

Memories of Dong Ha 1967

By Grady McEachern

Sometime around March 1, 1967 I was told that I would be on the Advance Party for a deployment to Okinawa. On the prescribed date I mustered along with the rest of my flight and was told “go home, we are not going to Okinawa!”

A short time later I was given a new report date and time for departure, but was not told where we were going. On the designated date I reported and was transported to Point Mugu where we boarded an airplane with rear facing seats, possibly a C-69.

We noted on the way to Hawaii that one of the starboard engines at died, but there was nothing that could be done until we reached Hawaii. We landed on Oahu and were treated to the most sumptuous chow hall I had ever seen. We spent the night and with a “fixed” engine we were on our way the next day. We noticed soon after takeoff that the same propeller was not turning, but we made it to Midway Atoll for more repairs and to spend the night.



This process continued through Wake Island, Guam, the Philippines and on to Da Nang. When we landed in Da Nang the hydraulics had blown and there was fluid all down the starboard side of the aircraft. We were then towed about a mile to the gate. I was happy to have survived the 5 day trip to Viet Nam.

The first night in Da Nang I heard what war sounded like. I still had no idea of what was to come. The next morning we were told that we were going to Dong Hoi. I found a map of Viet Nam on the wall and discovered that Dong Hoi was in North Viet Nam. Happily, soon afterward we were told we were actually going to a very peaceful location called Dong Ha, which was, depending on who you ask, somewhere between 8 and 11 miles from the DMZ. (Photo left is of me in the center and John Carey to my right as we were waiting to board our flight to Dong Ha)

We landed in Dong Ha in time to set up our squad tent and then headed out to the perimeter to stand watch along with the Marines. I stood my watch and then put my poncho down on a pile of dirt and thought about how far down the food chain I had fallen in the last week.

I did very little electrical work the first month; my basic duties were to build perimeter fencing during the day and stand watch on the perimeter behind the ammo dump at night.

On April 27th I was on perimeter watch with John Carey, Larry Splitt and Jerry Harris. Shortly before sundown we heard explosions to the east of us and were later told that a platoon of Marines had come under a mortar attack and had several casualties. I stood the first watch and then went to sleep about 10 feet from our assigned bunker.

I don't know whether I heard the whistle of the first 140 mm rocket or something else woke me up, but my eyes were wide open when it exploded about 100 yards away. I had wondered about incoming, but now I knew! I jumped up and started running and noticed Larry off my right shoulder. When I ran into the ammo dump perimeter fence I realized we were running the wrong way, so I yelled at Larry and we both ran back to the bunker where Jerry and John had already taken shelter.

The first barrage lasted quite a while, and when it lifted we left the bunker to retrieve our weapons and flak jackets. Jerry Harris, who was on watch at the time of the attack told us that he had seen muzzle flashes in the hills to the south. Our bunker was more of a caved in pit than a bunker so we stayed topside and talked for a few minutes until Harris yelled out that he saw flashes coming from the same location as before. At about the same time a Twin 40 mm that was setting next to us opened up and we could see tracers going into the location from which the flashes were seen. We headed back down into the bunker to wait out the barrage.

Rockets are fairly slow and you can hear them whistling in for a while before they explode. One of the targets was obviously the ammo dump because the rockets were landing close to us inside the perimeter. Not all rockets explode, and

fortunately for us eight of the ones that landed inside the ammo dump were duds.

No other muzzle flashes came from the location Harris identified after the Twin 40 opened up. The next morning I talked to the Sergeant who had been in the tank and he told me he also saw the flashes for the first barrage and called for permission to fire.



He said he was told to hold, but when he saw the second flashes he opened up with both barrels and again requested permission to fire. He said “they came back and told me to hold, but I kept firing!” He said “one of my guns jammed so I fired every round I had through the other barrel!” He told me that after it was all over the radio came on and gave him permission to fire. Such was life in Viet Nam; I always felt that his failure to obey orders may have saved lives.

The attack happened at 2:12 AM on April 28, 1967; later that day the main body of MCB 11 began arriving. As the rest of the battalion were deplaning and finding their way to the camp which later became Camp

Barnes, I and the rest of the Advance Party had already secured our forever titles ‘Viet Nam Combat Veteran.’

As all who were on the Dong Ha deployment know, this was only the first of 98 separate attacks on the Dong Ha Combat Base. At first it was mostly rocket attacks, but later on it became predominantly 105 mm artillery. Sadly, some of our number did not make it home alive, but thankfully most of us did live to tell our stories.

After the Navy

Having previously worked for the Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph Company as an Aerial Lineman and later as a Cable Splicer, I had a good job waiting for me when I was discharged. I received an early out due to my being too “short” to go to Quang Tri. I worked as a Cable Splicer for a little over a year and was promoted to Foreman in October of 1970. After 3 years I was promoted to

Supervising Foreman, also known in the industry as 2nd Level. I held a variety of jobs in that position including Construction, Cable Maintenance, Staff, Centers Manager, Engineering Manager, Process Manager, and at times multiples of those positions.

I retired with a total of 40 years and 3 months as Director of Operations and Technologies with Qwest Corporation. Subsequently I worked for a startup called Graviton and later as a Manufacturer's Representative for several telephony related companies. Both of those jobs came to me, as I never sought employment after retiring from the telephone company.

During my career I raised 3 sons and picked up an Associate's Degree in Middle Management. I studied at ASU, but did not graduate. I also have 7 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren.

My avocation since retirement has been to serve as co-founder and President of the Lost Dutchman Marathon, Inc. Our purpose is to conduct a Marathon, Half Marathon, 10K Road Race, and 8K Trail Race every Presidents Day Weekend. Oh yeah, did I mention I was a long distance runner for more than 20 years? We recently completed our 16th annual event and with this year's awards we will have contributed more than a half million dollars to local youth with a focus on the economically disadvantaged.

I can be reached at gmceach@msn.com