

Vietnam ...

... Dawn

Thanks for the Sunrise

by Harold Throne,
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12th SPS Phù Cát Air Base, 1970-1971: It has been almost thirty years since I served in Vietnam. I look back at those years, and the incidents that occurred, and realize how fortunate I was. I also realize how fate could have dealt a different hand. I arrived in Phù Cát Air Base in March of 1970, and like a lot of other nineteen year old Security Policemen, really not knowing what to expect. I was first assigned to Law Enforcement Section at the Main Gate on day shift for a few weeks until I asked to be assigned to the Security Section. I got my wish being assigned to the night shift, Cobra Flight working the perimeter on the south side of the base. Phù Cát's Cobra Flight was the largest security element in the 12th SPS, at Phu Cat Air Base.

I worked Cobra Flight until September of 1970, when I learned from my friend George Hayes there was an opening in the Sniper Ambush Team. I had known George from my previous base in Albany, Georgia, and he was already a member of the Ambush Team. I had also spoken to Capt. Kelly about volunteering for either the Ambush Team or APC's on previous talks we had on post. In September of 1970 I learned that I was scheduled for an interview with the team. In the Nam wishes do come true, and after the interview process and training I became a member of the Sniper Ambush Team. I don't know if Phù Cát was the only base with a bush team, but in reality the team was more of a forward observation team, going out at night past the wire or (MLR) Main Line Of Resistance.

The team consisted of about eight or nine members depending on manpower, usually one NCOIC Staff Sergeant, a few Buck Sergeants, and the rest Airman. The main object was to go to various parts of the base to detect movement, and at times to perform sweeps during the day. I had been a member for about a. We were armed with one M60, grenade launcher, CAR-15's, hand grenades, side arm, and whatever else you wanted.

For a month and a half, due to a manpower shortage in security, our team was temporarily disbanded to fill in perimeter posts. We would go to various parts of the perimeter to fill in, and toward the end of October, I was working a bunker post on the south side when about midnight I was replaced at my post and driven to the CSC. The whole ambush team was assembled and we were briefed that we were needed to guard Armored Personnel Carriers that were disabled near the ROK Water Point next to the river.

Our team collected our gear and weapons, and we went out. We arrived at the location without incident, and we needed to set up a perimeter to cover a footpath next to the river where the APC was. As Security Policemen, we all knew about the endless hours spent in silence waiting for the dawn and end of shift. It is a tedious job, and our time was spent with endless hours of boredom filled with small amounts of excitement such as incoming, sappers, or small arms fire. At dawn's first light, our team felt we were home free, but then we started hearing noise coming toward us on the footpath. We all signed to be ready, I checked my ammo of my M60 while the others were checking their weapons. As the voices came nearer we waited much longer than usual because of the coming dawn. As these people came toward our ambush perimeter we thought we heard American voices---which really threw us off because Phù Cát was a closed base, meaning no one was allowed to leave the base, especially on the foot path.

As this small group of four or five moved toward us, we knew they had to be GI's as they strolled into our kill-zone, and on signal, the whole team stood up. Now it was just about dawn, and light enough to see our faces painted green and black and weapons leveled on these Airmen, who literally soiled themselves.

The Staff Sergeant knew why and where they had apparently gone for a night's entertainment, and told them to get out of there in no uncertain terms (as only an NCO can do)! We never reported the incident.

I thought of it then, and even to this day, of how if those Airmen had casually strolled down that worn footpath a half hour earlier, it would have been a very different outcome. I have heard of friendly fire accidents that occurred in Vietnam and in every other war, but I really don't know how I would have coped with such a tragedy. All I can say then and now is...

... thanks for the sunrise.

Read Thomas "Tom" Aumack 's account of this incident!

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