

Eric England – *The Phantom of Phu Bai*

BLUF: Eric Roy England was a United States Marine with the 3rd Marine Division during the Vietnam War. Serving as a scout sniper, England's 98 confirmed kills ranks him second among Marine Corps Scout Snipers during the Vietnam War era. He joined the Marine Corps at age 17 in 1950. At age 19, England won the U.S. National rifle shooting competition. England served in the Marine Corps for 24 years, retiring from the Marine Corps in 1974 with the rank of Master Sergeant.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness, Integrity, Tact, Endurance, Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm.

SETTING THE STAGE: Eric England was born on 15 April 1933 near Blairsville, Georgia. His parents, Augustus (Buster) and Mary, lived on a small farm owned by Mary's mother in Georgia's Appalachian highlands. England grew up living in the backwoods of Georgia with a deep-rooted family ancestry as hunters and woodsmen. His great grandfather Jasper Nix and great grand-uncle Newton Nix served in the Civil War as Confederate snipers. Newton Nix was killed at the Battle of Antietam near Burnside's Bridge in 1862. England's first cousin James Turner was a Marine rifle instructor at Parris Island. As a teenager, England visited his cousin, and they would spend hours on the rifle range. It was with his cousin that he honed his shooting skills. During his teenage years, England competed in numerous rifle competitions. By the time he entered the Marine Corps at age 17, England was an accomplished shooter.

England completed basic training at Parris Island, SC, in September 1950. He attended infantry training at Camp Lejeune, NC, assigned to the Marine Detachment aboard the *U.S.S. Newport* in January 1951. As a private first class, England was on a journey to expose him to very different cultures from his native Georgia. He sailed the Mediterranean Sea visiting ports in Malta, Morocco, and Algeria for the next two years. England rose quickly through the ranks achieving his sergeant's stripes in July 1952.

Following his stint on the *U.S.S. Newport*, England, was assigned to the Headquarter 2nd Service Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, with the Fleet Marine Force stationed at Camp Lejeune. In October 1954, England transferred to the 3rd Marine Air Wing at Cherry Point, NC. After winning several competitive rifle competitions between 1952 and 1956, England was promoted to staff sergeant in 1956. His skills as a shooter and a teacher of shooters were applied at various Marine Corps training facilities. In 1958 while serving with the rifle range detachment at Camp Lejeune, England was reduced to sergeant due to budget cuts. After 1959, Eric England's official record in the Marine Corps becomes a bit unclear.

THE STORY: It is uncertain how many tours of duty England completed in Vietnam. His sniper colleague Carlos Hathcock confirmed that England was at the Phu Bai Combat Base for parts of 1967 and 1968. During that time, numerous North Vietnamese military officers and Viet Cong officials were reported killed. Among the natives, they began discussing the existence of a "Phantom in their midst." Wanted posters and cards began appearing around the Phu Bai area, offering 100,000 Piastres (\$10.00) for information about this phantom. As the Communist body count increased, speculation among the Communists and the Americans increased about the phantom's identity. Carlos Hathcock already had a bounty on his head. Ho Chi Minh feared Hathcock so much that he issues a three-month salary bonus for the capture or head of Hathcock. The phantom, however, seemed to be a different animal. Whereas Hathcock's targets varied, the *Phantom of Phu Bai* mostly targeted high officials. Hathcock himself, by early 1968, believed that the *Phantom* was Eric England.

When England went on a mission, he most often set out on his own. He stated that he would enter a "bubble." He was dropped in the bush by helicopter, not being retrieved for days, and sometimes weeks, from the jungle. A spotter did not witness most of his kills, but the deaths of officials during his absence were a strange coincidence. Over six months, nearly 50 Communist military officers and officials were reported assassinated by the North Vietnamese government. By mid-1968, the wanted posters began to display the name of GySgt. Eric England with a crudely sketched face.

In September 1968, England reappeared back in the U.S. He continued his shooting competition career, winning National and International trophies. England trained Marine Corps scout snipers, who greatly respected and loved him. England was the type of teacher who led by example with a quiet and smooth demeanor. He never expected his Marines to do anything that he could not. In 1974, England retired from the Marine Corps at the rank of Master Sergeant.

AFTERMATH: Although little is known about Eric England outside his sniper circles, Carlos Hathcock was once quoted as saying, "Eric is a great man, a great shooter, and a great Marine." When England retired in 1974, he felt like a part of him died. His time in the Marine Corps seemed to be the most significant period in his life.

In 2006, a sculpture in England's honor was erected at the county courthouse in Union County, Georgia. England won dozens of competitions in his lifetime, including the 1000 yds Leech Cup Trophy in 1965, 1967, 1968, and 1969. In Marine Corps records, England is credited with 98 confirmed kills and hundreds of unconfirmed kills. Eric England passed away on 7 April 2018.

QUESTIONS

1. How did Eric England display his leadership skills throughout his career?
2. In what ways did Eric England's upbringing prepared him for his life in the Marine Corps?
3. What is the lasting legacy of Eric England?

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