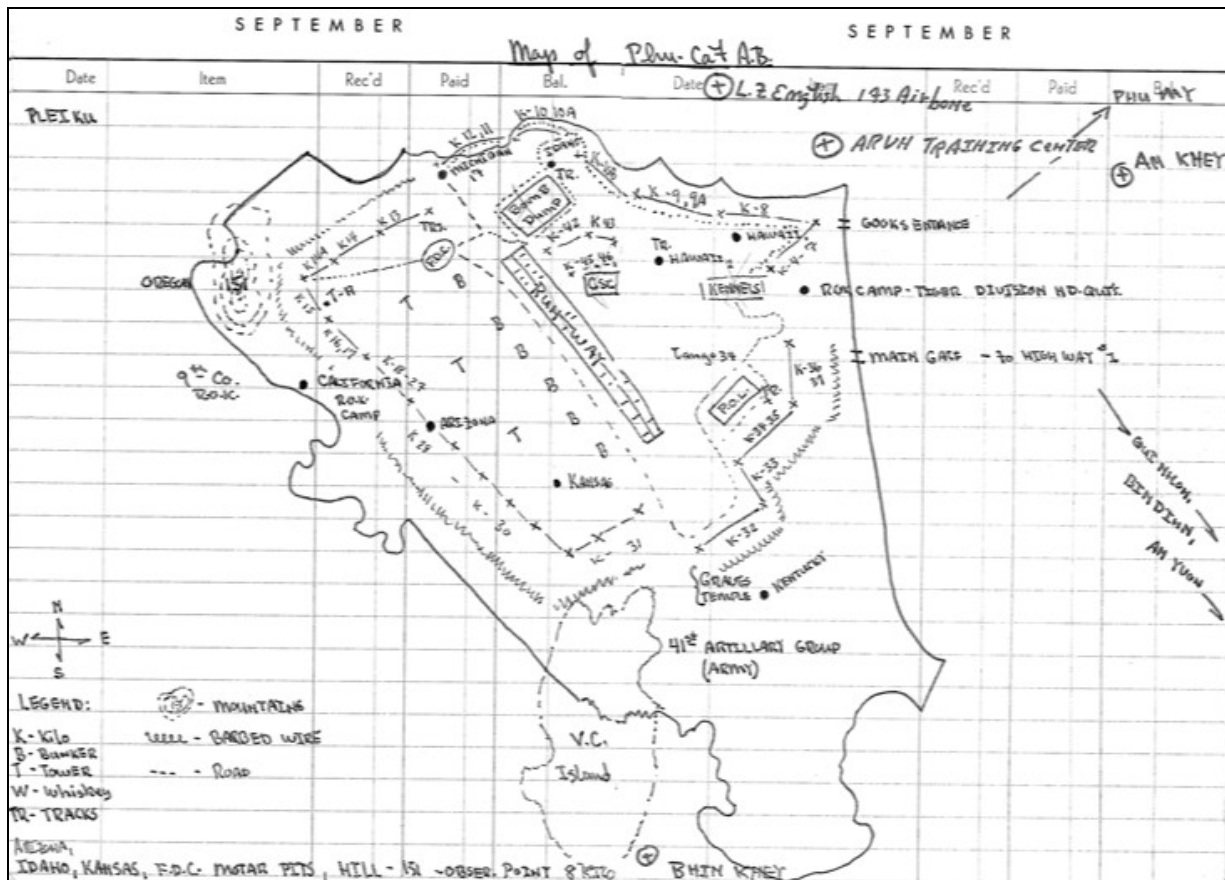


My Memories and Reflections
as a Combat Dog Handler in Southeast Asia
 © 2013 by [Charles H. Collins](#)

Phu Cat Airbase

37th Security Police, K-9 Sentry Dog Section, 1968 to 1970

It has been well over 40 years since I was in Vietnam yet when I smell the burning wheat stubble of the Palouse country in southeast Washington my memories and reflections are like yesterday. I recall the smell of the nearby village fires as burning bamboo smoke drifted over the silent rice paddies, and darkness would break into the morning dusk with a slight chill and mist in the air. Even today, when I take my early morning walk, I am apprehensive as my head is cocked looking for *movement* in the lowland marshes of Kent, Washington. In a flash without a thought I am on guard listening as if I were back in the jungle. My eyes expanded and fixed on the edges of the stream below to silhouette a target. My imagination briefly takes over wanting that target to move, but it does not. Blinking and refocusing my gaze, the thrill is over as I walk the country road reassured the perimeter of Creekside community is safe.



MAP: Phu Cat AB, 37th SPS K-9 Posts, 1968-1970

I lived on the perimeter outside the wire of Phu Cat Airbase, Republic of South Vietnam, assigned to the 37th Security Police Sentry Dog Section from 1968 to 1970. We were based in the central highlands and positioned about 25 miles west of Qui Nhon, a city on the South China

Sea. Attached to the Airbase was a Republic of Korea Battalion of soldiers (ROK), responsible for long range patrols, controlling villages and protecting hamlets within five to ten miles of the base from North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) Sapper Units. The ROK's were very effective at eliminating the enemy threat.

Sentry Dog Handlers, or simply called dog-men, were the first line of defense working only in hours of darkness to detect, protect, guard and stop intruders. At Phu Cat Airbase, there were 42 canine posts (see above map) providing point-to-point perimeter security, with each post varying but often consisting of heavy jungle, elephant grass, animal trails, rice paddies, Vietnamese graveyards and surface artesian wells. A typical K-9 post would be a quarter mile in length in front of armed bunkers and towers with [Cobra Flight](#) Security Police sentries, armed with M-60 machine guns, slap flares and a radios. They depended on canine as their eyes and ears during a ten hour shift and were also vigilant in scanning the perimeter for infiltrators. Often ground-bunkers had large rats and occasional snakes within, because they scrounged for C-rations and remaining debris sometimes left behind by the sentries.

Air Force Security Police Squadrons (SPS) Sentry Dog handler teams were highly disciplined,



trained its Airmen in weapons firearm policy and followed the Geneva Convention Accord from World War Two. At the time, squadron Airmen could be absolutely depended upon to do their job without a second thought. We were an interdependent team of security police committed to the protection and safety of the base. We were very effective in eliminating base perimeter penetrations. Viet Cong usually preferred stand-off attacks such as mortars and rockets, rather than direct sapper attacks which often resulted in a high enemy death rate. In time, jungle areas were cleared away from base perimeters, but we knew there was a labyrinth of an expansive tunnel system known to be under parts of the Airbase and posts we patrolled. Tunnel encounters were rare.

SPS were, so to speak, the *light infantry* of the Air Force. There were also elite teams who volunteered to go beyond canine posts reaching

into heavy jungle, and known as *Cobra Ambush Teams* (CAT). CATs served as Listening Posts during heightened security precautions for the Airbase. They performed with stealth, were excellent in what they did, and had the respect of perimeter post dog-men, as they volunteered to go beyond canine posts reaching into the heavy jungle.

A team of three Viet Cong sappers had penetrated the perimeter of Da Nang Airbase in

December 1968, hurling satchel charges of explosives into a massive weapons and bomb dump storage area. Munitions exploded for more than a week, as delayed and secondary explosions continued for days, spraying shrapnel and bomb fragments for miles, killing many people. Primary targets at Airbases for VC were often bomb dumps, flightline F-4 Phantom aircraft and officers' quarters, and barracks areas, so protecting the perimeter was never an understatement.

We knew the enemy must be stopped at the perimeter, and with base attacks often predictable when there was no moon, or during heavy rains, we could expect enemy patrols to occasionally send three-men teams to simply probe for weak areas. The VC then could be lightly armed with AK-47 rifles, and willing to crawl a half mile or so leaving bamboo markers along the way and go undetected. They would crawl for two or more hours arriving at the base entry point around 10:00 p.m. outside of K-9 posts such as Kilo-10, 10-Alpha, 11, 12, or 13, which were portals to the bomb dump. Kilo was the radio call sign for a canine post. Detection was the last thing a VC Sapper Team wanted since more often than not, our dogs would alert and hit the end of the leash hard pulling the handler toward a Sapper Team!



Sapper Photos: <http://www.vspa.com/pc-arnold-houchin-sappers-16-apr-1969.htm>;

<http://www.vspa.com/pc-mike-sipes-37th-sps-sapper-feb-22-1969-p1.htm>

; [pc-sappers-barbarise-1969.htm](http://www.vspa.com/pc-sappers-barbarise-1969.htm).

A K-9's alert is so fast there's no time to think as the dog leaps forward and the handler sees nothing but may feel elephant grass cutting at his face; as if they vanished! They could quickly evaporate into the night retreating. If the first sapper team was detected, a new sapper team could follow the next night. Next morning, that same VC sapper may be planting rice in the field at the same place of the penetration attempt unscathed, wiser, scoping the next route or digging an escape or concealment tunnel. One thing for sure was they would be back, and we of course knew this. Sapper infiltration could



be a very deadly game of *cat and mouse*, and exfiltration seemed as if they had been magically absorbed by the dark-greens of the jungle. They too understood that attacking an Airbase could lead to a sudden death (see photo

above). Both sides needed nerves of steel.

Phu Cat Airbase was small with an estimated population of 1,000 airmen, with basic services like a mail room, outdoor movie pit, chow hall, entertainment barn with music and beer, Base Exchange, barn-like barracks and a barber shop. On base you were expected to be clean, well-shaved and behave with a professional appearance. The Air Force supplied rear-echelon support for other service combat mission's success. However, everyone knew an Airbase was still a dangerous place to be since the enemy conducted regular harassment with 122 millimeter and 140 millimeter rocket and 81 millimeter mortar attacks, usually occurring early in the morning around 5:00 a.m.. I still have a piece of a 122 millimeter rocket with Russian lettering which hit our kennels, which was a reminder the Russians supplied the enemy with weapons now and then. During daytime, 100 plus local Vietnamese civilians worked on the Airbase doing such jobs as laundry, cleaning, food services, and haircuts. Some had been observed pacing off targets, using brush area tunnels and as well as making maps. If caught they were handed off to the ROK's for interrogation and never seen again.

Airmen couldn't help but get friendly with some of the local Vietnamese. Americans seem to mostly have great dispositions, so it was fairly normal for them to be polite, yet, act with caution. I had haircuts with the same barber over the months, never talking mission, and he knew I was a dog man by my patches and dog gear I sometimes carried around. He said: "Dog man *number 10* with a sly smile!" I replied: "Dog man *number 1*, bragging to him we were the best and that many VC die," whereupon he responded: "Maybe I see you later." I said: "You're dead if you do!" He scoffed and was quiet. I did not want my razor shave. I got up from the chair silently and said: "Don't do anything stupid." That was the last time I saw him.

Coincidentally, we did intercept a VC Sapper Team weeks later in a fire fight on Kilo 10 Alpha, but the bodies were unidentifiable and beyond recognition. **I replaced the two Airmen who were shot and hospitalized that night**, and continued patrolling until dusk since. Often, Sapper Teams would try to return to the contact site and retrieve their wounded and dead. That night they did not return and three VC were KIA [4 VC/NVA KIA and 1 POW; 1 US WIA: 22 Feb 1969].

The Security Police Squadron lived on the far northeast edge of the Airbase, next to the ROK compound. The Canine Section of about 50 dog handlers lived in an area about 100 yards away from our kennels, where sentry dogs and weapons were housed for quick response, daily training and veterinarian care. We lived in hooches, or small huts, housing eight Airmen with a common small room with a Sanyo refrigerator for two cases of beer in tin cans. Electrical outlets were haphazard and generally powered 16 inch fans that blew 90 degrees hot air and 100% humidity by noon and beyond. We slept from 8:00 a.m. to around 2:00 p.m. in small double bunks with sheets and pillows. After 2:00 p.m. the humidity and heat left your mattress soaking wet and it was near impossible to sleep other than from exhaustion. There was never an escape from the subtropical weather; only an open-bay shower room between the hooches. We each had a single locker (some homemade) with a cheap lock.

Essentially we lived outside enough to understand, and respect, that critters like snakes, spiders and scorpions could find a dark space to live, too--like inside your boots. That's one

reason today when I am asked to go camping with friends or family I politely say that I'd rather not...thanks.

Our routine was simply to be ready every day at 6:00 p.m. to go to Guardmount at the kennels and be issued: CAR M-16 weapon, 180 rounds of ammunition, radio, C-rations, 2 magnesium and slap-flares; grenades were optional as we prepared to be inspected and given post orders by Noncommissioned Officer in Charge (NCOIC).

There was always a slight bit of tension as we listened to orders read and getting our dogs for posting. Outside their kennels when around each other or handlers, the dogs all had to be muzzled. Sentry Dogs were vicious by training and would literally try to kill anyone and anything other than their handlers. At Guardmount we were regularly advised of local intelligence on NVA and VC activity in the area, and issued a *nightly* password. Briefing was interesting and usually informed us what was going on at the base, with dog-men on leave or taking R&R, required advanced dog training, veterinarian appointments, and who was getting short or ready to go home.

Everything about Vietnam was measured against how many days you had left in country, which was a gauge others also measured you were as to what you could do. New guys had a hard way to go until all the old guys left and then it was your turn to get better posts or drive the posting truck. Depending on the Defense Readiness Condition or enemy threat we earned a day off. This occurred about once every 30 days or so; otherwise you went on post every night and walked your post for 8 hours at a minimum, positioned downwind when possible, and searching for infiltrators. The 8 hours shift was for the health of the dog, and not the handler, but was not written in concrete. We just knew it was hopeless to complain and got numb to the routine and realized--*this is Vietnam*. This is what we did. It was hard duty especially during the monsoons as buckets of water soaked you to the bone; but we were better men for it, able to endure and be guided by our discipline and reputation.

In a way, we went hunting every night and each post was very different and unique. Several times we had to haul out a dog man from an overgrown surface well hidden by vegetation. If handlers fell 30 feet down into a pitch-black water-well it often took hours to retrieve the guy. Meanwhile, he would hold onto the insides of the well by vines infested with critters. Sometimes, an event like that could be overwhelming, and some men were never quite the same again. No one ever died from a well-fall, but some got bitten and were treated for multiple snake bites. Fortunately, not every snake was poisonous.

After a few months you got to know each post and had it mapped into your mind how to move from trail to road to dense jungle, scrub brush, or open field, ever careful with areas ever changing from weather and foliage. All the while, we looked for VC entry points, tunnels, rise of the land into rice paddies or open areas, and avoiding being silhouetted by a backlit background. We were always vigilant. You had to be. It was like you could never rest. Even when you were asleep, a sixth-sense kept one eye slightly open or an ear tuned for danger.

Fatigue was the enemy then and today, equally as menacing memories triggered by our senses

(smell and sound) may shift our mood in a flash! Anger is the predominate emotion followed by fear.

Each airman may have their own story. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) leaves a family confused, helpless, rejected and paradoxically angry at him for his symptoms of indifference to them. Group Therapy sessions are an excellent adjunct for managing symptoms as provided by Veterans Administration Health Care System for increased self-awareness and building a support system of family and friends. My treatment was at a Seattle VA Store Front Service Center from 1987 to 1990. I was able to put into perspective my level of PTSD compared to others, realize my guilt was based on shame and we did not know what forgiveness met, was or how to get it or give it. My story was simply lightning-fast extreme anger followed by poor judgment of others and most often I was wrong.

Some nights on post were better than others: if the moon was full and weather dry, it felt like walking on the ninth hole of a golf course and it was really great when there was zero threat and no jungle. We liked that fine; but 80% of the time we sloshed through rice paddies and had to push neck-high vegetation away using the muzzle of our weapon acting like a machete. Much of these vines and fruit trees had large spiders and fruit bats hanging from them which would be stirred and jump at or in front of you, adding to your fear of what else could be out here. It was hard to contend with difficulties with everything coming at you and the dog generally tugging at the end of the leash seeming to enjoy his evening walk and countless new smells.

One night standing near a mango tree, and unknown to me, my dog leapt high into the air and like catching a football pass coming at me, which was a five foot wing span giant fruit bat! Wrestling the bat to the ground with it flopping all over the place, screeching like a wild cat, and screaming with pain, my dog killed the bat. It was literally the size of a fox flying! Truth is, it was like a giant rat and more than likely had rabies for which the dog was treated the next day. The veterinarian was in disbelief as I plopped the giant bat on the exam table.

Jungle sounds become normal and you figured out quickly what to watch out for, between the giant lizards, night birds, and big ocelot cats. Cats are curious by nature and like dog handlers were night hunters. When the cats came around their scent cones were close to the ground so the dog would begin to track the animal with a low crawl. Human scent cones are airborne but dogs sniff the air two feet off the ground and are pulling to the human target. Often times VC Sapper Teams would smear gun-grease, used crank case oil, gun powder or pepper on their groin and arm pits to completely remove the scent. The dog could miss this scent resulting in the handler walking right by a target, or in my case stepping on the wrist of a Sapper which I felt under my boot.

Aircraft were taking off and landing always, but otherwise it was silent. There were no jungle noises of birds or lizards chirping and it was as if they were telling me danger was nearby! I kept moving realizing if I stopped I was certainly an easy target, or dead. I walked about 20 feet, dropped to a knee, slapped a flare for vision, fired my weapon and waited. I retraced my steps and found matted down elephant grass where minutes ago lay a VC Sapper Team that chose to withdraw. I felt relief they were gone and angry that my dog had missed the scent entirely. How many more times could I endure those moments of walking on the edge of death? Truth is, the

sentry dogs were subject to illness and fatigue, and as far as I was concerned were better humans than most humans. Later, it was a strange thrill to know with certainty I had stood nearly on top of an enemy who must have been equally and strategically terrified to be detected.

As it turned out, the encounter was a *draw* and we both got to live another day. This was, as I found over the next 18 months, the way it was going to be. *You will come to me and I will find you often*. How many times did a dog man have to endure what we called a *dead alert*? This was how it would be in our war on the perimeter *outside the wire*. Regardless of conditions, canine were the *first line of defense* every time.

Security Police Sentry Dog Handlers were an isolated group by profession and choice, even during eight weeks of basic dog school at Lackland AFB, Texas, which all other branches of military considered a technical school. Lackland was the only function that used live animals to do sentry work to detect and detain. We were trained in basic and advanced obedience, quartering a post downwind to position for oncoming scents and attack training using a highly padded *head to toe* attack suit, which the dogs would viscously maul until their gums bled. Sentry dogs were considered weapons and muzzled always until the handler *changed over* from *obedience choke chain* to *leather attack collar*, which was the signal to go to work, when they were posted on the edge of the jungle. Unmuzzled dogs would most certainly attack other dogs, handlers, or anyone around within the reach of the leash. Sentry dogs were considered to be *loaded weapons* and if you dropped the leash to attack intruders, the dog was certain to drag their victims to the ground and rip them apart snapping at anything moving. The more the victim struggled, moved or tried to escape the more wounds, and if the dog grabbed their neck and would not release, there was not much that could be done for the victim's survival.

The dogs were deadly, extremely fast, and accurate. Their sense of smell and hearing was highly refined and even under adverse conditions a sentry dog could alert on a Sapper Team within 50 to 75 meters, *advising* the handler who then could radio a message to Security Control. Dog teams would converge on a central point to stop the intrusion or pull back to bunker line and saturate the area with firepower from towers, and sometimes a Spooky gunship or Cobra helicopter gunship would show up for 30 minutes. The message was clear to the enemy outside of any U.S. Airbase at night: any invasion or infiltration would not be tolerated and be dealt with by deadly force. A massive show of force deterred most attempts.

At Phu Cat AB, along with regular perimeter security, four Security Police maintained an outpost (OP) known as [Hill 151](#), about 5 kilometers northwest of the base. Elevation was about 1,000 feet and the [OP was perched on the hilltop](#). Rotating weekly tours, they stood watch using a giant infrared starlight scope with radio frequency set to US Army, Air Force, Navy, and ROK Units. We had small weapons to stave off and observe enemy activity during hours of darkness. Two dog-men and two Cobra Flight Security Policemen would spend the week in a fortified [bunker](#) with not much more than [400 square feet of space](#). It was very hot, crawling with critters, dirty, and with limited food or water. It was a *rite of passage* as part of being on the team. You had to go and got a free 10 minute helicopter ride to The Hill. No dogs allowed, and it was a welcomed break from the day to day grind of humping a post every night.

At night *on the hill* was busy since you had a map and a [scope](#) to watch activity. When enemy activity occurred, no less than 20 kilometers from our position, typically Spooky Gunships made multiple passes on targets while circling at 5000 feet. From the port side four 20 millimeter cannons would blast in bursts of 10 seconds in a stream of liquid-fire *drilling* the target sounding like a low growl. First, the gunship would arrive on scene of a target, drop a seven foot aluminum canister of burning liquid phosphorous connected to a parachute-flare that when ignited threw off millions of candle light power as it bobbed and dangled in the air for about 20 seconds. The light enabled the pilot to have excellent visibility of enemy movement below and in an instant would begin to fire his cannons at the desperate enemy below. There simply was no escaping Spooky gunships. They would work out as we called it for about 30 minutes, then back to base to reload 50 gallon ammunition drums and fly another mission mostly at night.

Unlike the Army and Marines in combat, much of the Air Force conducted their work at night under the cover of darkness such as canine and air strikes. We would watch and advise combat operations from The Hill what we observed. Additionally, we watched the perimeter of the Airbase where bunkers, towers and canines were posted looking for VC Sapper Teams threading their way toward the base, and the North side where the bomb dump was located. When we made a sighting we would call in the coordinates and SPS mortar teams would saturate the target. Canine would go search for bodies, wounded, or hiding VC, and in the morning daylight hours the target would be swept clean with a final search. The base was always secure as possible--this is what we did.

I never wondered or concerned myself with the other Air Force Squadrons, personally or professionally. There was no free time to make friends and as K-9 handlers we all seemed to concentrate on what we did as dog handlers. The little time you did have you spent sleeping, or trying to sleep, training or humping your post, or checking your dog's health with the Vet. Today, I do wonder, however what it was like for the non-SPS Airmen at Phu Cat AB. What were they thinking about then besides going home or R&R? What was it like for them at night, trying to sleep and hearing gun fire or Spooky working out, or a distant pipe line fire shooting flames 400 feet in the air, or getting hit by harassment enemy mortar or rocket attacks early in the morning?

I always knew when we patrolled on the perimeter, where I lived, I was relatively safe mostly because I had a strong sense of control being armed and an idea of who and where the enemy were and might be. I have heard it said that *simply being in Vietnam* no matter the job you had was like being on black ice most of the time. And true, it was dangerous, and you never knew about getting hit by a rocket attack. And there are sad stories like an airman who did his 365 day tour of duty with distinction was waiting for his aircraft at Flight Operations at 10:00 a.m. in 1970, which took a direct hit by a rocket and killing him! It was not bad luck, it was a war zone, and you always just never knew. PTSD is an abnormal *over reaction* caused by massive distress over an extended time. It's the mind's way to compensate and can last a lifetime--40 years for me.

Because the Airbase was a place you were stationed at you learned to live together as a combat support community. We all had perceptions about our level of what being in combat meant individually or to our families back home. The benchmark for being in combat for me was

the image of a World War Two Army enlisted soldier crawling out of a foxhole advancing toward the enemy cradling an M-1 rifle--with a square jaw, wearing a five pound steel helmet--or a movie stereotype from *The Dirty Dozen* and Lee Marvin types. This, of course, was *myth* and truth of the matter was in the Air Force the real combatants were officer pilots sitting in cockpits soaring at 500 MPH with 2,000 pounds explosive ordinance diving directly into the jaws of the enemy at times 500 feet off of the ground, or through flak and their own napalm (jellied fire) followed by a 2G climb to prepare for another pass! They were elite fighter jet pilots and an Air Force working as one team from cooks to cops and in it all together, which was a reason for success.

When the Airbase defense readiness conditions were increased to a higher security level needing additional bunker guards drawn from non-SPS squadrons, were a gladly supplemented combat support group of augmentees armed with M-16 rifles were posted on the perimeter. Airmen, I knew, were not distracted by myth and to a person were glad to do sentry duty [*two augmentees were KIA and others WIA*]. Again, I wonder what went through the minds of young men crouched in a bunker made of green canvas sandbags stacked only two deep with a slot for an M-16. They soon learned, to grip with a sweaty trigger finger too ready to squeeze an automatic burst, staring in to the darkness...listening for movement... alone, hour after hour as rain pounded your helmet with a never-ending stream of water upon your face, could prove exhausting. What were augmentees thinking about then, and to what effect and what end these years later?

I have been told by some augmentees were terrified...untrained for combat as they were. They knew the enemy were skilled in guerrilla tactics, depending upon stealth and opportunity, and that suddenly you could be just another causality. Not knowing when or how one might be killed was a distress-multiplier for augmentees as they performed their duty on post [See: [Relax, you're spookin' the dog](#)].

Often times, dog man would know about augmentees on the bunker line and some would reassure them they patrolled in front, and briefed them about the mechanics of a canine patrol. There would be some friendly movement out front, and if they were ever in doubt to slap a hand-flare first before firing at will. Augmentees were a needed complement for life on the perimeter making it more secure for a base that never rested, day or night.

Patrolling the perimeter as a dog team fifty plus meters outside the wire was lonely, but I was always armed with a personal affirmation: *I will get you first!* We knew, when to back up immediately to our tower and bunker line team, and that was my ace.

Night life on the perimeter of an Airbase in a combat zone *demand*ed nothing less than 100% of your attention all the time. You never stopped listening; always trusted your instincts; let your dog lead; learned patience, and allowed the enemy to come to you. Concentration. Focus. When engaged in an alert as your dog advanced on his target, you compartmentalized on success.

Many times people with PTSD have symptoms of simply learning to be numb because of the

constant fatigue endured in a war zone that carried over into civilian life. Family, children and friends outside of the war interpreted their behavior as estrangement, and they too became helpless dealing with our ineffectiveness in contending with difficulties, as it seemed never seemed to change. Would veterans ever learn to trust others? is the larger question. What are predictable outcomes from abandonment by family members, much less a nation? Answers here could offer possible solutions.

For some, coping while in-country was simply reason to get drunk. We had monthly ration cards for four cases of beer and two bottles of liquor. You might expect to get a full day off once a month. It was not uncommon then as now in present day to drink a single case of beer or down a bottle of whiskey in one sitting outside your hooch. Then, you could go the Airmen's Club for a stage show imitating American bands with Go-Go Dancers; have a Vietnamese hamburger made of water-buffalo meat; or ample drinks could be bought with Military Pay Certificates (MPC), only to stagger back to your hooch.

Canine parties sometimes bordered on violence when non-dog-men might find their way into their area and could result in fist fights, obscene gestures and language hurled at passing trucks. I think this is where some veterans' anger may have its origins. How is it the Security Police were a closed society? Does that still have an effect on us today 40 years later? What will it take to remove the boundaries which limited our socialization then and today? Does anyone really want to change that? Either way, how will we know we are successful?



I have generalized the aforementioned because not 100% of airmen were drunk nor did they ever drink; however I would estimate 80% of the dog-men I knew looked forward to their day off, having a beer or a drink and a steak when possible. I'd say that was typical. Each of us who served will have their story around what we did off-duty, too, like some community projects or working with the ROK's learning Tae Kwon Do, or about orphan children housed with the Korean ROK's. We did some good things.



Phu Cat AB, Security Police Squadron Kennels, 1969. ROK Karate Demonstration, US Air Force Sentry Dog Handlers, Orphan Vietnamese Children.

“Getting Short!” was code for going home or back to the world. Your status for the most part was predicated on the amount of time you had in country which had a great segregation effect since old timers may not even talk to new arrivals! That seemed very odd, since we were in a war and we should be supporting each other. The Senior NCOs, of course did not tolerate this and always worked very hard for a *unified* team, and were fair about post assignments, driving the posting truck or checking post as Kilo 1 or Kilo 2.

You were glad to see the short-timers leave because your status increased with each day and some of the easier duty would eventually come your way. I would sometimes wonder about what *going home* really meant. Would it be the same as before? In a way, I kind of liked being where the action was, using my skill and training as a Sentry Dog Handler was my purpose. Managing self-discipline, training my dog to be the best, and I would always request north side posts: Kilos of 10 Alpha, 10 and 11 as the most challenging where I could do the most good. Because of this I extended for an additional 6 months of sentry dog duty leaving Phu Cat July 05, 1970. I served an 18 month tour of duty in Vietnam. Today I know that another SP extended for a second tour and was KIA the first week of that tour. What must families think when told their son had extended, only to learn he was dead a week later? *What could have been...*lost forever.

Reflection

I was 21 years old and one month when I arrived in Vietnam on December 15, 1968, and President Nixon was reelected, whom I voted for, and I like many others volunteered to go to South East Asia. I was proud to have served then, and knew I was going to be an excellent dog man and return to US and use the GI Bill. That proved true and I earned a BA and MA in Education and worked professionally from 1974 to 2012. I was determined to be successful then as now; however the war had a lifelong lasting effect on me, eventually realizing my PTSD in 1987. I have worked in five different professional areas for four or less years and finally found a corporation where I could establish a professional career as a management trainer and corporate career specialist where I was able to succeed until recently Laid Off after 23 years in January 2012 by The Boeing Company, Seattle, WA.

The first signals I had about my PTSD behavior was purchasing a .45 Caliber hand gun after discharge from the Air Force, and while living alone in an apartment as a college freshman. I was very jumpy at night-sounds; had nightmares about Kilo 10 Alpha; experienced excessive anger over little insignificant things; avoidance of touch by both spouses; excessive head turning during college classes as advised by professor later to be recognized as constant ear ringing. I experienced profound shame in college and first jobs about having even served in the Vietnam War, and absolute avoidance to ever tell anyone about being a dog man, understanding this was a disability if I wanted to be promoted. The public didn't understand, and everyone knew baby-killers didn't get the nod for advancement. Leaving jobs and marriages before they left me, or being abandoned again, hyper-vigilance around low flying helicopters or enclosed areas, July 4th celebrations and New Year's fireworks and two marriages resulting in divorce are a snap shot of my post-Vietnam life. The 1987 Seattle *Veterans Center* weekly group therapy sessions allowed me to contend with difficulties more effectively with flash backs, nightmares and sensory triggers causing my hyper-vigilance.

Today I might be having a casual conversation with someone and I briefly mention I was an Air Force Security Police Dog Handler in Vietnam, and generally get back a blank stare. They don't have any idea what I just said about being a combat veteran. So I retreat and change the subject politely, with the feeling of embarrassment and shame resurfacing. Why? Because of my guilt and the losses suffered by [K-9 and handlers](#), and 111 SPs, superb young men, killed or wounded in action:

Kemp, Jimmy	A2C	Phu Cat 37 th SPS	06 Jun 1967
Foster, Tony C.	A1C	Phu cat 821 st CSPS	05 Dec 1969
Park, Irving G.	Sgt.	Phu Cat 37 th SPS	06 Mar 1970
Davis, Arron Jr.	A1C	Phu Cat 12 th SPS	12 Feb 1971
Wissig, Edward	SSgt	Phu Cat 12 th SPS	12 Feb 1971

Today, I understand that a traumatic and emotional wounding is no less deep or severe than the Purple Heart, because PTSD is a permanent memory scar etched forever in my mind, and oft triggered by a simple sound or smell. While in Vietnam, no one could have convinced me of that truth. It is just something you have to live through to understand.

The aforementioned conversation was as if it didn't matter about the cause of democracy for Vietnamese citizens; well, it did and does to Vietnam veterans. Veterans with PTSD deserve recognized compensation because they suffer from battle fatigue as featured in my document adversely affecting marriages and work performance. These men are not the same people who left America to serve in Vietnam. They were changed. Many came back *different*, and too many veterans *did not—could not—readjust*, as PTSD is the delayed reaction...and can be life-long.

After 40 years of shame, guilt, embarrassment, and fear-based anger, I am compelled to ask:

“How important is the reputation of the Veterans Health Care System to its future success implementing effective policy awarding active and retroactive 100% PTSD benefits to those who served as proud Americans? What more can be done to restore the dignity of veterans who have suffered so quietly for so long? Disability compensation for a condition that is now well documented.”

What do I want? What do I expect? I want recognition for undiagnosed PTSD which has disabled me since 1970. I took orders, saluted, served as a Noncommissioned Officer, E-4, modeling the profession as a Security Police Sentry Dog Handler, who did his job very effectively and served four years with an Honorable Discharge. I was injured and did not know my injury and I have offered an exacting description of living life on the perimeter guarding an Airbase dutifully for 18 months, while serving honorably in Vietnam from December 1968 to July 1970.

This is my story--and what I did.