

VIETNAM

366th Security Police Squadron, Đà Nẵng AB
DET 1/620th TCS, Korat RTAFB

Red Sky At Night!

by Terry Sandman,
Sgt USAF Security Police, 1966-1967
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Red Sky in the Night...NVA Take Flight!

Photo by Terry Sandman, composition by Don Poss.

Đông Hà Air Field, including the Air Base, Marine Combat Base, units deployed along the Cua Viet River and South Vietnamese CIDG area received 140 incoming artillery, rocket and mortar rounds fired by the NVA in a stand off attack during the night on May 18, 1967. The Air Base received some building damage and some WIA's, but thank God no KIA's. The Marines took quite a few KIA's, exact number unknown, and WIA's. The NVA walked their rounds through an area and then waited a few minutes and walked a second number of rounds through the same area again. Some of the KIA's had field dressings on them for wounds received in the first sweep of rounds and they and others were hit again and KIA by the second sweep of incoming rounds. That morning we searched our area for impact points and discovered that many of the impact holes had a second hole nearby. Three Marines were KIA when a rocket landed in the hole they were using for cover. After seeing the casualties and damage inflicted on the Đông Hà Air Field area by the attack, I believe that we at the Air Base were fortunate that night.

Red Sky in the Night...NVA Take Flight! One of the more interesting aspects of being a SP on the perimeter at Korat RTAFB during the early to mid months of 1967 was that I had an excellent view of the war in northern Quang Tri Province. Đông Hà Air Field was part of four Marine Combat Bases that formed a quadrilateral extending about 12 miles south from the eastern DMZ area to the Cua Viet River at Đông Hà Air Field. The quadrilateral was known as "Leatherneck Square" and included Đông Hà Air Field, Cam Lo, Con Thien and Gio Lin. Some very heavy fighting took place around that area as the U.S. Marines and U.S. Army denied the North Vietnamese Army the opportunity to build up in supplies and troops with the objective to over run Quang Tri Province. Đông Hà Air Field was receiving alerts for possible NVA ground assaults. (The NVA finally achieved that objective during the 1972 Easter Offensive after U.S. Forces had been pulled out of the war in Quang Tri Province and sent home).



To support the build up of troops and supplies, the NVA had mobile Rocket units that roamed the area and artillery placed in the DMZ that was dug in and camouflaged. Đông Hà Air Field, at only 12 miles distance, was the farthest base below the DMZ. The NVA 130mm artillery had a range of 19 miles (almost twice the distance of most of our artillery) that enabled stand off attacks by the NVA artillery and rockets of all the bases in the area and also units in the "bush." Additional support for the NVA was brought in with AAA and SAM SA-2 Missiles that were a threat to any aircraft flying near the DMZ. I observed a North Vietnamese SAM SA-2 shoot down one of our aircraft near the DMZ one evening.



The pilot bailed out and survived the attack and was rescued in the DMZ by a SAR helicopter the next morning. The helicopter was hit four times during the rescue. With such a concentration of troops, supplies and armaments in a relatively small area,

the NVA must have presented some inviting targets to our Air Force, Marine and Navy aircraft. I was assigned to bunker post 14 on the northeast perimeter for a night shift in the spring of 1967. At that time, bunker 14 was a one-man post. An airman from the Sky Spot radar site came up to my post. Sky Spot directed B-52 Arc Light missions and jet fighter-bombers to their targets, if known and fixed, within a 200 mile radius including North Vietnam. The airman said that there was going to be a bombing mission nearby soon that he would like to observe from my post. Bunker 14 had the normal slit openings at ground level, but also had a raised observation sandbag area on top of the bunker that elevated the SP on post up just enough to give him an excellent view over the relatively flat terrain east to the coast and north to the DMZ. The night was clear and the sky was almost cloudless with brilliant stars hanging over the countryside. The airman told me to look in an area generally north of our position and somewhere near the DMZ. He also said that the bombing mission would be very impressive. The airman and I continued to look north when a few minutes later there was a large air burst explosion. It was either one explosion or several so tightly grouped together that they appeared as one. That was the beginning of the bombing mission that was being directed by Sky Spot. From that point on, I witnessed something that I had never seen before. It was difficult to estimate the altitude of the air burst, but it was at a considerable distance from the ground. From the point of the air burst, large, red shapes of something that was neither solid nor liquid started to spread out and form into dozens of glowing reddish globules (for want of a better word) of varying sizes and shapes. The glowing globules seemed at first to be suspended in the air, but then slowly they began to descend to the earth. It seemed to take the globules some time before they started impacting. As the first of the globules touched down there were large explosions on the ground. As each following globule touched down there would often be tremendous explosions that would cause other explosions to ignite. Whatever the target was that Sky Spot was directing the aircraft to hit it was receiving some devastating blows by the incendiary weapon. The airman from Sky Spot and I sat there on top of the bunker slack jawed by the experience. As the last of the glowing red globules struck their targets on the ground I saw numerous fires burning. Every now and then one of those fires would touch off another massive explosion. The fires and secondary explosions continued for some time after the initial bomb drop. The NVA on the ground near that bomb run had to be experiencing hell on earth that night. The target may have been a large concentration either of fuel, rockets, artillery or maybe a SAM site or SAM missiles. I don't know whether one aircraft or several aircraft were involved in that bombing mission or what the target was that night. However, it looked like serious damage had been inflicted from all of the explosions we saw. The Sky Spot airman and I continued to watch the fires burning in the distance for some time. That was a one-time experience for me, one of many different experiences that the war in Nam has so vividly imprinted in my memories.

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History Channel: 1967 U.S. positions south of the DMZ come under heavy fire. U.S. forces just south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) come under heavy fire as Marine positions between Đông Hà Air Field and Con Thien are pounded by North Vietnamese artillery. At the same time, more than 100 Americans were killed or wounded during heavy fighting along the DMZ. On May 17 and 18, the Con Thien base was shelled heavily. Đông Hà Air Field, Gio Linh, Cam Lo, and Camp Carroll were also bombarded. On May 18, a force of 5,500 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops invaded the southeastern section of the DMZ to smash a communist build up in the area and to deny the use of the zone as an infiltration route into South Vietnam. On May 19, the U.S. State Department said the offensive in the DMZ was "purely a defensive measure" against a "considerable buildup of North Vietnam troops." The North Vietnamese government on May 21 called the invasion of the zone "a brazen provocation" that "abolished the buffer character of the DMZ as provided by the Geneva agreements."

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