

Remembering my Dong Ha “Mole” Certificate By Ron Fogle

Surely, no one who was in Dong Ha on the morning of September 3, 1967 will ever forget the experiences of that day. I know I haven't, but now that 50 years have passed, I would think that we all may remember it differently than others who were there. This is my recollection of the events of an attack on the base that blew up the nearby ammo dump. I recall we were already at the “A” shop that morning when three rocket rounds landed near the repair line where we staged equipment needing maintenance. On that morning, one of the early rounds landed right next to an MRS 110 scraper that was awaiting repairs and staged near the shop. I think that I recall a ‘Bee saying later that he had just been in that spot checking the equipment a few moments before the impact. Everybody scrambled for cover when the rockets impacted and then, after it got quiet, we went back to work. It wasn't unusual for the enemy to fire a few rockets, mortars and even artillery at various times throughout the day. The galley and our A shop were large metal buildings and apparently they made good targets. Some guys didn't like to eat at the galley or would grab something quickly so that they could take food back to their hut. Such incoming started being more frequent towards late August and I recall that there were only three days in September that we didn't receive any incoming.

The ammo dump where all the ammo was stored was near the airstrip. A new and better ammo supply was planned to be built a bit further away and also with berms to section off the ammo so that it wasn't all in one small area. But that project had not been started at that time. Dong Ha, being a resupply forward combat base for that area, had a bunch of munitions stored in the ammo dump. This ammo stockpile had a live 500 pound bomb in its midst that could be set off to destroy the ammo should the base be overrun. Since we were being told that we were surrounded by about 30K plus enemy troops, we were constantly on alert of being overrun by an enemy assault.

It wasn't too long after those first few rockets hit that more incoming hit over by the airfield and the next thing it seemed like the world was blowing up. Everybody ran like the wind for mortar holes to jump into. That 500 pounder had apparently been struck by a direct hit and the whole dump started to explode. What ammo wasn't exploded right away due to the big bomb going off, started to “bake off” from the intense heat of the ammo that was exploding. There were several injuries to ‘Bees that day and one extraordinary story of a Seabee driving a vehicle into that burning ammo dump and rescuing the Marines who had been trapped in that inferno. I understand that ‘Bee was awarded a Bronze Star for his bravery.

I recall that there were way too many guys in the mortar hole I had run to. We were hunkered down in there for about 8 hours while the ammo continued to explode. A short time after we had run for the mortar trench word was passed that there was a chance of being overrun by the enemy. We were told to get our weapons if we didn't already have them, as well as our other combat gear and then go back to the mortar holes.

One gets to know their “brothers” quite well when forced into a small area for that long under those circumstances. About 8 or so hours later when the explosions had pretty well calmed down, I remember being given a handful of stakes and told to form a line and sweep through an assigned area of the base to locate and stake unexploded ordinance. That was pretty intimidating to someone who did not know much about such ordinance or what it may take to set it off. I was paired with another Seabee and we found several pieces of ordinance. I don’t recall what they were, but some appeared to be mortars and other similar small ordinance. We were instructed to drive a stake in the ground near the ordinance so a bomb disposal squad could handle the cleanup. While we were told most of the ordinance was stored without the firing mechanisms being affixed, that really didn’t seem to ease our concerns much when driving stakes into the ground next to the found munitions.

There are pictures in our cruise book showing the damage caused to the base structures just due to concussion from the explosions. As I recall, the word was that our base was about 90% complete prior to the ammo dump being hit and it was described as being about 90% damaged after that event. There was much to do just to fix up the damage to base structures. Some damage was more severe such as building walls completely collapsed and then there was minor damage like some roofing blown off or screen wire blown out.

To commemorate the event and, I guess to sort of make light of it, everyone in the battalion was awarded a certificate saying that they had officially earned the Dong Ha Mole Certificate. This was signed by the CDR W.K. Hartell as administrative remarks and entered in our military records. I realized this to be so when, a few years ago, I had requested copies of my military records and the Mole document was in the material that was sent to me.

Time in the Navy and Career Since

After the Dong Ha deployment ended in late November and early December 1967 and we arrived back in the states, I took leave and went home. My wife had stayed with her parents while I was gone and she had delivered our first child, a baby girl. Around the first of the year, 1968, we arrived back on base at Port Hueneme. Our battalion regrouped and went through training for our next deployment which turned out to be Quang Tri, which was about 10 miles south of Dong Ha. Since I was due to be mustered out in late July, I was assigned to the Advance Party for that deployment. Quite honestly, after Dong Ha, once I learned the location of Quang Tri, I didn’t really want to go back over. Then when I learned about early outs being granted to go to college, I applied for an early out. I had about a year and a half of college prior to joining the Seabees. After the first two early out requests were rejected, my third one was approved. I was processed out in early May 1968 and we returned to our home in southern Illinois where I enrolled in college. I subsequently earned an Industrial Engineering degree from the University of Illinois. During my professional career, I’ve had the opportunity to work in transportation, telephony, fossil and nuclear piping, industrial chemicals and wire manufacturing industries in various capacities. We have two married daughters and one grandson. We are fortunate to live near our grandson and we thoroughly enjoy spending time with him and watching him participate in sports. Now that my wife and I have retired this year, I’m sure that we’ll try spending more time with him.

With the various industries and organizations that I've worked with professionally, in my opinion the Seabees was the best organization I was ever associated with. When I went to join the Navy, I had never heard of the Seabees. But I'm forever grateful that things worked out as they did. The "Can Do" attitude has served me well all these years.

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