimilate into civilian life. His restlessness eventually leads him to active duty and he begins a rigorous touring schedule of competition shooting with Marine teams. While stateside, Hathcock receives a letter from Land that contains devastating news—Burke has been killed in action. Hathcock learns the details only much later—Burke's position had been overrun by enemy infantry, and Burke had coordinated the last-ditch defense of the command-post which was full of wounded men. For valor in combat, Burke was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross. Weeks later another letter arrives, informing Hathcock that he has been ordered off the competitive shooting teams and back to combat duties in Vietnam. Hathcock is excited, though Jo is worried.

Hathcock returns to Vietnam and is placed in charge of the sniper platoon on Hill 55—his old stomping grounds. He quickly discovers that the sniper program is not what it used to be, however. The platoon leader is a lazy drug addict, the equipment is in disrepair, and many of the men use drugs, dress outlandishly, and do not want to patrol. The platoon is held in low regard by the command structure and instead of being sent on patrol they are usually ordered to police the area's latrines. Hathcock takes immediate control of the situation and begins a vigorous training regimen. Initially this irritates the local commander because his latrine duty is interrupted; gradually he sees that Hathcock will deliver results and very slowly allows the sniper platoon more discretion. This process is materially aided by Hathcock's reputation as a no-nonsense killer of the enemy. Note that the difficult process of forming a disgruntled and ineffective platoon into a crack fighting unit is glossed over in the book. Hathcock also is fortunate to obtain the services of his old shooting friend McAbee, a highly skilled armorer and sniper. Together, the two men mold the sniper platoon into a functioning unit and begin to inflict casualties upon the enemy. On one occasion, Hathcock kills an enemy soldier just as he enters a tunnel hole. One by one, additional enemy soldiers proceed to the entrance and are killed. After seven corpses are piled near the entrance, McAbee starts to laugh at how inept the enemy has become. Then, a vigorously drunken eighth enemy appears and Hathcock shoots him through the chest—the man charges in fury and McAbee and Hathcock both open up on him. The enemy soldier takes several shots before he collapses, leaving the two snipers shaken and amazed at how much damage the man could survive, at least temporarily. Much of the description is given over to a somewhat uninteresting discussion of contention between Hathcock and some of his superior officers. Meanwhile, the sniper platoon relocates to Que Son with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. Hathcock also is shot in the leg while riding in a helicopter. The

wound is not serious and Hathcock resumes duty within the month. The text offers surprisingly little data regarding the wound and recovery.



Chapters 18, 19, and 20

Chapters 18, 19, and 20 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 18 includes eight pages of photographs, including fourteen photographs. All of the photographs are topical, though several of them are not specific to Hathcock's service. Hathcock appears personally in five of the photographs.

McAbee and Hathcock continue to operate in support of the Marines. Hathcock and McAbee, the platoon's commander and second-in-command, respectively, are usually absent from the platoon's command post which infuriates their commanding officer. Thus, they are generally in minor trouble, even though successful as snipers. On one occasion Hathcock and McAbee plan a morning patrol but McAbee's spectacles are wrecked in an artillery barrage. McAbee secures Hathcock's promise to wait, and then travels to a distant station to secure new spectacles. Hathcock tires of waiting and takes Perry, another sniper, on the operation instead. The men accompany a Marine unit and catch a ride on one of several Amtracs in the patrol. On the patrol, Hathcock brags about his record of ninety-three confirmed kills and the high bounty on his head, and explains his trademark white feather. The patrol leaves the main road and proceeds down a trail and Hathcock becomes a little nervous, when suddenly the patrol is ambushed. The Amtrac on which Hathcock is riding drives over a huge mine and explodes in a fountain of flame. Hathcock is dazed but comes to and sees men sprawled about burning—he is also on fire. He stands in the inferno and heaves unconscious Marines to the relative safety of the ground—throwing out Corporal Perry, Privates First Class Roberto Barrera, Lawrence Head, Keith Spencer, and Thurman Trussell, and Lance Corporal Earl Thibodeaux. Hathcock, then severely burned, jumps to safety and collapses onto the roadway feeling like he is soaking wet. He receives almost immediate first aid, and the Corpsman has him drink several canteens of water. Hathcock is then placed on a stretcher and loaded onto a helicopter where he receives more medical care on the way to a hospital ship. The next day, Hathcock is awarded a purple heart. He spends most of the next weeks unconscious and is transferred stateside to a burn-specialist unit at Brooke General Hospital at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. Jo is notified that Hathcock has been grievously wounded and travels to the hospital. Hathcock's gallant action resulting in his injuries informs the title of Chapter 18.

Hathcock's burn wounds are extensive—forty-three percent of his body has suffered full-thickness burns. He receives self-grafts, grafts from cadavers, and even some animal-skin grafts in his treatment. For weeks it is touch and go with high fevers, infection, and delusion. Hathcock gradually recovers and finally is discharged. His extensive burn scars make his body inflexible and he finds it impossible to assume the normal competitive shooting positions. Hathcock gradually resumes military duties, working primarily as a marksmanship trainer. In October, 1973, the last American combat forces leave Vietnam, and in 1975 the Vietnam War comes to an end.

Throughout this period, with various setbacks and advances, Hathcock continues to



heal and work as a marksmanship instructor. He even begins to shoot competitively, but realizes he will never approach the level of shooting required for championships. Every day's shooting leaves him with cracked skin and bleeding welts. In addition, his multiple sclerosis begins to increase in intensity. He dedicates himself to service and earns the respect of those he works with but eventually he is forced into a medical discharge, just months shy of a twenty-year service period. Over the next few years Hathcock descends into a black pit of depression. Finally, even Jo is ready to walk away as he refuses to even attempt a recovery. This final loss spurs Hathcock to activity and he makes a show of recovery, eventually meeting a group of men who like to sport fish for sharks off Virginia Beach. The new sport is exhilarating and captures Hathcock's imagination—it leads to a gradual recovery as his son pursues a military career. Hathcock is repeatedly honored for his service and accomplishments and, at the text's conclusion, is living a peaceful and distinguished life.



Characters

Carlos Norman Hathcock II

Carlos Hathcock (1942—1999) is the subject of the biography. He is described as deeply tanned, five feet ten inches tall, weighing in at between 120 and 140 pounds, and possessed of an incredible constitution and patience. He is a United States Marine Corps sniper with a service record of 93 confirmed kills and more than 300 probable kills during the Vietnam War. Born in Geyer Springs, Arkansas, Hathcock grows up in rural Arkansas with his grandmother. From a young age, Hathcock is an avid hunter and shooter. Many of his childhood days are spent in the woods with an inoperable Mauser rifle that his father brings back from prior military service. At the age of seventeen, in 1959, Hathcock enlists in the Marine Corps. He marries Josephine Winstead in 1962. Prior to deployment, Hathcock wins numerous shooting championships including the prestigious Wimbledon Cup for long-range shooting, at Camp Perry, Ohio in 1965. Hathcock's pre-war military career includes a few demotions, one for striking an officer during a drunken bar brawl.

In 1966, Hathcock deploys to Vietnam with a military police unit, and is later recruited as a sniper by E. J. Land. During the war, Hathcock is credited for killing 93 enemy personnel; military practice at the time requires a kill be confirmed by an acting third party—often a difficult proposition. Hathcock's kill record is thought to have exceeded 400 enemy personnel. Hathcock's 93 confirmed kills place him third on the list of most confirmed kills for an American sniper, but by most subjective standards he is considered the best sniper in US military history. Much of the text details several of Hathcock's confirmed and unconfirmed kills. Hathcock leaves Vietnam in 1967 but returns again in 1969. Shortly after returning for his second tour of duty he is riding on an Amtrac that is targeted by a mine. The resulting explosion wreathes the Amtrac in flame. Hathcock remains aboard long enough to assist—or throw—several other marines from the burning vehicle. This exposure causes severe burns over most of his body, and Hathcock spends the next several years recovering from these injuries. His latter military career is spent training snipers, and he eventually returns to competitive shooting but never attains the levels he did prior to his extensive burn injuries. Hathcock develops multiple sclerosis later in life, and the debilitating illness causes him to eventually give up formal target shooting and, just a few months shy of twenty years of service, receive a discharge from the Marines. Hathcock then enters a period of depression for about two years, but gradually recovers—turning to sport fishing for sharks as a form of therapy—at the time of the text's publication in 1986.

Lance Corporal John Roland Burke

Corporal Burke, from Alabama, is Hathcock's spotter for most of the book. Hathcock considers Burke to be the second-best sniper-spotter in the Marine Corps, second only to himself. Burke shows a predilection for peanut butter, cheese, and crackers—though



this preference is enforced more by necessity than choice. Burke is presented as good-natured, utterly dependable, and skilled at fieldcraft and observing. He accompanies Hathcock on many of the sniper actions described in the text but apparently acts as spotter far more often than as sniper. Apparently, Burke first works extensively with Hathcock during Operation Rio Bravo, during November, 1966. The two men clearly share a good rapport, and Burke sticks up for Hathcock whenever possible.

Surprisingly little biographical data is offered for Burke—he is often described as "big", but next to the wiry Hathcock this description has a wide range of possible meaning. Burke remains in Vietnam when Hathcock rotates home. Burke is killed several months later, his position overrun by an enemy attack. Burke reportedly organizes the last-ditch defense of the command center, filled with wounded men. For his gallant defense, Burke posthumously receives the Navy Cross, the United States' second-highest medal for valor. The news of Burke's death, delivered by a terse letter from Land, devastates Hathcock.

Staff Sergeant Charles A. Roberts

Staff Sergeant Charles "Charlie" Roberts acts as Hathcock's spotter during early 1967, and the two men do not get along very well; Hathcock finds Roberts unprofessional. Roberts is described only as deeply-tanned and shirtless. Virtually no biographical data is presented for Roberts other than that on one occasion he needlessly exposes himself to enemy fire until tackled by a senior NCO. Roberts is the first spotter presented in the text but has an otherwise minor role in the narrative, though he does participate in most of the platoon-sized or larger operations described in the text.

Major E. Jim Land

Major—then Captain—Land recruits Hathcock into a sniper company and, additionally, is credited in the text with convincing the Marine Corps that a sniper program would be effective. In 1960, Land organizes a scout/sniper school in Hawaii. He also writes many letters, memos, and articles that promote the idea of Marine scout/sniper units—one such memo is quoted in Chapter 6 of the text. Land's first group of scout-snipers graduate in 1961, and includes Hathcock. In 1966, Land is serving as the commander of Ordnance Company when he is reassigned to lead a sniper group in Vietnam. Aside from Hathcock, Land also recruits Burke and about fifteen other Marines who will form the basis of the 1st Marine Division's Scout/Sniper Instructors. Land recruits Hathcock due to his target range record, and the men train together in Hawaii, along with Arthur Terry.

Land deploys to Vietnam and has Hathcock assigned to his platoon. During the first months of their tour, Land and Hathcock form a frequent sniper team. Later, as Land's administrative responsibilities increase, he takes to the field less often. Land acts as Hathcock's spotter when Hathcock kills Apache. Land deploys to Hill 263 during Operation Rio Blanco and after his departure leaves Hathcock in command of a handful



of snipers. When Hathcock sends the other snipers back but remains, alone, Land fears Hathcock is taking too many chances and orders him to return to Hill 55, even if it means Hathcock must be arrested. Note that Land wrote the foreword to the text.

Apache

Apache is the colloquial American name given to a North Vietnamese sniper. Apache is described as an attractive female, about thirty years of age, very thin, and about five feet tall. She usually wears her long hair pulled into a tight bun. Her small nose is pointed and her wide eyes are light brown, suggesting French ancestry. She wears a man's wristwatch. Apache is the individual in the text described in such intimate physical terms. She uses a small notebook constructed from American artillery shell containers, and in it records details of her constant observation of the American positions around Hill 55. She is armed with a Russian-built M1891/30 Mosin-Nagant 7.62 x 54mm rifle, topped with a 3.5-power PU scope.

Apache is a keen observer and delights in torturing American soldiers—reportedly because of some sexual dysfunction or homosexuality, though this motivation is ascribed to her by American servicemen. In reality, virtually nothing is actually known about the woman beyond her reported activities. About once a week, Apache manages to obtain a captured American soldier and takes him close enough to American positions that his screams can be easily heard. Then, she spends the entire night torturing him to death. One such scene of prolonged torture is presented in great detail during Chapter 8; it ends with Apache accusing the Marine of raping young Vietnamese girls and emasculating him before allowing him to flee toward the American lines, where he dies in the concertina wire from loss of blood. Several days later, Apache is killed by Hathcock.

The 50-year-old Farmer Sniper

During Operation Rio Blanco, an enemy sniper frequently, but ineffectively, shoots into the American base—the man apparently does not injure or kill anyone. The text delivers a surprising amount of biographical data about the sniper, though it is unclear how this could be factually ascertained. The man is said to have been an uneducated and illiterate farmer and father of at least a few daughters. He has no political ideology and routinely ignores Viet Cong indoctrination. This causes the Viet Cong to single him out—his water buffalo is killed as a reprisal and his family is threatened. In order to escape further harassment, the old man accepts a decrepit rifle with a split stock, rusty action, and fully eroded barrel. He uses this weapon to shoot twenty rounds toward the American camp every few days, making no real effort at aiming. The empty cases are returned to the Viet Cong, and replaced with twenty loaded rounds. After a few days of activity, Hathcock easily stalks and kills the man, shooting him through the head. The man's corpse kicks around gruesomely for several minutes. It is unclear whether the man represents a real individual or an amalgamation of folk lore attempting to explain



why some Vietnamese resisted American forces. The man is presented in sympathetic terms within the narrative.

The White Frenchman

Hathcock is recruited to perform an execution because he is the best sniper available. He must accept the mission without knowing anything about it—and this cloak-and-dagger spiel undoubtedly appeals to Hathcock's vanity. He accepts and, accompanied by Burke, is taken on a long helicopter ride to an unknown location where he receives only a tiny square of map, cut from a larger map. The square shows local terrain but is too small to identify the area. Hathcock and Burke travel overland to a location which overlooks a trail where the white man walks every day. Hathcock kills the man with a single shot through the chest. The operation is apparently organized by the CIA.

Nearly all data presented in the text about the man are speculative. He is said to be a Frenchman operating with the North Vietnamese as an interrogator. He is said to be sadistic and a sexual pervert, a homosexual pederast. Apparently, pilots feel particularly grateful that the man has been killed. All of these elements are speculative, and virtually no biographical data is offered for the man other than that he is white, somebody wants him dead, he is important to the enemy, and he walks the same path at the same time nearly every day.

The Enemy General

The enemy general reportedly commands all of the enemy forces arrayed against the Marines stationed on Hill 55. He apparently holds the Apache in particularly high regard and, learning that Hathcock is responsible for her death, puts a fantastic sum on Hathcock's head as a reward. The general then sets up a sniper training program with a physical near-duplicate of Hill 55 and trains a platoon of snipers in the area before deploying them to Hill 55 to kill Hathcock. One of the snipers—named Nguyan in the text—nearly succeeds. The general is described as an older man with a paunch. Hathcock is assigned the mission of killing the general. The general lives in an isolated compound surrounded by flat land cleared of all significant vegetation. Hathcock traverses about 1,200 yards in four days to reach a distance of 800 yards from the compound's main driveway. The enemy general intends to take an automobile departure in the morning, but is killed when Hathcock shoots him through the chest.

Staff Sergeant Ron McAbee

Staff Sergeant Ron McAbee, or "Mack", is one of Hathcock's old-time acquaintances and is assigned—apparently by chance—to Hathcock's sniper platoon. McAbee is an armorer, responsible for maintaining and accurizing the platoon's sniper rifles. McAbee is an able armorer and has the platoon's equipment functioning smoothly within only a few days of assuming his position. In addition, he is a capable scout and sniper and he often pairs with Hathcock in the field. McAbee is described as large—standing 6' 2"—



and tough, and is one of the most intelligent people considered in the text. He enjoys the complete trust and intimate friendship of Hathcock and they form a formidable team. For example, McAbee is with Hathcock when the sniper team kills eight enemy soldiers in a row—a nearly fantastic episode of ineptness among the enemy described in Chapter 17. A likable and sympathetic person, McAbee has a fairly minor role in the narrative, appearing fairly regularly in only a few chapters.

Privates First Class Roberto Barrera, Lawrence Head, Keith S

The men listed, along with Corporal Perry and Hathcock, are in the passenger area of an Amtrac when it is destroyed by a road mine. With the Amtrac engulfed in flame, Hathcock throws all of the six unconscious survivors to safety while being burned extensively himself. Most of the men survive because of Hathcock's brave action. The listed men occur only briefly in the text.



Objects/Places

Sniper

A sniper is an infantry soldier or serviceman who specializes in shooting from concealed positions at longer ranges than normal. Snipers often use purpose-built rifles. Snipers are typically skilled in marksmanship, camouflage, observing, and field craft. Military snipers are routinely called upon to carry out infiltration, reconnaissance, and observation. During the period considered by the text, snipers worked in conjunction with a spotter.

Spotter

A spotter is a sniper's partner, the second man in a two man team. The spotter is the half of the sniper team who discovers targets by using a powerful spotting scope or binoculars. The spotter can also, if required, direct the sniper's fire onto target, calling shots and suggesting sighting adjustments. The spotter also provides cover and security fire for the sniper. Often, a sniper team is composed of two snipers who take turns acting as spotter for their partner.

Vietnam War

The Vietnam War, often called the Vietnam Conflict, occurred from 1959 to 1975 and pitted the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam and its communist allies against the Republic of Vietnam and its allies—notably the United States of America. U.S. involvement in the war began c. 1963 and reached a peak c. 1969. The U.S. subsequently commenced troop drawdown efforts and the formally ceased offensive operations in January, 1973.

Sniper Log

Hathcock carries a dog-eared, green notebook which he refers to as his "sniper log". He uses the log to jot down facts and incidents related to this work as a sniper. The sniper log is used to complete official reports. The sniper Apache is also noted as constantly referring to her sniper log, constructed from discarded American artillery containers.

Viet Cong

The National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, colloquially known as the Viet Cong, was an insurgent organization fighting against the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. In the text, the partisan fighters themselves are often referred to as Viet



Cong. The Viet Cong fought alongside forces of the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA, and the text usually discriminates among the two types of forces. Collectively, the enemy is often referred to as "Charlie" and on at least a few occasions individual enemy soldiers are abstractly referred to by the name "Nguyen Schwartz". Hathcock generally refers to the enemy as either Homer Hot Dog or the much-preferred Homer Hamburger, referring to them individually as Hamburgers.

Sniper Rifle

A sniper rifle is an especially accurate rifle used by a sniper—though not all sniper rifles are remarkably accurate. The book describes several sniper rifles, including a variety in use by the Marine Corps during the period considered. Hathcock usually uses a sniper rifle built by Winchester—a U.S.-made Model 70 in .30-'06 Springfield, featuring a semi-Monte Carlo walnut stock and topped with a 10-power Unertl scope. The Remington Model 700 rifle was beginning to replace the Winchester Model 70 during Hathcock's second tour. A typical enemy sniper rifle would be a Russian-built M1891/30 Mosin-Nagant 7.62 x 54mm rifle, topped with a 3.5-power PU scope. At least one enemy sniper—nearly combat ineffective—used a rusty SKS with a cracked stock and a badly-eroded barrel.

Operation Rio Blanco

Operation Rio Blanco involved elements of the U.S. Marines, the ROK Marines, and the ROK Army, capturing area in the region along Song Tro Khuc. The operation took place in November, 1966, and included at least twelve snipers. Land, Burke, Hathcock, and other snipers participated in the operation. The time period is considered during Chapters 10 and 11 of the text, and Hathcock is based on Hill 263.

Yankee

Yankee is the name of a dog adopted by McAbee. Hathcock likes the dog and the men appreciate the animal's nearly supernatural ability to detect incoming danger before there are any outward signs. For example, Yankee's deep-throated growl alerts them to danger a few seconds before an artillery barrage. The text features a photograph of Hathcock with Yankee.

The Burning Amtrac

Hathcock and other soldiers ride in an Amtrac on patrol in Vietnam; the Amtrac hits a large road mine during an ambush and catches on fire. Hathcock, engulfed in flames, remains aboard the vehicle and throws other unconscious Marines to safety. The valorous action saves lives but covers Hathcock in extensive and life-threatening burns. Hathcock's actions are described in Chapter 18, and the life-changing burns are described in Chapter 19.

Sport Shark Fishing

After being grievously burned in Vietnam, Hathcock is eventually medically discharged from service and lapses into a deep and prolonged depression. Faced with the imminent likely failure of his marriage, Hathcock turns to sport shark fishing as an avenue of excitement and meaning. He enjoys the sport, makes many friends, and uses it as a springboard to emerge from depression. Several fishing experiences are detailed in Chapter 20 of the text.



Themes

Scout-Sniper

The book is nearly entirely focused on Hathcock's activities as a sniper. Most of the information presented relates to this single aspect of the man; even the biographical data offered attempt to explain why he became a sniper and what traits he possessed that made him an effective sniper. Much of the material presented deals with the establishment of a sniper program within the Marine Corps and even fragments of a typical course of study are presented. Nearly every person mentioned in the text has some connection with sniper activities—nearly every person mentioned in detail—such as Land or Burke—are themselves snipers. Nearly the entire text features Hathcock either training to be a sniper, operating as a sniper, or training others to become snipers.

It is interesting to note that the text is presented in a style that highlights sniper activity as an exciting and accessible activity. In practice, targeted individuals mentioned in the text are nearly faceless caricatures defined simply as enemies; when biographical data is presented they are entirely negative definitions. Contrarily, the snipers themselves are defined in vaguely heroic terms. While there is little doubt that a sniper is highly effective in combat, the text does not examine fundamental assumptions about the nature of the Vietnam War, the role of its combatants, and the rationale behind sniper activities.

Surviving and Succeeding

Hathcock's life was full of difficulties and his desire to achieve success is described as a "...flame that...blazed within his soul..." (p. 278). He was obviously a unique individual with an overwhelming desire to succeed at the task at hand. Remarkable instances of nearly superhuman determination are many. From a poor and difficult upbringing, Hathcock emerges as a national champion shooter and respected Marine. As a Marine, Hathcock remains a determined and respected marksman even as he establishes a family under difficult circumstances. During his two deployments to Vietnam, Hathcock demonstrates a relentless pursuit of success and a determination to survive under harsh conditions. Rising beyond merely survival, Hathcock establishes a record of 93 confirmed kills and hundreds of probably kills, establishing him as probably the most-respected marksman and sniper in the history of the Marine Corps. Hathcock uses the same ferocious approach to life to save several men during the destruction of a vehicle in which he is riding, a heroic action leading to severe burns over most of his body. While many men would simply die, Hathcock regains his health and faces himself with a steely determination to return to competitive shooting and remain in his beloved Marine Corps. Against all odds, Hathcock achieves both goals, often leaving the firing line soaked in bloody sweat from numerous cracking skin wounds. Finally, Hathcock faces dismissal and multiple sclerosis with a renovated will found after a brief bout of depression. Hathcock's personal drive to survive and his unrelenting demand for personal excellence and success form an inspiring core of the biography.

Unrelenting Dedication

Hathcock does not become a national championship shooter and a record-setting sniper through accidental happenstance, nor through common dedication. He achieves both critical successes through an unrelenting dedication which often sees his indomitable will pitted against his failing body. The initial hints of this dedication are offered in Hathcock's childhood biographical data—he would spend long hours afield hunting for the pot and from an early age was determined to serve as a Marine. Hathcock's achievement of winning the Wimbledon Cup demonstrates a nearly superhuman dedication to being the best marksman in the world—literally. This achievement alone is paralleled by few and yet it is only one of Hathcock's many notable successes. After becoming the national champion, Hathcock continues to train and improve his skills, and is subsequently recruited as a sniper. Here, his nearly singular abilities of field craft, patience, and marksmanship combine to make him probably the greatest sniper in the history of the United States' armed forces.

Style

Perspective

The author does not state his qualifications or motivation for writing the text and the usual cover blurb is absent in most editions of the book. The text is dedicated "[f]or all the snuffies of the Corps, and to the memory of my brother Marines..." (p. vii), establishing the author as a Marine. The emphasis within the text placed on technical descriptions of the M-60 machine gun—a weapon which Hathcock never uses in the biography—would appear to indicate the author was familiar with that weapon, though such is an assumption. The book is engaging and exciting, and the language used is very simple. This varies only insofar as a large amount of contemporary slang is presented, though individual words are often given an explanatory footnote; and military jargon is also present. More esoteric military terms are defined, but many are not. Readers unfamiliar with typical military usage would do well to consult a standard military dictionary for such things as divisional organization, standard tactics, typical weaponry, and so forth.

The book's portrayal of sniper activities is in general positive. Snipers are presented as resourceful warriors who lead in combat and defense, and who are performing an essentially moral and correct task. The descriptions of combat kills within the text are generally not notably graphic and are usually concise. Though there are exceptions, the text is not particularly gruesome excepting one prolonged narrative of the torture, emasculation, and death of a Marine in Chapter 8. The text also features a fair amount of graphic profanity, nearly exclusively used as a device to add flavor to dialogue.

Tone

The text is presented in a conversational tone which assumes an implicit sympathy between the reader and the subject. Basic assumptions of the text include the belief that the United States involvement in Vietnam was justified and correct; that the enemy was collectively and individually amoral, ruthless, and routinely involved in illegal activity; that the social milieu stateside was relatively peaceful; that combat is an acceptable extension of political will; and that sniper activities are essentially moral and correct. Whether these assumptions are correct or not is irrelevant, as the text assumes that they are correct.

The setting is not fully established beyond a vague feeling of being in a strange land which is full of insects and plants, and that is hot and wet. For example, from time to time Hathcock relocates from one fire base to another—but they are nearly all indistinguishable from one another and aside from being given a different designation could function interchangeably within the narrative. While this might be essentially true as reflected in the reality of being on the ground in combat at the time, it is derived in

the text more through a failure to develop the setting than through a repetitive description.

Structure

The 310-page text is divided into twenty named and enumerated chapters. The book also includes acknowledgements, a foreword, a preface, and a bibliography. The text's forward is written by E.J. Land, an individual also appearing in the biography. Chapter 18 includes eight pages of photographs, presenting fourteen photographs. All of the photographs are topical, though several of them are not specific to Hathcock's service. Hathcock appears personally in five of the photographs. The text is presented as a biography of Carlos Hathcock, but the biographical materials are fairly limited in scope—basic information is offered but the focus of the book is undoubtedly on Hathcock's service as a Marine sniper. The bibliography serves more as a source reference listing, and includes books, interviews, magazines, newspapers, official U. S. Marine Corps records, and a miscellany of scholarly papers and other documents. Presumably, the basis for many of the conversations recorded in the biography and reported as verbatim are interviews.

The text is atypical of biography in construction. First, it is presented in the form of a novel, beginning in medias res and focusing nearly exclusively on exciting episodes of combat. Very little sense of place or setting is established, and the larger historic background of the Vietnam War is only lightly presented. Extended conversations are reported as verbatim transcripts and the interior thoughts of several individuals are reported. For example, the thoughts and motivation of the sniper known as the Apache are offered as a bizarre mix of narrative assertion and innuendo delivered as unattributed dialogue. While this construction makes the text easily accessible and quite enjoyable, it does want for authenticity about the putatively biographical facts presented.



Quotes

A gentle breeze rustled the white feather in the Marine sniper's floppy hat as he watched the land below through the telescopic gun sight. The soft stir of air had swept up the hill from the rice paddies and, just moments earlier, had touched a twelve-year-old Vietnamese boy whose khaki shirt hung loose and wet across his skinny back and who struggled to keep his heavily laden bicycle upright.

It was a mild February afternoon in 1967, and Stg. Carlos Norman Hathcock II sat cross-legged behind his M-2 .50-caliber machine gun. A year and a half earlier, at Camp Perry, Ohio, the slim, twenty-year-old marine had won the U.S. 1,000-Yard High-Power Rifle Championship. Now he took aim from the southern finger of a solitary peak in South Vietnam.

He squinted as he stared through the eight-power Unertl sniper scope mounted on the top, right-hand corner of the machine gun's receiver. His spotter, a darkly tanned, shirtless Marine staff sergeant named Charles A. Roberts, silently crouched next to him and looked through an M-49 twenty-power spotting scope, watching for the enemy. The brim of Carlos Hathcock's faded camouflage bush hat sagged over the dull green tube of the telescopic sight as he observed a distant speck wobbling toward him up the dirt road.

Slowly the boy on the bicycle grew larger in Hathcock's gun sight, and a troubled expression crept across Hathcock's narrow, suntanned face. He saw a number of rifles—four dangling from the handlebars, two on each side, and three more tied sideways beneath the bicycle's seat. A dirty, green haversack hung from the center of the handlebars, bulging fat with hundreds of rifle cartridges packed in bandoleers or loaded in a dozen banana-curved magazines that protruded from beneath the flap of the old canvas pack. This boy was not just another kid on a bike; he was a Viet Cong resupply "mule" carrying arms and ammunition to an enemy patrol. When night fell, that patrol would turn the rifles that this underfed, twelve-year-old boy struggled to deliver, directly on Hathcock's brother Marines. (pp. 1-2).

Now, once behind the dense, green cover of the weeds and bushes and trees that grew on the edge of his grandmother's backyard, Carlos dropped to his knees. He knelt next to the thick trunk of an old pine that overlooked the yard and magically projected his imagination through space and time to the jungles of Guadalcanal, where he joined the 1st Marine Raider Battalion in action.

The skinny, black-haired boy no longer wore jeans and T-shirt but Marine Corps herringbone and boondocker boots. He faced the Japanese enemy alone. They hid behind every tree, stump, and rock.

Quietly, Carlos shoved the muzzle of his rifle through the prickly vines of a blackberry bush. Pushing with his toes, he slid across pine needles and damp earth without making a sound. There he lay hidden beneath an umbrella of tangled vines.

Today, he hunted the Japanese, much the way he stalked squirrels and rabbits with his J. C. Higgins .22-caliber, single-shot rifle, which he had gotten for his tenth birthday. He rarely missed a shot. (pp. 26-27).



Hathcock's heart pounded too, sending the rifle scope's cross hairs rising and falling over his target—the man who walked at the head of the column and wore a pistol. The sniper waited for his pulse to again settle. He had faced the same dilemma at Camp Perry, Ohio, when he won the Wimbledon Cup in 1965. This shot was not nearly as difficult as firing at a 20-inch V-ring from one thousand yards away.

As his concentration narrowed more and more on the accuracy of this first shot, the pitch of his sight's cross hairs grew less and less erratic until the steadiness of a national champion marksman held the scope's center point steadily on the NVA commander.

The surprise of the sniper rifle's discharge caused Burke to blink, and as he heard the sound of Hathcock's bolt ejecting the shell and sending a second into the Winchester's chamber, Burke fired at the suddenly frozen figure on the far left of the advancing column.

The NVA leader lay dead at the feet of his company. A seventeen-year-old recruit lay dead at the company's rear. A third shot cracked from the distant jungle, and another NVA soldier wearing a pistol reared back with a .30-caliber hole in his chest. (pp. 37-38)

Hathcock sighted down his scope, picking the corner of the west end of the low dike, and sent a round whining toward the river after it ricocheted at a right angle off the wall. Moving his scope along the dike, he found a tuft of black protruding from behind. One of the soldiers attempted to peek over the top and locate the snipers' position. Hathcock took a short breath and held it, bringing his scope's reticle on the black tuft. Slowly he tightened his grip around the small of the rifle stock and began squeezing the trigger. Burke winced as Hathcock's bullet struck the soldier's skull, showering the young NVA troops who huddled beside him with blood, bone, and brains. The sudden bloody shower sent a dozen soldiers scurrying down the wall toward the eastern end, and Burke followed them with three shots from his M-14.

Hathcock shot once more and sent two soldiers dashing from the dike's east end toward the distant huts. Both snipers concentrated their fire toward the middle section of the wall as more of the soldiers saw the escape unfolding and followed their brothers' lead. "Call the artillery, Burke."

Burke called the fire mission, instructing the battery to fire for effect.

"Let's go," Hathcock said.

Both men moved quickly up the ridge and began their trek around Dong Den to their rendezvous with the patrol that would take them back to the fire base and their helicopter ride home. (pp. 66-67)

"As a sniper, you do not have that luxury. You will be killing the enemy when he is unaware of your presence. You will be assassinating him without giving him the option to run or fight, surrender or die. You will be, in a sense, committing murder on him—premeditated.

"To deal with this successfully, you must be mentally strong. You must believe in what you are doing—that these efforts are defeating our enemy and that your selected kills of their leaders and key personnel are preventing death and carnage that this enemy would otherwise bring upon your brothers."



The captain stood silent, looking at his new students' solemn faces, allowing this sermon to digest. He cleared his throat, "Gentlemen, the screening is not done. It has only begun. We want strong, good men—the best. We will weed out the ear, finger, and tooth collectors and send them packing. We will eliminate the hot dogs and cowards and sent them packing with the dummies, liars, and thieves. I will tolerate none of these among my snipers.

"I will tolerate only hard work and dedication. You give us that, and we will make you the deadliest creature on earth—a sniper." (pp. 96-97)

As the fog thickened just before dawn, the Viet Cong woman torturer completed her work on her prisoner. "Goddamn-fucking GI. You no fuck no more," she said, as she approached him with a long, curved knife in her hand. Taking his genitals in her left hand, she jammed the blade's point beneath the base of his penis, grazing his pubic bone. She pulled the knife with a sweeping, circular cut that released both testicles and his penis on one large handful of flesh that gushed with blood.

Blood surged from the gaping cavity left between his legs. She knew that this man could not last long, and, quickly cutting away the cords that bound him to the bamboo rack, she said, shaking with laughter, "Run, GI. Maybe you live—you find doctor in time! Run to wire. We watch Marines shoot you fucking ass."

The Marine ran, shouting unintelligibly, as blood gushed so rapidly from his body that it left jellylike pools on the compost of decaying leaves that covered the forest floor. And when he emerged from the trees on the far side of a rice field that lay below the observation post where Land and Wilson watched, he began waving his arms, screaming incoherently and sobbing.

"The poor bastard's trying to tell us not to shoot," Land said. "Look at him, Gunny. That bitch emasculated him."

Several Marines ran toward the wire, only to see him fall headlong into the curled strands of concertina wire, dead.

The final nightmarish cries had awakened Hathcock, and he had just reached the observation point when the Marine ran the final yards of his life. The sniper hung his head and shook, his anger rising to a nearly uncontrollable peak.

"I want her!" Hathcock said in a strained voice, his teeth and fists clenched.

Land didn't speak, but wrapped his arm around Hathcock's shoulders. He, too, felt the need for revenge. (pp. 101-102)

She looked back and, as she did so, Carlos, coming to his natural respiratory pause, let his finger complete the roll of the rifle's trigger. The recoil sent the Unertl scope sliding forward in its mounts as the bullet cracked across the open land, crossed the narrow stream, and shattered the woman's collarbones and spine, sending blood and gristle spraying over the low, green ferns that lined either side of the trail.

The Marine sniper pulled the scope back to the rear position, cycled his bolt and centered his sights on the woman's body heaped in the center of the trail. The next bullet ripped through her shoulder and into both lungs, scrambling vital organs to a pulp. The man who followed her reeled on his toes when the first shot blew the woman off her feet a few yards ahead of him. In leaping steps, he sprinted back up the hill. A single



shot that Carlos aimed squarely between the man's shoulders killed him instantly. An enormous smile passed across Hathcock's face. Land threw his arms around his sergeant's shoulders and shook him hard, "You got her, Carlos! You did it!" Hathcock laughed in jubilation and then, suddenly, he pounded his fist angrily on the hard-packed earth, and said, "Ya, we did it. We got that dirty bitch. She ain't gonna torture nobody no more!" (pp. 117-118)

"Sir, I can't imagine anybody not wanting to make snipers a regular part of the battalion. Just think if every company had a platoon of snipers who doubled as scouts. How could anyone not want that?" Hathcock asked Land.

"They don't want to consider that you, in a single month, killed more than thirty enemy soldiers, confirmed. Forget probably kills. Compare your success—one man—against an entire battalion's during the same period.

"Operation Macon started back on the fourth of July down near An Hoa. That's real hot Indian country. Third Battalion, 9th Marines worked extra hard clearing the area around the industrial complex. They lost twenty-four Marines from the time they started until the end of October, when they wrapped it up. In the four months that Macon lasted, they confirmed 445 enemy dead. That is a little more than 110 per month. It's a damn good result for a battalion. They're proud of it, too.

"From mid-October to mid-November you confirmed thirty kills, nearly a third of what an entire battalion accomplished patrolling day and night.

"Look at October alone. Operation Kern netted seventy-five VC kills and cost eight Marine KIAs. Operation Teton nailed thirty-seven VC and two Marine KIAs. And Operation Madison blew hell out of Cam Ne hamlet—looking for a VC battalion—and got nothing, not even a sack of rice.

"In the first month we've been in business we have more than sixty kills. That's between seventeen people, and most of them students.

"What if those battalions had snipers working ahead of their operations, or keeping security around their camps. I think the results would have been much more impressive and would have had longer lasting effects against the enemy. Lord only knows how long Charlie keeps on ducking and dodging after we've worked an area.

"If we sell the sniper system, battalion and company commanders won't want to go to war without a sniper platoon to keep the boogeyman out of the bushes."

Hathcock looked Land in the eye and smiled. They both knew that if the Marine Corps could be convinced of the value of sniping, they were the ones to do it. Just then, rifle fire began to crack." (pp. 124-125)

The M-60 machine gun is an air-cooled, belt-fed, gas-operated automatic weapon. It fires the 7.62mm (.30-caliber) ball, tracer, armor piercing, and armor piercing incendiary cartridges (standard service ammunition for field use consists of ball and tracer cartridges in a 4 to 1 ratio). It is able to provide a heavy, controlled volume of accurate, long-range fire that is beyond the capabilities of standard individual small arms. The weapon fires from the open-bolt position and is fed by a disintegrating belt of metal links. The gas from firing one round provides the energy for firing the next; thus, the gun functions automatically, as long as it is supplied with ammunition and the trigger is held



to the rear. The weapon is 43.5 inches long and weighs 23.2 pounds. It has a maximum range of 3,725 meters and a maximum effective range of 1,100 meters. It effectively extends grazing fire (knee high) up to 700 meters. The machine gun has a 100-round-per-minute sustained rate of fire (6-8 round bursts), a 200-rounds-per-minute rapid rate of fire (10-12 round bursts) and a cyclic rate of fire of from 550 to 600 rounds per minute. (p. 140)

Burke reached the body first. He looked at his sergeant and said, "Nobody is gonna believe this unless they see it. Look at that. You put that round straight through his scope!"

Hathcock took the Russian-made sniper rifle from his partner and looked into the hollow tube of a telescopic sight that had had the glass blown from it as his bullet passed down its length and entered the enemy sniper's head through his eye.

"Burke, I just had a scary thought. What's the only way a person could make a shot like this?"

Burke looked puzzled. "What do you mean, Sergeant?"

"Stop and think about it. He had to be sighting his rifle right at me in order for my bullet to pass clean through his scope and get him in the eye like that."

"Why, then he almost had you!"

"Yeah, Burke, when you get down to it, the only difference between me and him is I got on the trigger first."

With the last remaining daylight, Hathcock sat next to the man's body and marked the exact position of the kill on his map. He would pass the information to headquarters, should they want to recover the body. As for the rifle, its lensless scope and bloody stock were a grim reminder to Hathcock of how close he had come to losing this duel, and he carried it away with him. (pp. 183-184)

He faced another problem, however, that would not be so easily solved—rifles. When he reported to Vietnam, he anticipated seeing nothing but the M-40 rifle in use. He saw the first arrivals of the new sniper weapon in January 1967, therefore, it was not unreasonable to expect this weapon—a Model 700 Remington 7.62mm rifle with a 10-power light-gathering, range-finding scope—to be the common denominator among snipers. But what he found when he arrived left him bitterly disappointed. There were vintage World War II era Model 70 Winchesters and M-1D sniper rifles, as well as a couple of M-40X rifles—the test model of the M-40.

The sniper arsenal offered him nothing more up-to-date than the weapons he had left behind in 1967, and in fact, he believed he was handling some of the same rifles he'd fired then. Only now there were a little worse for wear. (pp. 232-233)

He waited until the channel cleared.

"We're headed home today!" Hathcock shouted.

"Where are you two standing right now?" the sergeant major shouted back.

McAbee looked at the map, and the lance corporal who operated the radios said, "This mountain is called My Dong."

Carlos smiled and keyed the radio. "Right now, we are standing on My Dong." (p. 244)



"You look good," Steve said as he and Carlos sat rocking and bobbing in the red and silver hunting boat they named "Shark Buster."

"I feel good," Carlos said, tilting his eyes upward.

"I told you. I would either kill you or make you well," McCarver said.

"I am getting better," Hathcock said as he sat in the rocking and bobbing craft, his bush hat tilted back, and a soft breeze rustling the white feather tucked in his hatband. As he gazed at the sea-filled horizon, listening for the line to spool off the reel and sing to him, a broad smile beamed across his suntanned face. He felt alive again. Again in the arena. (pp. 282-283)

On August 25, 1965, Carlos Hathcock was one of 130 marksmen lying prone on the firing line at Camp Perry, focusing through their rifles' scopes at a target that at 1,000 yards resembled a pin's head. The bull's-eye at which they aimed measured 36 inches across, and inside that black field was a 20-inch circle painted in white with 5-V marked in its center. That small circle within a circle, the V-ring, was the very center of the target, and championships usually rested on the number of times the marksman's bullets struck in that circle—that number was the V-count.

It was opening day for the first elimination round for the Wimbledon Cup. The high shooter from this 130-man relay would join the single high shooters from 19 other relays, also competing for the 1,000-yard championship, and shoot the sudden-death relay for the title—firing a single round at a time in three minutes. (pp. 47-48)

Topics for Discussion

After reading the book, do you feel that Marine Companies should have a permanently-assigned sniper platoon as part of their standard organization? Why or why not?

Regarding the course of instruction offered by Hathcock, Land, and others; what aspects of sniper operations and training surprised you? What aspects of sniper operations and training were what you would have expected?

The text suggests that many people consider sniper operations to be somehow immoral—that warfare is horrible but essentially fair, whereas sniper operations are a form of murder or assassination. After reading the book, do you feel that snipers are immoral, cold-blooded murderers or specialized soldiers?

Hathcock shoots one sniper in the eye—the bullet presumably piercing the length of the dead sniper's telescopic rifle sight before striking the enemy in the eye (review the end of Chapter 13). Realizing that a line of sight is a straight line whereas a bullet's trajectory is an arc, do you agree with Hathcock's assessment that the enemy sniper must have been looking right at him at the moment of firing? Why or why not?

The text is a biography but includes numerous constructions atypical of biography and more typical of fiction. Does this construction make you question the veracity of the incidents presented? Do you think the text represents an authoritative biography? What aspects of the text's construction do you find particularly troubling?

The text discusses two enemy interrogators killed by Hathcock—the Apache and the White Frenchman. Both interrogators are noted as being particularly vicious. The text suggests that both interrogators are homosexual perverts; the Apache a putative lesbian delighting in sexually mutilating men and the White Frenchman a confirmed pederast and sexual torturer. Does this characterization seem gratuitously banal? Is it possible for a heterosexual person of pedestrian sexuality to be sadistically cruel?

The text makes only passing reference to the social upheaval in America during the time period considered, and the sense of place established for Vietnam is not particularly distinguishing from any modern battlefield. Do you think that Hathcock's experiences are presented in a valid way, though almost entirely divorced from a larger social and cultural milieu? Explain your answer.