

# *First Mission!*

1966

by Thom Thomas

## **1st Infantry Division, 35th Infantry Platoon Scout Dog.**

Much to my regret today, I joined the Army *before* the Vietnam War started. As a Military Policeman, I was assigned to a security detachment to guard a highly classified (then) chemical weapons storage depot on Okinawa. Upon arrival, I was asked if I wanted to stand guard in a tower all night or become a Sentry Dog Handler. Hell, I loved dogs, and hated heights, so a dog handler, I became!

In late 1964, I was transferred to the 820th M.P. Platoon (Dog) in Korea. This was the 8th Army Sentry Dog Training School. *Wow...* now I'm a dog trainer and an instructor. I was really getting some place in this world. One year later, around October 1966, I received orders to the *1st Infantry Division, 35th Infantry Platoon Scout Dog (IPSD)*, DiAn, South Vietnam. My first reaction was, *not me!* I am a MP--not an infantryman. *What's a scout dog anyway?*

Upon arrival in Nam, I was assigned a scout dog (whose name, I don't remember) and given approximately three days of training inside the base camp at DiAn (N/W of Tân Sơn Nhứt, Saigon, and S/W of Phù Cát). Now that I was an "expert" scout dog handler, I was sent to the field on my first Mission. All I remember is that it was a full Division operation, with headquarters on a large French Rubber Plantation with a small airstrip.

The first night there, the new guy (me) got assigned to be part of a listening post approximately 25-50 meters forward of the perimeter. I was assigned to three other Infantry types that I had never met. I out ranked all three, but didn't know a damn thing about infantry tactics, where we were going, how we were going to get there (or back), or what they expected me to do! Being the intelligent person that I am, I tore off my stripes and played the role of the dumb private (which I really was). Once we were in position, we made a startling discovery. This dog of mine did not want to sit still and listen--he wanted to go walking, i.e. scouting. No amount of my pleading could convince him to sit still and be quiet, especially with my whole three days of rapport with him.

Dog made so much noise and with my inability to control him, the infantry guy in charge, radioed back for permission to send me back to the perimeter. They pointed me in the proper direction, gave me the password, and said get-out! On the way back in, with the dog about to pull my arm off, we of course, tripped a wire attached to a trip flare. I knew then and there I was going to be shot by the guys on the perimeter and that my life was over. I promised myself, as I screamed the password over and over, that if I lived through this night, I would become the best damn "infantryman" and dog handler that I could possibly be.

Somehow, by the grace of the big guy (or whomever) I made it back to the perimeter that night and with much additional training, I did become a good infantryman and scout dog handler (good enough to make it through two tours with the 35th). Now that I look back on that LP, I can find humor in it all! *So much for my first mission in country....*

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