

## From the Fleet to Vietnam: Memories By Charles Worcester

Following boot camp at the Naval Training Center at San Diego I was assigned to two years duty with Amphibious Construction Battalion One (ACB-1) Coronado, Ca. That was my indoctrination to the Bees. I was assigned to the Supply Department and thereafter Supply would become both my military and civilian vocation. And a good lifetime vocation it was. Right up to my retirement almost 20 years ago.

Moving on from the Seabees, I saw sea duty on the refueling tanker U.S.S. Navasota out of Long Beach, Ca. Then duty on a repair ship the Delta also home ported at Long Beach. From there I was assigned to two years shore duty at the Naval Training Center, San Diego. But, the excitement came when I volunteered for NMCB-11 which I had learned was next to deploy to Vietnam, my choice at the time.

After arriving at Port Hueneme and joining the battalion I found that I had missed most of their combat training. I was later to regret that fact. After being issued 782 gear and an M14 rifle, I found that I knew little to nothing about either. But there I was, a certified John Wayne "fighting Seabee". We were sent to a firing range nearby for familiarization with the M14. It was a great weapon that I found was extremely accurate to 500 yards or beyond. In my mind it was far superior to the M16 we now know as the AR-15 rifle that was issued to other troops. Yes, the M14 was heavy at 10+ pounds and used heavy ammunition. However it fired 100 percent of the time. At the time the M16 was in the headlines for its well-known jamming problems--basically, not firing when one needed it the most. A cure was ultimately found but it didn't help those men who lost their lives because their weapon jammed in the middle of a firefight.

I flew out of CONUS with the main body on one of the C-130 flights departing Point Mugu all the way to Dong Ha, RVN (similar to photo below.) We sat in very uncomfortable nylon jump



seats for the entire trip with our 782 gear hanging overhead, sometimes swinging wildly. We island hopped from Hawaii, to Midway, Guam, and some other islands and eventually onto Dong Ha. Frankly, I don't remember our arrival date in country or the

date I left but those dates are of no real consequence. I believe I arrived sometime in April and left in mid-December 1967.

As the plane approached the coast of Vietnam it banked right and flew north up the coast at a somewhat leisurely speed I thought. Looking out a small window I saw us pass over a river below and watched it disappear to our south. After about five minutes the plane made a sharp 180 degree turn to the south and the engines roared to what must have been full speed. Looking back on the incident I realize the river was the Cua Viet River which bordered the DMZ between North and South Vietnam. We must have been flying over North Vietnamese territory -- a very dangerous place to be for sure. Later in the tour I vaguely remember seeing U.S. aircraft being chased south across the DMZ by North Vietnamese SAM ground-to-air missiles. When we landed at Dong Ha the Load Master told us to get ourselves and our gear off the plane as fast as possible. He said that the plane would land and taxi at slow speed but may not really stop. It would quickly turn around at the end of the runway and take off with whatever personnel or gear that remained on-board. It was a somewhat scary introduction to life in a war zone, especially an area that was only six or so miles from North Vietnam. We all know now that those folks were our enemy and that they were trying their very best to kill us or at least run us out of the area. Ultimately, we found our new home, soon to become Camp Barnes which was situated just south of the airstrip.

That afternoon I moved into a large tent which also housed the Battalion Supply Office. There I set up a folding cot and settled in. After eating my evening meal I decided to tear apart my rifle and clean it. It seemed like the thing to do at the time. However, it proved to be ridiculously dumb. Just a few minutes after tearing the rifle down to its basic components the NVA decided to attack the main base with what were said to be sappers. Sappers are a squad or more of enemy soldiers carrying explosive charges and small arms. They try and do as much damage and kill as many as possible during their assault. Here I am under attack with a weapon that's not functional. I am a complete liability and totally useless. I can't defend myself and worse yet I can't defend my fellow CB's. I made sure that situation never happened again.

Camp Barnes at the time was a fairly large tent city with only a few metal buildings. Our advance party who preceded us had erected most of the base defenses, shops and tents for living quarters. Vietnam's weather was extremely hot and humid. I have always marveled at how much those guys in the advance party accomplished with so little in the way of tools, equipment and manpower--hats off to those guys for sure. Anyone who has tried to wrestle one of those large tents into place knows that it's no easy job.

I personally weighed near 180 pounds upon arrival. Two months later my weight was 153. Anyone who wants to lose weight should go to Vietnam at almost any time of the year. The extreme heat and humidity will work wonders. Right away, I was assigned a position on the perimeter to defend our base should it be attacked. That position was two, possibly three hundred yards from my work area. Each time we went to "Condition Red" (an attack by whatever means the NVA could muster) I ran to that position with my weapon, six loaded magazines of ammo, steel helmet and two canteens of water plus a flak jacket among other miscellaneous items of considerable weight. Being heavy, the first time I made the run I was winded to the point that I was of no use for anything. After a while, with much experience, I could make that run and not be at all winded. Weight loss has its plus side.

The only time I was nearly killed was a day in August. I think that most of our guys had learned to pay attention to the sounds that incoming fire of different weapon types made. For example incoming rockets whistled as they flew in. Incoming artillery fire made a distinctly different sound. Mortar fire had its own unique sound. I was on my way across an open spot near my workplace to relieve myself. At any rate, I heard a large artillery piece shoot at us from across the DMZ and for some reason it just didn't register. The round impacted in front of me and blew up creating a large crater in the ground. The concussion picked me up and threw me fifteen to twenty feet. I landed unceremoniously on my rear end, shook my head and wondered if I had been wounded. Who knows why but I found nothing of consequence. A fellow CB who was much further away had minor wounds from the shrapnel. I assume that the artillery piece looked like the photo below. I guess God sometimes protects the unconscious.



I counted the times we were under artillery, mortar and rocket attacks by marking a line on my helmet cover. I stopped when the count reached one hundred. There were many more but it became unimportant to mark the occasion. One of the attacks worth mentioning was September the 3rd. That was the day the NVA artillery hit the main ASP (ammunition supply

point, or ammo dump). It blew up big time. It took several hours for the ammunition and other explosives to go off. The concussions from those explosions literally blew down or heavily damaged several of our buildings in the camp. Many of our guys were wounded then and at other times during the deployment. An unusual incident that happened during the ammo dump explosion that comes to mind is that during most of the day I was alone in a mortar hole next to the supply office. The dump had been exploding for quite some time when a man I didn't know jumped in with me. I don't know who he was or where he came from but I do know he wasn't from our battalion. At any rate I'm sure we talked for a few minutes. We were being bounced around in like a couple of marbles in a jar. Then this guy sits in one end, draws his knees up to his chest, put his arms around his legs and promptly goes to sleep! He slept for two maybe three hours like that. Somewhere in my mind I think he said he was from CBMU301 whose camp was nearby but I can't be positive about it. Somewhere during all the ruckus I heard and saw a six-by truck roar by which seemed to be headed toward the ammo dump. It's possible that it was Floyd Pratt, a well-known name in our battalion for his efforts this day. Floyd drove into those explosions to rescue Marines who worked there--one brave human that's for sure. I believe he made more than one trip into that inferno.

I am one of the lucky ones who didn't suffer physical or extreme mental damage. Back then mental illness in combat was called Shell Shock, today it's PTSD. I can only point out from my own experience that I had a very mild case. After returning home I didn't sleep well until I had my wife exchange places with me in our bed. I found that she was on the side that I had used to escape my bunk and slip into a hole in the ground during attacks. So in my mind she was between me and the safety of that hole. When we exchanged places she was no longer between me and my little hole so I slept soundly. Also some sounds made by building construction bothered me because it sounded similar to artillery fire. Even today celebratory fireworks bother me on occasion. Go figure.

I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the bravery of the fellows I knew and worked with. Without exception, those were the finest young men. They carried on with the work at hand and completed their task under the most dangerous of circumstances with unwavering courage.

We lost five men killed due to enemy action and I believe four more due to accidents, nine souls in all who deserve every honor that can be given. God bless them all.

Our Departmental Chief Luis G. Hernandez was a man of humor, courage and was a guiding force for me personally. He often told everyone to "Take It Easy". It doesn't sound like much today but at the time most of us found that it was very difficult to calm down and take it easy.

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

I joined the Navy on the 25th of January 1960 which was two days after my 17th birthday. My mother had signed papers allowing me to join prior to my being turning eighteen. At the time eighteen was the age when one could join without consent of parents or guardian. My mom and I had differences of opinion as to how I should conduct myself. Looking back I'll have to say that by allowing (more like requiring) me to join the service she absolutely did the right thing. The Navy helped me find discipline, work ethic and self-esteem in my life.

I left the Battalion and the Navy in February 1968 after 8 years of military service. It was a difficult to leave. I was expecting to serve at least twenty years and retire but it wasn't to be. It was the right decision for me. I had gone looking for a war and had found one. The big revelation was that John Wayne I'm not. War is truly an awful undertaking which our leaders should consider very, very seriously before entering into. Would I take anything for my experiences, NO! Would I do it again? At my age I wouldn't survive the training. As of this writing I'm about to turn seventy five so it's not on my radar.

After the Navy I joined an aerospace company in Texas. The company designed, built and installed highly classified surveillance and communications systems for the U.S Air Force plus other branches of the military. My position as Senior Buyer for Construction, Operations and Maintenance was very challenging and rewarding. The "Can Do" spirit learned while attached to the Bees has always served me well. I endeavored to live up to the Seabee motto "The difficult we do immediately, the impossible takes a little longer". I retired in 1998 and am living in a small town in East Texas with my high school sweetheart and beautiful bride Yvonne. I'm living the good life, fishing, wood working and assisting neighbors with various projects.

Contact: Charles Worcester, [charlesw143@verizon.net](mailto:charlesw143@verizon.net)