

Đà Nẵng Air Base
Sapper Mortar Attack - July 1, 1965
by Mike K. Bush, (MSgt, USAF Security Police - Retired)



Hi Don, I'm Mike Bush, (MSgt, USAF Security Police - Retired). Jack Brokaw [past president of the Air force Security Forces Association] informs me that you would like to publish the letter that I wrote which outlines the circumstances surrounding the death of SSgt Terry K. Jensen at Đà Nẵng Air Base during the attack that took place there on 1 July, 1965. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute. The letter follows below.

9 July, 1997

To: CMSgt Jim Calcutt,

48 FW PSC 41

Box 2603, APO AE 09464

From: MSgt (Ret) Michael K. Bush

CMSgt Calcutt,

I served in Vietnam at Đà Nẵng Air Base From August 1964 to August 1965. I fought in the action against the NVA and elements of the Viet Cong on 1 July 1965, during which SSgt Terry K. Jensen was killed.

I was part of the Strike Team Reaction Force that *counter attacked* to sweep through to the south end of the base during that action. Terry was my friend, and he died fighting valiantly in the best tradition of the Security Police (then known as "Air Police").

The following is a brief account of the circumstances that led to Terry's death. The details are accurate - *I was there*, and those memories are as fresh in my dreams now as the night they occurred: 1 July 1965.

I was a young SSgt assigned to the armory during the day shift, and was also assigned to the teams that provided security in the field during classified reconnaissance drone recovery operations.

I "hit the sack" around 2300 hours, 30 June, 1965. At approximately 0132 hours, 1 July, 1965, the first incoming mortar rounds hit the base on the South end of the runway and aircraft parking area, where the alert F-102 interceptor aircraft, and two C-130 flare ships were parked. Later, Monkey Mountain Radar reported that the NVA had six mortar rounds in the air before the first round impacted - they were very good!

The mortar fire then shifted (they reportedly had three mortar tubes working us over) and started "walking" fire up the flight line.

The "Sapper" attack on the south end of the base occurred as follows:

The NVA (guided by local VC) had infiltrated the southeast perimeter through five holes cut in the perimeter fence. Their strength was estimated at approximately 60 personnel. The main force consisted of "hard-core" NVA--not VC. We knew this at once because of the sound of AK-47 fire. At that time, only the NVA carried the AK-47 -- not the VC..

After successfully infiltrating the base perimeter undetected, the enemy force grouped behind two large concrete revetments area, in which two C-130 flare ships were parked. There, they waited for the mortars to open up. That would be their signal to begin their attack.

When the mortar fire began, the NVA force advanced in assault under their own fire across the taxiway. As they moved past the revetments, the NVA ripped open the fuel cells in the C-130's with automatic weapons fire, threw grenades into the fuel and fired the aircraft, destroying them. A team of NVA worked their way around behind the alert F-102's, and fired either RPG's or 57mm recoilless rifle rounds up the engine exhaust pipes of three of the aircraft, destroying them.

All of the F-102's were parked "cocked" with the canopies open. The NVA destroyed or disabled the remaining aircraft with automatic weapons fire, and by throwing grenades and satchel charges into the open cockpits. Air-to-air rockets on-board the burning F-102's burned, exploded, or "cooked off," and launched north towards the cantonment area and other aircraft parked on the rest of the flight line.

Only two posts were located at the south end of the base. One was a checkpoint, (not an access control point) located on the west edge of the taxiway across from, and approximately 50 yards North of the first C-130 revetment. The second was a position located at the juncture of the taxiway, and the active runway, near the runway over-run area.

Many times, off duty troops could not sleep for one reason or another, and would go over to [Command Security Control] CSC, check out the ton-and-a-half truck, and run coffee around to the troops on post. Sometimes, the Flight on-duty would assign someone to do this, but usually someone off-duty would just "volunteer." I had performed that duty just two nights before the attack.

On the fateful night, SSgt Jensen was running coffee. He was armed only with a .38 caliber revolver, and basic load of ammunition. (Up to that point, we were still state-siding it as far as weapons and ammunition were concerned.) In those days, the Air Police were thought of as little more than internal point security guards for critical resources. We were neither trained, nor equipped to fight an actual ground engagement against a determined enemy. Only a few troops wore steel helmets -- flack jackets were not an issue item. We were

authorized only basic load of ammunition for the M16 rifles (three 20 rd. magazines). We were neither issued nor authorized grenades, or M60 machine guns. We carried nothing that wasn't carried at a CONUS base.

At approximately 0129 hrs, SSgt Jensen pulled up in the truck to the check-point at the F-102 Alert Area. The check-point was manned by a young "two-striper," last name of Handy, first name unknown. Handy was TDY to Đà Nẵng from George AFB, and had been *in-country* about a week. SSgt Jensen told Airman Handy that the "*coffee jug was in the back of the truck*" if he wanted some.

At that moment, the first mortar rounds impacted at the end of the runway -- approximately 200 yards from where SSgt Jensen and Airman Handy were located. At the same time, the NVA force moved from behind the C-130 revetments, and across the taxiway, firing as they advanced, into the small tent/trailer area, located between the taxiway and the active runway where the alert crews, and maintenance troops were billeted.

Over the noise of the enemy's fire and explosions, SSgt Jensen yelled at Airman Handy to "*Get the radio in the bunker;*" as the truck that SSgt Jensen was driving was not radio equipped. SSgt Jensen dismounted the vehicle on the driver's side (preparing to engage the sapper team), and was immediately struck once in the lower abdomen by a 7.62 X 39 mm. AK-47 round. SSgt Jensen went to his knees, and though painfully wounded, drew his .38 caliber revolver, and returned fire at three NVA soldiers at a range of approximately 30 yards. SSgt Jensen fired three rounds, and witnesses later recounted that two of the NVA soldiers went down -- no enemy bodies were found as the NVA always removed the bodies of their dead upon withdrawal.

Seeking better cover, SSgt Jensen managed to crawl around the rear of the vehicle, where he took up a position behind the right-rear tandem wheels, and prepared to re-engage the enemy. An NVA soldier who had approached SSgt Jensen's truck from the front, threw a grenade into the cab. When the grenade detonated, the vehicle [SSgt Jensen was behind] burst into flames. In the ensuing confusion, the NVA soldier managed to circle around the rear of the burning [ton-and-a-half truck], and approach SSgt Jensen undetected. The NVA soldier stood over [the gravely wounded] SSgt Jensen and fired four rounds into his upper and middle back, killing him instantly.

[Meanwhile,] Airman Handy had been attempting to contact CSC with the radio located in the bunker (a large "portable" *non-tactical* Motorola radio, not a small hand-held radio which he could have worn in a belt carrier case), with negative results. Handy reportedly looked up from inside the bunker (which was nothing more than a ring of single sandbags approximately three and one-half feet high, and with no overhead cover), and saw the NVA that had just killed SSgt Jensen

Handy then brought his M16 rifle to bear, and killed the NVA soldier. *Airman Handy then remained at his post, and delivered flanking fire on the advancing NVA line, and broke their assault.* Airman Handy continued to engage the enemy until his ammunition was exhausted.

An captured NVA officer later revealed that the initial objective of the attack was to eliminate the Marine Aviation Battalion Helicopters, which were hurting NVA operational

efforts in the local Đà Nẵng area. The NVA officer further related that when Airman Handy had opened fire on their advance, they were convinced they had run into a "dug-in heavy machine gun" -- broke off their attack and began to withdraw by the same route by which they had entered the flight line... area.

In the light of the burning aircraft, the NVA could be seen dragging dead and wounded toward the fence line. The NVA were also engaged by the F-102 crew members and maintenance personnel in the tent area, who were lightly armed with a few unauthorized M16's and hand weapons.

The Marines, from the aviation battalion, also contributed effective fire from their positions across the active runway to the west. [In 1965, there was only a single runway, with one under construction.]

I will never forget the sight of an Air Force Major, dressed in a flight suit and hatless, sitting on the hood of a jeep with an M16 rifle in his right hand, barrel pointed upward, with the butt anchored against his right hip --tear filled eyes staring unwaveringly straight ahead. SSgt Jensen's body was draped across the Major's lap, and his head gently cradled and supported by the Major's left arm as the jeep moved slowly down the taxiway toward the Air Force compound. No fallen warrior could have had a more solemn, profound, and appropriate escort.*

You said that you sent a picture of a Major receiving a medal... that was probably our "commander" at the time, an Major Howard, I believe his name was. I don't know if it was him that brought Terry's body in. I know that it was a Major in a flying suit, and Major Howard was a pilot that wound up being our commander -- and I never saw him wear anything but a flying suit! It was dark that night, and nobody was about to turn on a light of any kind... there was still plenty of action going on, and a whole bunch of very trigger-happy GI's. I have a photo of Major Howard taken out at the firing range standing on a berm... that was before the attack.

There is much more to the story and events that took place that night, but these are essentially the details of the circumstances surrounding the death of SSgt Terry K. Jensen.

* Excerpt from the Account of 1 July 1965 by,
Air Police [SSgt. Joseph F. Oates](#), 23 ABG (SLE), (NCOIC SAT Team):

"Me and the Maj. went to Post-1 and found the body of SSgt Jensen under the right rear of the truck. At this time a unknown Capt. pulled up with a jeep, and the Maj and Capt put SSgt Jensen's body on the jeep's hood, and I acted as a cover. We then left the area, and sent SSgt Jensen and A2C Handy to the Hospital."

We Take Care of Our Own