



Attack on Phan Rang

Air Base, RVN

On 26 January , 1969 a sapper, mortar, and rocket attack was launched against Phan Rang AB. During the attack 82mm mortars and 107mm rocket rounds impacted inside the base. Three buildings and two hangers received minor damage. USAF personnel wounded totaled 14 (4 K-9), 14 enemy KIA and one captured. Two F-100s were destroyed and numerous other aircraft were out of commission. The following is my recollections and the intelligence transcript of the captured North Vietnamese whose account highlighted with " before and " after his quotes.

I was barely 20 years old and trying to experience life; I was an "OJT" Sentry Dog Handler in RVN, recommended for the job by a couple of friends and good handlers; Jesus Parra Jr. and Bob Dragich. I arrived in-country in April 1968, and became a member of the USAF 35th TFW (Tactical Fighter Wing) Security Police K-9 Squadron at Phan Rang AB. Phan Rang AB was located about three or four miles inland from the South China Sea, 35 miles South of Cam Ranh Bay, and 9 miles East of Phan Rang AB City population 24,000. The climate was semi-arid and we lived in drought conditions more often than not. My dog's name was Winston (A170).

Phan Rang AB was considered a "Single Purpose Base" by MACV/PACAF & USAF. We provided: "Sorties for ground support, night interdiction on supply/truck routes, logistics, and C-123 Ranch Hand Operations (Agent Orange)." Phan Rang AB was particularly vulnerable to off base interdiction because the base water supply and jet fuel was piped in. For the most part Phan Rang AB abated minor conflicts, i.e.; mortar, rocket and probes until about November 1968.

In most cases, a K-9 alert meant something. However, because many times nothing could be confirmed by nighttime illumination, and day time investigations usually revealed little, the prior night's information about a K-9 alert simply became Security Police shift note. No one paid too much attention to the alerts. Except for us dog handlers.

We knew the alerts where a barometer of things to come at Phan Rang AB. And on January 26th, 1969, there was a wake up call.

" The 16th Company began preparing for the attack on Phan Rang AB in June 1968. Preparations included reconnaissance of the base, training personnel in penetration tactics and methods of night observation, and the acquisition of weapons and supplies.

Although he (captured NVA) did not take part in recon missions he reported that his company commander directed four missions prior to the attack, one in June '68, one in November '68, and two in January '69. guerrillas supplied by the District HQ acted as guides for the recon team. In November '68, the company commander conducted the training in penetration tactics and night observation. The men were told how to approach a fence and how to select sections of the barbed wire to cut. Instruction was also given on disarming mines and flares, but the source could provide little specific information on these subjects. He also had very little knowledge of night observation techniques. He did remember that the training covered listening for sounds and then trying to locate their source. During the second week of January '69, the 16th company requested ammunition from District HQ. "

Jimmy Thornton (Handler of Gunner #2B29) and I were scheduled off on the evening of January 25th, so we decided to use our privileges on the "hill" at the NCO club. Around 22:15 we decided that we had our fill of food and brew and made our way back down the hill. Everything seemed normal; the lights of the flight line filled the sky and our B-57s with their distinctive sound (sort of like a Hoover vacuum in heat), were launching to go destroy trucks on the Laotian and Cambodian borders.

There was "a partial moon" and the sky was partly cloudy. It seemed like a good time to get a rare night's sleep. Both of us hit the rack so that we could enjoy sleeping in the "cool of the night". We patrolled at night, so it was great to be able to sleep at night. As we innocently began to doze we never suspected that the NVA H-13 Sapper Company, part of the 351st NVA were about to launch a sapper raid and standoff attack that would embed our memories forever.

" He (captured NVA) described the distance from the outside fence to the aircraft parking area as about one kilometer. There were five fences in that stretch, each consisting of three rolls of concertina. No mention was made of mines or flares. The number of security guards and types of weapons were unknown, and the "dogs were described as stupid and afraid to leave their handlers"! (sing loi chumps, you blew it). After the briefing, the company divided into four cells and each man was assigned a specific duty. The first cell consisted of five men, including the company commander and the source. The source's mission was to destroy aircraft by placing large satchel charges near the wheels of the large ships and by placing tin can grenades

on the wings of smaller aircraft. He was armed with one two-kilogram satchel charge, one three-kilogram satchel charges, two tin can grenades and two hand grenades. The other three men were assigned various tasks such as penetration of the fence, defense of the attacking force, and destruction of long range targets using B-40 rockets. The second and third cells were to attack bunkers located inside the fence, while the fourth cell was a back up unit whose men would act as replacements for penetrates.

At approximately 14:00 hours the 16th Company left its new base camp and traveled to the point of attack, bypassing the east side of the base in order to approach it from the south. At about 22:45 they moved to an area 500 meters from the south perimeter. The men began crawling toward the fence. After reaching an area approximately 30 meters from the fence, they removed their clothing. Two men were sent ahead to reconnoiter the fence. A few minutes later, men assigned the task of penetration crawled forward and began cutting wire. After opening a section large enough to crawl through they advanced towards the second fence which was about 30 meters away.

As they reached this fence the source heard a dog barking (Tim Hunstiger's dog). Voices were heard and a flare exploded over the area; security guards inside the second fence began firing into it. The attackers immediately withdrew to an area about 10 meters outside the perimeter fence hoping for a second chance to attack. During this time the source observed that the company commander was wounded. He was wounded himself and lost consciousness."

Around 23:30 our Kennel Master interrupted our sleep (probably about 4 or 5 of us were off that night). He advised we had to proceed to the kennel, get our dogs and go directly to the "Juliet Area" (J1-2-3) for sweeps. Since most of us were admittedly half buzzed and groggy we weren't sure what was happening. We heard no sirens, nor the tell-tale squeak and thud of incoming mortars; the usual "MO" for an attack at PR.

We were told the attack began silently at the wire and NVA were pinned down in the canal near Kilo58; it was our job to flush them out. The attack was beginning to escalate and we began receiving incoming mortar and rocket rounds; at the same time the "Bravo" area was taking small arms fire. Sgt. Tim Hunstiger, who's dog was part of the initial alert in the "Juliet area" was already wounded and heading for med-evac to Cam Ranh Bay.

SP Capt. Garth Wright (Assistant OPS) was already on the scene and realized that penetration through the stone bridge that passed over the drainage ditch in the "Juliet Area" coincided with a dirt road intersection that

formed a triangle, and lead directly to the C-123 area. Once inside the NVA could be easily concealed as the area was covered with dense brush. The penetration point was ideal as the target area could be obtained within minutes and destroyed. Capt. Wright called for more assistance.

By this time Jimmy Thornton (with K-9 Gunner), Tom Caputo (with K-9 Fritzie), and a guy named Mollica, a.k.a. Captain America (Duke) and myself deployed to the "Juliet Area". Our Flight Chief, SSGT Glenn Redmond met us and explained what he wanted. I knew this wasn't going to be fun because Glenn had Hunstiger's dog.

We proceeded to the fence line between perimeter towers J-3 and J-4 and formed a wedge heading into the brush in the canal. In the meantime other K-9 teams consisting of Sgt. Ron Logan, A1C James Dean, Sgt. Danny Hatton and A1C Anthony Lampe, attempted to flank the area by going around an old ruined helicopter hut near the dirt road and an old barbed wire fence. They took extremely heavy fire and were forced to seek cover.

As the four of us penetrated the canal in hopes of flushing out the NVA, Capt. Wright, Logan, Dean, Lampe, and Hatton swung down the old back road towards an abandoned APC near J-3. Someone yelled from the bunker near J-3 "Watch out, VC are by the APC". Two SPs were pinned down near the APC by B-40s and grenades and the SP in the J-3 tower was trapped. Logan and Dean used suppression fire to give them a chance to escape. Small arms fire and explosions were coming from every where and it was mass confusion. Sgt Kirk (heavy weapons) arrived with his jeep mounted with a mini-gun and he began to quell incoming small arms fire from the perimeter.

In the meantime, we lost track of Caputo ("Cap") and Fritzie. The illumination was reduced at the same time the incoming was beginning to subside. This was good and bad for K-9. We felt we had the upper hand at squeezing "Charlie" into a box he couldn't get out of, and the illumination was part of getting them into the box (it is very rare for a sentry dog team to wish for illumination while exposed-we did this night). The bad part was when the flares stopped we didn't know where each other was except by voice. We had no defined post that we were accustomed to; sweeps were different. So where was Caputo?

We were still taking small arms fire and we knew the NVA were still inside. A pop flare was launched and I saw "Cap" near the abandoned APC firing toward the bushes, "Cap" hit the ground and was motionless. Fritzie was already dead, killed by one round. Jimmy, Mollica and myself and a couple of Med Techs ran to his aid. As we stared at "Cap" one of us asked, "Is he

dead"? Then he stood up and started to walk away. Wounded and in shock the medics took him away.

As the night progressed and the early dawn began to creep above the horizon we still took in small arms fire from the perimeter, but the penetration and flushing out of "Charlie" on the inside of the base was put to rest. Jimmy, myself and Mollica spent the late hours popping slap flares when requested. We let the dogs lay at rest, with no objections; we held our spot at the triangle in the road, where it all began, and did more sweeps as needed.

The NVA soldier regained consciousness around 07:00 and managed to crawl to a ditch where he again passed out and was subsequently captured by AF Security Police. The source believed that the attack failed because the 16th Company did not have enough information concerning dogs, guards, and mines. It is obvious that the attackers had little notion of the fire power of the security guards and that they did not know that sentry dogs are used primarily for detection.

After reading the statement of the captured NVA soldier it proves our dogs alerts where on target. We were right all along. The incident proved once again that there are few teams that could match, a Handler and his Dog.

First Published in Viet Dog Handlers Association newsletter "Dog Man" by
Craig Lord

Webmaster's comment: Sgt. Thomas J. Caputo was awarded the Silver Star and the Purple Heart.



© Vietnam Security Police Association, Inc. (USAF) 1995-2017,
Incorporated as a 501©(19) Tax Exempt (non profit) Veteran's Organization. All Rights Reserved

Vsipa.k9@gmail.com