

Going Downtown Da Nang City

Dead Beat...Dead Baby

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I landed in a C-130 at Da Nang AB on the 4th of July 1965. Oppressive heat and a sour stench of cold-fires greeted us on the flightline. An Air Police (AP) truck took the few of us joining the 23rd Air Base Group (MAAG)/APS and drove us to a large dirt area across the street from the flightline. There was a square flooring of wooden pallets in the north end of the field, and a large twelve-man canvas tent still in a bundle. We put up the tent, and someone delivered some army cots and C-Rations to us. From the new tents cantonment area I saw a growing pile of crashed and destroyed aircraft across from the field and beside the flightline.

We were driven to the flightline and were to be posted at the south end, and drove pass a row of revetments there were several C-130s that were completely destroyed by satchel-throwing sappers on 1 July 1965, three days earlier. An AP SSgt was KIA, three Airmen were WIA, six aircraft destroyed and three damaged on the flightline; one Viet Cong POW was captured. Airmen were busy loading debris for either the boneyard or salvageable parts. The NCO pointed out where fifteen sappers had come through the Vietnamese sector of fence, and supposedly crossed an impassable minefield, under cover of mortars, then blew up the F-102s in the first three revetments, killed AP SSgt Terrance Jensen who engaged them in combat, and then went down the flightline tossing explosive-satchels and destroying several C-130s.

About three weeks after PCS to Da Nang AB, SVN, some friends and I wanted to go downtown Da Nang City. Earlier, at base-orientation, we were given the speech about STD, warned to stay together, and stay alert for suspicious actions by civilians, such as their suddenly disappearing from where you are—*no problem*.

Gary Eberbach (VA Agent Orange disabled), Tom Baker (RIP 2007/VA Agent Orange), J.B. Jones (KIA/mortars, 1 Jan 1966, Panel 04E - Line 093), and a couple more whose names I don't recall, took the Air Force bus with heavy-wired windows downtown to check out the sights. We knew the screens were to prevent explosives being thrown in to the bus. Once downtown, the we climbed off the bus at G.I. Corner and were immediately surrounded by a horde of begging kids that we waded through, to shouts of *You dolla-me...Numba Ten thou G.I...*

We continued along the main drag, looking at the open shops and girls in Vietnamese attire, ignoring the sour-stench of the street. We tried to figure out the official exchange-rate for South Vietnam's Piaster ("P") and the U.S. Dollar that troops were still paid in at that time. The crowd was like treading-water in a bustling cesspool of human debris (worse than Tijuana Mexico), and then we suddenly stepped out of the crowd, which had stopped following us, and in to an island of space with plenty of elbow-room.

A young Vietnamese woman suddenly came up to us and unexpectedly thrust a package at me. Reflexively, I took the cloth bundle, which was heavier than it looked, and instantly thought it was a bomb. I looked down—it was a dead infant with an elephantiasis head, and stank fiercely — I shoved the baby back into her arms. The crying mother pleaded in pigeon-English for us to help as she needed beacu-P for the baby's funeral. I was shocked and appalled by the condition of the baby, and very angry that a society would permit a desperate mother to have to beg for money to pay for her child's funeral. Nevertheless, young American G.I.s are easy targets because of a natural generous-nature and desire to help.

We had emptied our pockets and the woman then moved on down the sidewalk, and the crowd parted for her. We continued up the street and encountered some Air Force buddies. I began telling them about the tragic scene witnessed and turned to point out the woman with the dead baby—I could still smell the putrid scent from the dead baby on my arms and clothing. I then saw the woman lateral pass the baby to another woman and casually walk away rubbing her hands on her clothing. The second woman began moaning and panhandling G.I.s and passersbys.

At first I was speechless, then livid and loudly cursed at the *new* mother, and wanted to call the White Mice (SVN national police). Neither of the women was starving or underfed--and the simple truth was they were just *walking a beat* and using a dead infant to con American servicemen—and *it was working*.

We returned to Da Nang AB, broke, and a little wiser, but I was still pissed as could be and told everyone I came in contact about the dead baby scam. I realized that I had been had—and played for a genuine sucker—and resolved never to fall for another sympathy scam to separate me from my too few dollars. To this day I still haven't given a dime to con artists—and *never will*.