

Bien Hòa AB...

It Happened to Me

by John Forbes, as told to M.L. Jones



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Close Shave

John H. Forbes spent eight years on active duty in the U.S. Air Force. He says, "Being a security policeman at an airbase in Vietnam was pretty boring most of the time." But one night shift was different.

AS I clambered down off the flatbed truck I looked at the sky. No moon, the stars hidden behind the clouds. Almost time for monsoon season. Garcia was waiting for me at the guardpost.

"It's real quiet — nothing stirring except the rats," he said as he left.

The guardpost was a wooden crate half-buried in the ground. Its flat plywood roof was covered with sandbags. About two feet of the box showed

above the ground. By standing on the shorter pallets that formed the floor a sentry could look all around. Inside was a field phone hanging on the wall, my chair. We weren't allowed to sit down, as the CO was afraid we'd go to sleep.

Stepping down, I leaned forward to keep from bumping my helmet on the doorway. I picked up the handset and checked in with the controller at Central Security Control (CSC).

Leaning my M16 against the wall, I took off my helmet, picked up the green binoculars and started sweeping



Night shifts on an airbase in Vietnam often meant walking in circles around an airplane for hours or staring into the dark, according to Forbes — until something moved. Here sentry and guard dog finish patrol. Photo: Dept. of Defense

Something moved. Grabbing the handset, I talked into it. "Post 18."

"Hey, Chuck baby, you're two minutes early."

"Yeah, well, I think something's moving out here."

"Aw, come on. You've only been out there for a half hour. It's a little early for the bushes to be dancing."

"No, I'm serious."

"Okay, take another look and see if it's still there."

Setting the handset in the dirt in

front of me, I walked a couple of landmarks so I could pick out the exact spot — then I looked at it for a minute. It seemed longer. I rubbed some sweat out of my eyes, then glanced at my watch. 1 1/2 minutes. Looking at the spot again, I could see the hump was still there, but it had moved toward me about 10 feet.

Picking up the handset, I whispered my identification.

"Hey, man, speak up."

"I can't. There is something out there," I murmured.

"All right, I'll call the flight supervisor," came the exasperated reply.

Looking back at the hump, I watched it creep forward toward the first line of concertina wire. Suddenly a figure

rose from the ground and jumped over the wire. The man lay on the bare ground, not moving. Slowly letting out my breath, I crouched down, reaching for the phone. The figure didn't have a gun, but the pack on his back, if filled with explosives, could kill a lot of people.

Quickly I described what I had seen to the controller and requested permission to use my weapon.

There was a pause, then the flight supervisor came on the line. That was a shock. I had thought he was headed to my post by now. He had me repeat everything I did, then waited. Briskly he gave me permission to open fire and ordered the Security Alert Team to my post.

Standing up I tilted my M16, searching for my target. It had moved. He was over the second strand of wire, crawling in the direction of the fuel dump. All I could see was the pack strapped to his back scuttling along the black line of the ground.

The click of the safety switch sounded loud in the dark air. Lining up the front sight on the pack, I shifted ahead of it just a little. Inhaling, I pulled back on the trigger. The muzzle flash lit the dark sky for an instant, and the hump rolled over. It didn't move.

The pickup with the alert team pul-

the jungle just a hundred yards away.

In the 10 months I had been here I had never seen anything at night, but last month a security policeman at the next post had been found with his throat slit, his weapons and uniform missing. I hadn't slept out here since.

Putting down the binoculars, I looked at my watch: Five minutes more, and I'd check in with CSC. I did so every half hour, so they'd know I was still awake out here on the perimeter.

Scanning the green wall again, I thought of what I would do with my next two days off. Payday was tomorrow; maybe I could get a card for the PX. The PX had a good selection of goods and I could get a haircut.

front of me, I picked up the glasses.

Nothing moved.

Sheepishly, I put the handset to my mouth. "Well, maybe not."

"Yeah, well, give me a call if you do see anything."

Replacing the handset, I went back to wondering what to do with my two days off....

It moved again. This time my glasses had been pointed right at the spot. The bush moved. There wasn't any wind blowing. I moved my line of sight a little to the left.

I saw the leaves wave, and there it wasn't any breeze. Looking directly at the spot, I could see a dark shape.

Nothing moved. I wondered what it was. I was still wondering when my two days off...

led up a couple of minutes later.

Together we walked over to where the Viet Cong was lying. My shot had caught him just under the armpit, coming out the opposite shoulder. It had taken most of the meat, exposing the shoulder bones. The sand was soaked with black blood.

The sergeant's flashlight shone on the face, shocking us all. It was the Base Exchange's Vietnamese barber. About four hours ago he had given me a haircut. The pack was full of plastic explosives and detonators.

As the team took away the body in the back of the pickup, I went back to my post. Taking off my helmet I picked up my binoculars. Sweeping the jungle in front of me, I wondered what I would do with my two days off...

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