

MEMORIES OF 'NAM

633rd SPS, Pleiku, RVN

by **Steve Shelt, Sgt**

633rd SPS, Pleiku

1967-1968

I arrived in Nam through Đà Nẵng Air Base on March 7, 1967 and was temporarily assigned to Phu Cat AB. Within the next two weeks I was transferred to Pleiku AB. Arriving at Pleiku I remember thinking how small the base was and how on earth could we defend it against the VC/NVA when, you could almost throw a rock from one perimeter to the other. The base was the home of the A1E (Sandy), rescue choppers and Puff the Magic Dragon, AC-47.

I was assigned to swing shifts, which I hated. You could never get your night vision focused due to the amount of time spent in sunlight during the day. Just as you were adapting it was time to be relieved. The other reason that I did not like swing shift was that when Charlie hit I was normally sound asleep and had to react to the situation in a stupor. My buddy, Dan Gittens, and I were always the first in line for posting or assigned to the SRT. Neither one of us could stand not knowing what was going on at the perimeter. Also, the rounds usually fell on the flight line or within the compound, so it made sense to me to head for the perimeter. There were a couple attacks that my strategy did not work and I ended up in the middle of an attempted penetration of our defenses.

During the next few months up until March of 1968 the

base received numerous rocket, mortar attacks, sniper incidents and two attempts at penetrating our perimeter. These incidents were minor compared to the tragedy that occurred one quiet day. I remember a large explosion rocked the base and nearly knocked me off my feet. I ran to the bunker where I was to respond when under attack and waited for more in-coming. To my amazement there was only one explosion. Over the radio CDC informed everyone that SPS Arms Room had exploded. At first it was believed that a sapper attack caused the explosion, it was later proved that it was caused by careless handling of a ammo can (with grenades and hand flares) which caused the explosion. What a tragedy, we did it to ourselves. Carelessness caused death and injuries, not the enemy. I always thought that I could accept it or at least understand loss of life caused by the enemy but not by stupidity. The base was left vulnerable due to the loss weapons. The only weapons we had were those left on post at the time of the explosion and those stored in the SRT lockers at the barracks. We recovered from the incident both strategically and mentally but it will always be in the back of my mind that it could have been me. It was nearly 14 years later while performing executive protection duty in Beirut and saw the Marine Barracks blown to rubble that I relived that day in Vietnam.

After leaving Vietnam, I was assigned to the 81st SPS, Bentwaters RAF and then separated from the AF in March of 1970. I married, earned my BS in Criminal Justice, worked in the pharmaceutical business and then re-enlisted in the Army in 1980 as a Military Policeman. As a military policeman I worked law enforcement, criminal investigations, executive

protection and physical security. I am now a Supervising, Physical Security Specialist with the Department of Energy at the Savannah River Site (Defense Nuclear Weapons Site) in Aiken, South Carolina.

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