

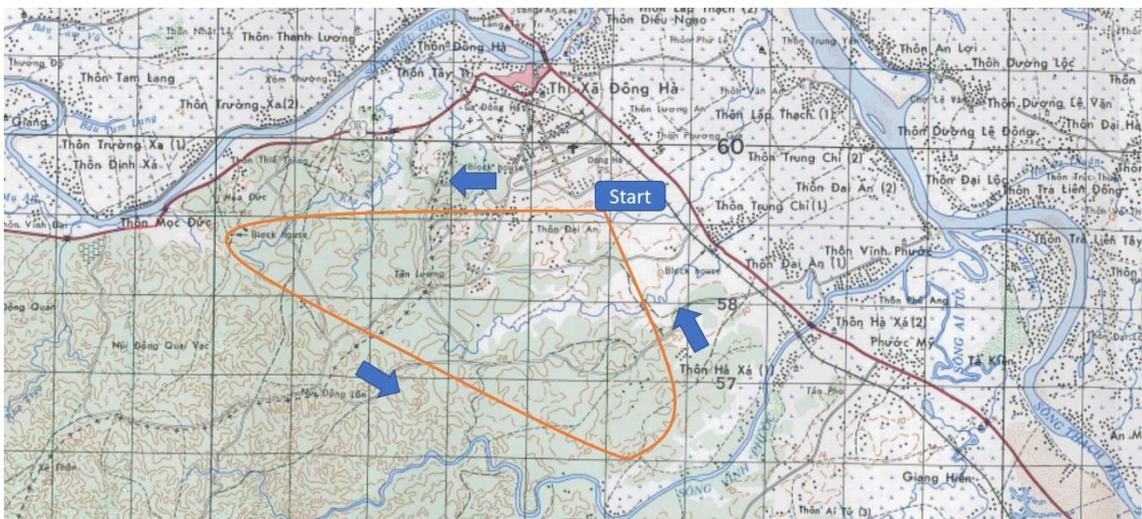
## Tet Minus 2 Months: Incoming Artillery from the South....Really

By Dan McDonald

It was sometime in November 1967 and we were on a patrol to the west and south of the Dong Ha Combat Base. I was Security Company Commander. There was nothing unusual in this patrol other than that we were moving in a counter-clockwise direction this time rather than the more usual clockwise direction. Our squad-sized unit left the base moving west towards the old French Fort, turning southeast through a series of hamlets at the base of the hills to the west of Dong Ha, then south along the Song Vinh Phuoc River where we turned east. Once we were due south of the base we turned in a northerly direction, back towards home. I remembered the specific directions we moved in on that day because they turned out to be important.

Security Company was responsible for approximately a mile of the Dong Ha Combat Base perimeter. Our sector consisted of 13 bunkers manned with M-60 machine guns, lots of land mines, concertina wire and Claymores. Along with keeping the perimeter secure we had responsibility for 3 to 4 reconnaissance patrols per week. The route for those patrols was given to us by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division and we reported directly to them at checkpoints during the patrols.

Usually, patrols were about 7-10 miles long. This particular patrol was a little over 8 miles as I remember, took about three hours to complete and had 5-7 checkpoints along the way. The patrol leader would give radio reports on happenings in the field using directions relative to a predetermined checkpoint so that HQ would know where we were but enemy listening in would not know our specific location.



This particular patrol was getting close to home, maybe a mile and a half south of the base (near the last arrow in the map above) when an enemy ordinance attack on the

base began. What all of us immediately noticed was that the incoming fire was from the **south** and was **artillery**, not rockets. This was a shocking distinction as it indicated a level of logistic sophistication of the enemy that was unimaginable at the time.

The sound of an incoming rocket versus that of an incoming artillery round is very different and cannot be mistaken for those who have experienced both. By this time all members of this patrol were more than 6 months into the Dong Ha deployment and were veterans of literally thousands of rounds of artillery and rockets. And we on the patrol were “drop jawed” and universally in agreement that these were **artillery** rounds not rockets. Finally, we were clear that they were going directly overhead and coming from the **south**.

Rockets are self-contained, are packed by troops, and are set up and launched at the target; there is nothing to service and very little left behind. Hence, there is low requirement for support logistics involved in the use of rockets.



But artillery pieces are much different and require considerable security and supply.



So, what this attack meant was that enemy artillery pieces were operating well south of the DMZ and had the logistical support necessary to keep them hidden and firing. That

fact was a very big deal because artillery is far more useful and accurate than rockets, but was a logistical nightmare for the enemy to supply and transport behind “enemy lines,” which in this case was us. For a piece of enemy artillery to be working south of the DMZ suggested a level of protection and logistical sophistication that was unimaginable at the time. And it was totally counter to conventional wisdom about our enemy’s capabilities in late 1967 and the accepted belief that we were “wearing them down.”

I immediately radioed our observations concerning artillery fire from the south to my controllers at the base’s 3rd Marine Division headquarters. We imagined that what we were reporting would be understood by HQ and that they would be as interested and as surprised and concerned as all of us on that patrol were.

Following orders, our patrol proceeded to the next checkpoint where we set up a perimeter to wait until the attack on the base was finished. Then we headed home.

### **The Next Day**

It was one of my responsibilities as Security Company Commander to attend the weekly Base security briefings at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division headquarters. It so happened that the meeting was scheduled for the next day. During the briefing, staff went through the situation report, in particular the happenings of the last couple of days. Towards the end of the briefing, the Intelligence Officer (S-2) stated, “At approximately 1400 hours yesterday, Dong Ha Combat Base was hit by artillery fire from the north and by rockets from the south and...” I did a doubletake—“rockets from the south?” That’s not what we heard and not what I reported! I immediately took notice and wondered what was going on.

Once that portion of the briefing was concluded, I raised my hand and said, “I’m Ltjg McDonald, Security Company Commander of MCB-11. I was leading a patrol yesterday and was a mile or so south of the base when the referenced attack commenced. Our patrol stopped and waited out the attack in position at our assigned checkpoint due south of the base. What we observed was indeed incoming from the south, but it was not incoming rockets that we had heard coming directly overhead, it was incoming artillery rounds.” I went on to say that we had immediately radioed our report of observations to 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division HQ.

When I had completed my statement, **the silence was deafening**. To a person, the leadership of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MARDIV simply stared at me without speaking. It was clear that they just wanted me to sit down and shut up. I just stood there in the silence and after a very long minute or so, I sat down and the briefing went on to its conclusion. In all my life I have never experienced rejection so eloquently spoken without a word, and that includes rejection that I experienced during 24 years in the Washington State Legislature where rejection is something that one has to weather on a very regular basis! It was

obvious to me that what we had observed and reported was counter to the conventional wisdom and hence could not be so.

Had it not been that we had gone in a counter-clockwise direction on that patrol and had we ended up west of instead of due south of the Dong Ha Combat Base at the time of the attack, there would have been question as to the direction and type of the incoming fire. But because of our location when the attack commenced, due south of the base, there was no doubt. The artillery rounds, not rockets, were coming in directly overhead and the sound of incoming artillery does not take an expert to recognize for anyone who's heard enough of both.....and we all had.

### **My Thoughts About all this Today**

I thought then and believe to this day that this was serious and important intelligence. Why? Because the wide-ranging and hugely consequential Tet Offensive by swarming enemy forces was just about to commence and had there been serious follow-up to my report it is possible our country might have averted untold military and civilian casualties to say nothing of the political upheaval at home in the months to come.

It is one of my greatest regrets that I could not have been more persuasive at that time and place.

### **Time in the Navy and Career Since**

I graduated from Naval Officer Candidate School in August 1966 and was sent to Civil Engineer Corps Officer's School in Port Hueneme in September. There I asked for and got assigned to a Seabee battalion and after reporting to MCB 11; I was first assigned as Assistant Charlie Company Commander. Soon after we got to Dong Ha I was sent down-river to head up the detail at Cua Viet, joining EOC Alva Edwards. In early September Cdr. Hartell made me Security Company Commander, taking over shortly after September 3<sup>rd</sup>. I served in that capacity until the end of the Dong Ha deployment. After returning to Port Hueneme I took over as Bravo Company Commander, in January 1968. I held that position throughout the entire deployment to Quang Tri Combat Base. I finished my MCB-11 stint as Echo Detail Commander, the detachment that deployed to Okinawa when the rest of the battalion went to Phu Bai in 1969. I left active duty in August 1969.

In the early 1970's I worked construction, building a downtown Seattle high-rise office building and then turned to design engineering in fisheries, water and wastewater facilities. I traveled worldwide doing designs for fisheries and aquaculture in some exotic spots like Borneo, Sri Lanka, Ecuador and many more.

While not combat, I enlisted in the civilian world's equivalent when I ran for and won a seat in the Washington State Legislature. I was Senate Ways and Means Chairman for 5

years and Senate Majority Leader for two. I hung up my hat after 24 years and didn't run for re-election in 2002.

Janie and I have two sons, two wonderful daughters-in-law and 6 remarkable grandchildren. Janie and I were married 4 months to the day before I left for Dong Ha on April 28, 1967 hence we celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on December 28, 2016.

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