

Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, 377th SPS

National Day Parade

SAIGON - 1966

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Photo: A/2/12 of the third Brigade had the distinction of being one of the U.S. Army units that marched in the annual National Day Parade in Saigon on November 1st. This was not without it's dangers, as the night before the parade, two tons of explosives were discovered within the confines of the city, presumably to be used by VC sappers to disrupt and discredit the regime. The next day the parade went on lke clock work until we heard the whoosh of recoilless rifle rounds pass over us as we marched and landed two streets away from us. The CO never lost a step and proceeded to march past the reviewing stand where Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and US Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge stood symbolically side by side.



*A/2/12, Saigon,
National Day Parade*

"Parade in the Combat Zone"

It was one of those events one remembers forever and wonders about the wisdom of those who decided it was a good idea.

During 1966, while assigned to the 377th APS/SPS at Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, I worked Charlie Flight from 8:00 PM until 4:00 AM. One evening I was informed that I had been selected to march in a parade in downtown Saigon to commemorate a Vietnamese holiday.

At first, I thought this was a joke but later learned that the 377th SPS was going to represent the USAF in the parade and we would be the very last ones to march. We would also be allowed to carry live ammo, which was prohibited to other US Forces. In other words we were going to be the rear guard of the parade.

Almost everyone selected was trying to swap duties with someone else. They would much rather defend the Air Base against ground attack than be a sitting duck for a terrorist grenade, while marching in a parade.

A couple of days before the parade, we were bussed to downtown Saigon after curfew and made a practice run. It turned out to be completely uneventful as there were no spectators or anyone else, for that matter, on the streets.

On the day of the parade we were positioned on the Saigon River front, next to what was then a famous floating restaurant [The Mekahn was a floating restaurant tied up on the Mekong River dockside in Saigon]. It earned its reputation because it had been the target of a terrorist bomb a year or so earlier which caused quite a few casualties [40] --- many of whom were American.

We had approximately a three-or-four hour wait before we would start to march, so we all found a comfortable patch of grass on the side of the river and lay down.

The parade stand was in the middle of the city, about ten blocks away and held the Vietnamese President, Ambassadors and high ranking generals from all allied countries involved in the war. We lay there knowing that "Charlie" or "Sir Charles" was not going to pass up such a juicy target when it was presented to him.

After about an hour we heard loud explosions rip through the city, coming from the direction of the parade stand. That was followed by the sound of emergency vehicles responding to the scene. About five minutes later the 716th Military Police and QC's came tearing down the street in vehicles and deployed on the floating restaurant. Covering each other, they captured the restaurant oblivious to us watching them.

When they finally noticed us, they came over and asked if we had seen any Viet Cong activity from the floating restaurant, as counter-radar mortar had indicated that the mortars fired at the parade stand had come from the floating restaurant. We assured them that nothing had originated from the restaurant, as we had been there for the last hour.

The MP's and OC's then left and we went back to our previous posture. About an hour later we again heard loud explosions coming from the direction of the parade stand. We immediately visually checked out the floating restaurant which revealed nothing. Sure enough, a short time later here came the MP's and QC's again. This time they came over to us and asked if we had seen anything at the radar was still indicating that the rounds were being fired from the floating restaurant.

We assured them that they had not and if they had the 377th would have neutralized the situation without delay. They all left the area with a puzzled look on their faces.

Finally our turn came to march. I was wondering if I would see the grenade as it rolled into our ranks or just the explosion. It was scary. I don't think anyone was concentrating on marching and keeping the right interval. But looking back, we did a pretty good job under the circumstances.

I remember when we passed the parade stand, we received an ovation. I don't know if it was because we were the last unit in the parade and it was finally over, or because we looked so sharp. I like to think the latter. I do know that approximately 50 souls were greatly relieved when the parade was over and we were heading back to base.

I later learned that "Sir Charles" had been in a sampan cruising up and down the Saigon River and when he thought it was clear he would lob four or five mortar rounds at the parade stand. Those rounds must have gone over our heads and we didn't realize it. That's what you get when politicians run a war.

PS: Is there any Air Police or Security Police member who marched in this parade, or who took photo's from which I could get a copy? I would also like to know if there were any other parades "downtown" in the Republic of Vietnam during the war, or was this the only one?

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Read about the Parade from an
Excerpt from the 1967 Yearbook of the 4th Infantry Division

We Take Care of Our Own