



Stories of Da Nang Airbase

By Monty Moore

The Security Police Squadron had an 81 mm mortar pit located between Alpha Company Lines and the road that circled the air base. This pit normally fired illumination missions for the marines. Mortar flare's contain a parachute that is deployed by a small explosive charge. The explosion also ignites a flare that burns very bright. Now a dog can be seen easily by flare, they will not freeze immediately. Personnel who drop to the ground when the flare is shot off, can be almost impossible to see. These flares (if close) were also guaranteed to destroy your night vision. We were never to thrilled with the thought of the Air Force giving SP's big guns. Because to us, a heavy weapon is a dog that weights over 80 pounds. But night after night, the team provided illuminations as needed.

One night on Alpha Company lines, we heard the thump of the mortar firing. I took cover and expected to hear the pop of the flare opening, have the bright light appear, and my night vision destroyed. But no flare appeared in the sky. I did hear a faint thud between the mortar pit and my post. A few minutes later, the mortar fired again. Still no flare but the thud that followed was louder this time. It did not take this dog handler long to realize that the thud was the mortar round landing. And they were walking the rounds up to where I was. I did not think that a mortar flare landing on your head would be a fun thing. They fired again, but this time the round landed right in front of a Marine tower. The flare popped open and started burning. Now that section of Alpha Company lines was known for sniper fire. The Marine in the tower was illuminated and needed to get out of the tower as fast as possible. Assisted by gravity, he hit the ground by jumping/falling off the ladder. Unfortunately he broke his leg. I often wondered if the mortar team painted a Marine tower on their scoreboard or if the Marine was awarded a Purple Heart.

E-Mail from Russell Harrell:

Well that is an interesting story about the mortar team and I sure can testify to it. The fact is that I was in charge of that team when this incident occurred. We had a fire mission in support of the Marine Patrols that were outside of the perimeter. We were firing the rounds and expecting to see them open way outside the perimeter, nothing was happening and we couldn't figure out what was happening. At that time I think that we were supporting "Iron City" which was a base camp for a platoon of the Marine

MPs and when they were on patrol many times they would request support from the mortars. Anyway we fired about three rounds without any idea where they were going then the fourth one (I think that it was the fourth one) impacted and the flare opened right to the rear of the Marine bunker on the perimeter. You can imagine our surprise and embarrassment. I proceeded immediately out there to explain to the persons on that post that we weren't attempting to hit them. Later we figured that we had gotten hold of some bad charges and that was the reason that the rounds weren't firing correctly. Instead the rounds were being sent out with only the cartridge at the base of the round. Those illumination rounds really shouldn't have effected your night vision because they were sent way outside the perimeter as requested by the Marine Patrols. That was sure an embarrassing experience and I wasn't aware until I read this that one of the Marines had been injured as a result of that miscue, that makes it all the worse now these thirty years later.

E-Mail from Larry Sutherland (Copied from VSPA Bulletin Board)

Note: It is with much sadness that I inform the ranks of the loss of another brave and good man. Our favorite mortar man Russell Harrell who never left a man behind, passed from this world July 20, 2001. His precious Gloria has sent word of his passing. He was the very model of a NCO with a heart full of courage and caring. Started in the Army in Korea, he crossed over to the USAF and retired there. Later in U.S. Customs he eventually retired in South Cal and recently moved to Florida with complications from prostate cancer. He never lost his humor and was my first contact when I tried to find the Safeside gang again. He ran the mortar teams of Phu Cat AB and was also doing mortars in Da Nang AB. He recently asked me to send duplicate patches of his time in Safeside. I hope it got to him before they blew taps. God Bless Sergeant Harrell and may his soul rest in peace.



In 1968 - 1969 the squadron received all kinds of toys for us to play with. We had starlight scopes, new radios, and armored vehicles to play with. One armored personnel carrier was sunk in a swamp during a show and tell. Another track became stuck in the attempt to pull the first one out. The starlight scopes were the first generation models. These were big and heavy. All Security Police flight chiefs were given a starlight scope to mount on their M-16. Air Force dog handlers carried the shortened submachine gun version of the M-16. The barrel was shorter and heavier for sustained firing in the fully automatic mode. The stock collapsed to reduce the length of the weapon.

The K-9 Flight Chief's starlight scope looked rather funny on his GAU. He used his starlight scope to try to catch handlers in unauthorized ventures.

Bill Greife, a sentry dog handler conned the phrase "Starlight, Starbright, Who will be spied on tonight".



These toys were expensive. If you lost it, you paid for it. If the base was attacked, it was written off as a war loss. I remember several nights that people were hoping that the VC would lob a rocket in to explain radio damage.

The new VHF radios were a big improvement over the old radios. They were smaller, lighter and worked better. The radios replaced the big handheld radios that used a long telescopic antenna. The new radios had a small rubber coated, flexible antenna. A small combination microphone/speaker could be used. This was attached to the radio by a coiled wire and could be clipped to your shirt. A semi waterproof case was available, that would protect the radio from the rain.

We were told that Da Nang AB was the test base for some new equipment, and the results would determine if the equipment would be used elsewhere. The radios had a VOX (Voice Operated Feature) option, that would enable us to operate the radios hand free. A cable connected a control box to the radio. This box contained two switches and could be clipped to your uniform. One switch was a push to talk switch that operated the radio. The other switch would change it to voice operated mode. Another cable connected the control box to a headpiece. The headpiece had a plastic tube that you bent to fit in the corner of your mouth. The microphone was in the headpiece but could pick up your voice from the hollow tube. An earpiece hung from the headpiece that you plugged into your ear.

Now, the logic behind this was you could have both hands free, but still communicate. The problems started with the cable that connected the radio to the control box. It was too long, so we wrapped it around our waist several times. The control box was oversensitive to vibration. A strong jar (a good bump on the posting truck) would cause all the radios to click. The Security Police Control (Call-sign Defense Control) thought we were clicking our radios just to bug them. The factory rep had to tell them, after we showed him the problem. After the first night, we could not turn the radio until we were off the posting truck. Another long cable connected the control box to a headpiece. The biggest problem was that the headpiece clipped onto your helmet. Only someone who is into self-inflicted pain will wear a helmet 9 -10 hours. With this system, if you took off the helmet, you could not transmit or receive messages. And military logic struck again, they only ordered medium ear plugs. They never thought that ears came in all sizes. So if you had a small ear canal, or a large ear canal, you had to really jam

that puppy in to your ear or it would fall out. Correctly sized earplugs were not available.

The radios caused some interesting problems. If the control box was working properly if you were transmitting the sound came back to you through your earpiece. However sometimes you would transmit and not know it. That could be "politically incorrect" if you were talking about the wrong subject, to someone that you should not be talking to, and you named names.

The powers to be wanted me to jam a thing in my ear (giving myself an earache). Then, they wanted me to wear a heavy helmet (causing a neck ache). And I had to wear this crap all night on post. I, like most of the other handlers, decided that I was not into self-inflicted pain. Now the powers to be would not listen to our complaints about aches and pains. We solved the problem by using the radios in the conventional manner. We were then threatened with punishment if we were caught not "testing" the equipment. Attempts were made to spot handlers "unplugged" by the infamous starlight scope. So the service life of this equipment was diminished, through unusually harsh wear. I later found out that other bases "tested" the radios with the same results. We were lied to but that was nothing new.



As I said earlier, the new Marines were always surprised to find AF Dog Handlers in front of their bunkers at night. Charlie Company had more of the Marine perimeter (distance) than Alpha or Bravo Companies; thus, we had plenty of friends with Charlie Company. When we were off, we made a night of it at the base theater and club, but we would usually end up at the kennel with our dogs. We did have other hobbies, such as "Midnight Sightseeing". The Marines had ambush teams off base every night, so it was not uncommon to find a handler with a Charlie Company ambush team. This was always done without the knowledge or approval of the squadron. We would either catch a ride with the posting truck or the Marines would send the company jeep to the kennels to pick us up. When the squad returned to base the next morning, we would return by the K-9 relief truck. No one outside of the section was ever aware of our "midnight tourist activities".

We were probably the only Air Force personnel, who could drive out Charlie Company Gates without being questioned, if the right Marines were on duty. On more than one occasion, the kennel's deuce and a half (2 1/2 ton truck) made runs to certain establishments located off base. During one of the runs, an argument ensued over prices and services to be rendered. The handlers involved solved the argument by driving the truck through the vacated hut in protest. The bamboo hut did not damage the "Deuce and a half". However, there was an unforeseen encounter with the electric pole located behind the hut. The front bumper and the left fender had to be

replaced. But no fear; for a few cases of beer the Marine motor pool repaired the damage and no one was the wiser. Of course, the paint didn't match, but who cared. The handlers involved will remain anonymous.



We sometimes would have to man special posts when the squadron wanted to provide extra detection capability. All of the handlers disliked one special post in particular. It was in a swamp, located between the Army Mortuary and Charlie Company Lines. SP machine gun towers equipped with starlight scopes would sometime spot movement in the swamp.

Thus, it would usually result in a dog handler being posted there for a few nights. The dog team would be dropped off at the mortuary. You had to walk past the double screen doors at the end to get to the post. You would say to yourself, "I will not look in, I will not look in;" but it was as though someone reached down, grabbed your head, twisting it to force you to look at the body bags containing all those KIA's. Then, you walked past the pallets of caskets and drums of embalming fluids. When a flare was up, you could read the label painted on the drums. After reading the directions for use you were in a great frame of mind, for the remainder of the night. The post even had a small Buddhist temple located within its boundaries. We would refer to this post as hunting for the "Phantom."



Monty Moore & Sentry Dog Kobuc

Hill 151 in the background.



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Vsipa.k9@gmail.com