



Story from Pleiku Airbase, RVN



By John Risse

I was part of the first 50 Air Force dog handlers to get permanent orders to Vietnam. I reported to Lackland AFB, during the last week of September 1965 for indoctrination and training. After a week of extra training we were ready to go, or at least we thought we were. On October 10th I kenneled my dog Duke 645F, and tranquilized him for the long trip ahead and boarded a C-130 at Kelly AFB.

We flew out around noon to Travis AFB for processing out of country. We spend the night at Travis then on to Hickam AFB, Hawaii. We stayed one day at Scofield Barracks where we watered our dogs, but they slept most of the time because of the tranquilizers. The next morning we flew to Guam where we again spent the night. Finally, on October 17, 1965, we arrived at Tan Son Nhut AB.

When we opened the doors on the plane the smell and heat literally threw us back a few feet. Once we could get off the plane we began unloading the dogs and our gear. Funny this is, we were told that they had no idea what to do with us...no one was expecting us! I came to learn that was SOP in Vietnam. We took our dogs out and walked and watered them. It was very, very hot and we had a difficult time cooling the dogs down. Two of our fifty dogs died the first day in-country of heat stroke. I knew right then and there this was not going to be too glorious a routine.

We were transported to Bien Hoa, where we stayed for the next week providing K-9 security for the Air Base there. On October 29th, twenty-five of us received orders for Pleiku AB. That afternoon we packed our gear and boarded a C-130 headed north. Again, upon our arrival, we were told we were told unexpected. We just laughed it off and took our dogs off the plane, staking them out between the runway and the rice paddies. The only buildings, in the distance, near the foothills, were those the 25th Infantry Division. We soon discovered we were to share those quarters with them for the next month.

There wasn't a place for our dogs to stay, so the first day we began by making temporary kennels for them. We put the shipping crates in two lines and staked the dogs between them. Within a couple of days we had our dogs settled in and we began guard duty at the ammo dump, the fuel storage area, and the perimeter of the base between the runway and the rice paddies.

We lived in tents and worked 12-hour shifts from 6 PM to 6 am, everyday, although once in awhile we got a day "off post" when we spent our time building a permanent type kennel for our dogs. In 1966, the base started to build up quickly after the first of the year. Contractors came in March to build wooden barracks and an office building. They built bunkers for us on the perimeter of the base with M-60s mounted on top. In case of attack, we were to use them until the Air Police could back us up. We soon found out that the M-60s were shipped without firing pins! We discovered it on the firing rang--thank God for practice.

One day, when I was in charge, I told the Vietnamese workers to stay away from the staked out dogs, but of course with our language barrier I only could hope they understood me. As I was sitting in the tent watching them work, I noticed a man attempting to walk between the staked our dogs. The dogs were watching him as well. I yelled for him to stop, but it was too late. One of the dogs jumped out at him and as the worker tried to get away, he jumped closer to another dog on the other side. The dog bit him on the arm, throwing him to the ground. I ran out to the kennel area and tried to separate the dog from the man. The man was hitting the

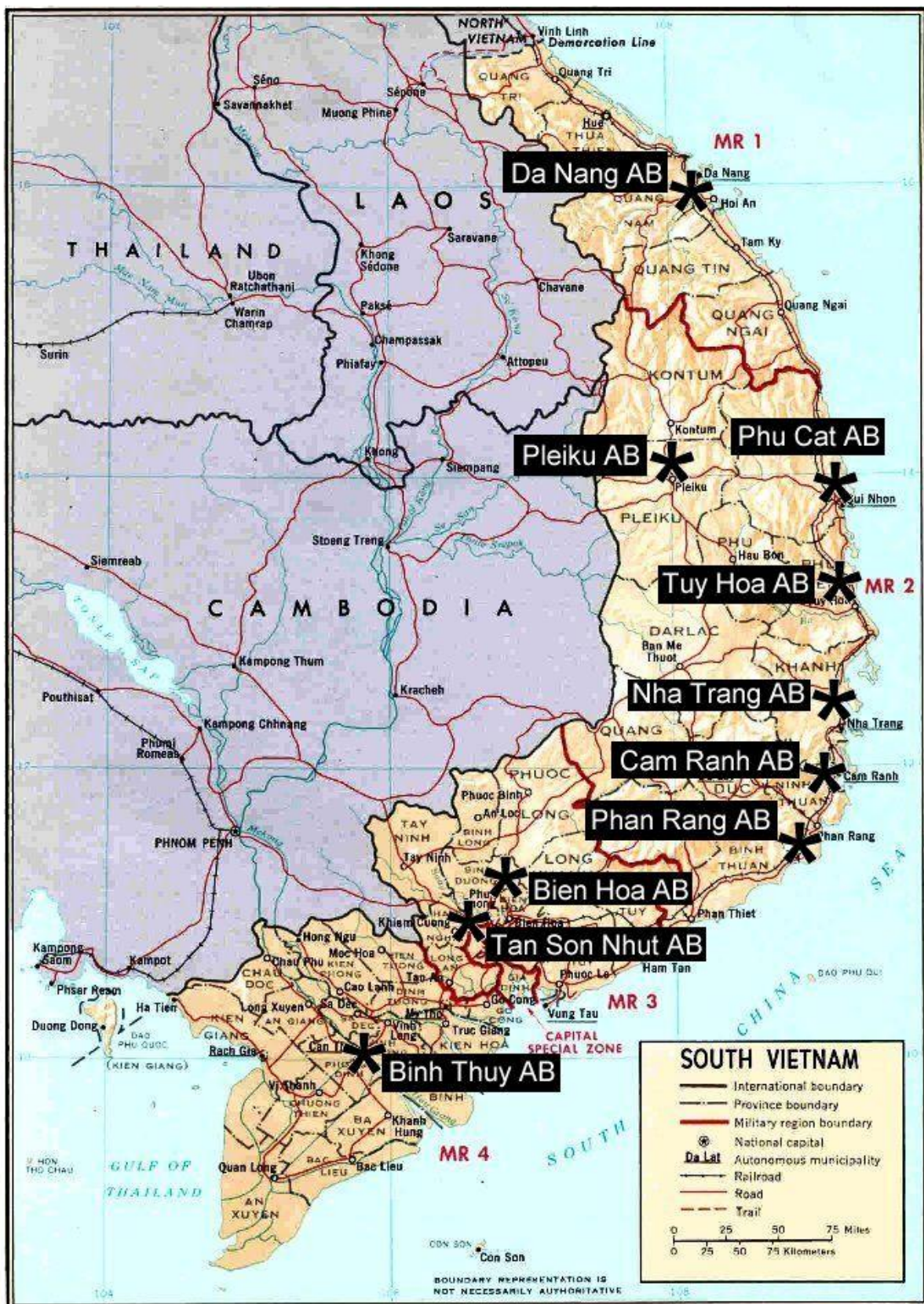
dog with a handsaw, trying to free himself from the dog's jaws. I grabbed both the dog and man and pulled them apart. The dog was none to happy about it either. The villager made it out OK. The only left some small puncture wounds on his arm. He was a very lucky man...and he knew it. The dog was quite satisfied with himself...I saw him smiling and "saying" to me, "See, I can do what you taught me!" "Good boy," I said, also with a smile.

One night Duke and I were patrolling the 500-LB bomb dump when we were hit by our first mortar attack. The initial sound was such that, even though I had never been in a mortar attack before, I knew exactly what it was...it's something I'll never forget either. The sensation and fear that immediately went through my mind is unlike anything I had experienced before, but I worked my way through it and did my job, just like a million other guys.

Once I recovered from my initial shock, I looked toward the runway and all I could see was flames and smoke billowing up, turning the sky bright red. It seemed to last for hours, but in reality it was but a few minutes. The rest of the night went by without incident, but I had a real eye opener the next morning. I found mortar shells that hadn't gone off sticking out the ground not more than 30 feet from the 500 lb. bombs! They were stuck in the sand that surrounds the bombs. I looked at Duke and he looked up at me. I am sure he knew we could have been blown to pieces that night! We called in and the munitions team came out to defuse them. They just kept looking at me, shaking the heads and saying how lucky I was. That night could have been 'THE NIGHT'.

But there is another day that REALLY sticks with me. April 22, 1966. It was another mortar attack. I was "off post" that night and Duke was at the kennels. Just after 2:00 am the first mortar hit. I jumped up and ran to the bunker outside the tent. This time I KNEW what it was...and what could happen. I waited out the attack in the bunker feeling relatively safe and sound, but I was also wondering how Duke was taking this attack without me. After the attack I was told to get to the kennels right away. Duke was loose and no one could get him under control. I ran as fast as I could, hoping he would be OK and that someone wouldn't get trigger happy and shoot him. When I got to the kennels Duke was up on the posting truck like he was waiting to go to post. I walked up to the truck calling his name. He was growling and barking at me. This was trouble because he had already put me in the hospital once and bit me three other times. He was a good dog but very aggressive and a little neurotic at times. Slowly I kept moving closer to him. Eventually I was able to get my leash around his neck and get him under control. The veterinarian was right behind me and he was able to tranquilize him. It was only then that we were able to see that he was badly injured. He had ripped the kennel's chain link fence trying to get out of the kennel during the attack and his back legs were totally torn up. He had lost a lot of blood and was in very bad shape. The vet told me he had to be transported to the 9th Med. Center, in Saigon, to get the proper care, but I was also told I could not go with him. They packed him up into a jeep and took him to a transport headed south. That is the last time I saw Duke. As far as I know he was put down in Saigon because of his injuries, but that cannot be confirmed.

I will never forget Duke. He was a great dog and sometimes I wonder what would have happened if we had been together that night so long ago. John Risse now resides in Virginia, Minnesota with his wife Carolyn and their three children, John, Andrea and Linda.



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