

Account of the Da Nang AB Sapper Attack, July 1, 1965

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I first learnt that I was going TDY to Da Nang, South Vietnam, while at George AFB, serving with the 831st APS. Being TAC we had a Base Alert and reported to the flight line with our mobility gear. Just like that, we flew out on a C-154 or C-118 and landed at Hickam Field, Hawaii, in the middle of the night — and still didn't know exactly where we were going.

We were not granted any leave prior to departure to SVN. They just blew the TDY-Whistle and we went. As for my marriage then, it was already on the rocks. My son was one and a half years old.

When we got airborne again the pilot said we were going to Okinawa. We stayed over night there, and then flew to Taiwan. We built a tent city at an old abandoned Chinese base called Tichung Taiwan. That's when we heard we were actually going to go to Vietnam. Our group was split into three groups. Supposedly, we were to rotate every three months, per group, and I was in the second group.

I didn't feel bad about the transfer. I had just rotated from Korea in January of 1965, and was accustom to the Orient. I was accustomed to stateside base security. We weren't told how long our tour in Vietnam would be.

We knew Vietnam was a combat zone, even if we were supposed to be mainly "Advisors." Nevertheless, we did not receive ANY training that would prepare us to defend ourselves or an air base, other than what we had stateside, which was OJT and nearly worthless for the assignment.

I arrived at Da Nang Airbase, South Vietnam, on Monday, June 28th 1965. When I was at Da Nang AB, I was told I could make it permanent change of station if I wanted to. Upon arrival at Da Nang, we received no OJT training at all, and were or were basically treated as if we were still stateside.

My three days of hell had started with my first post on the day of my arrival, and the night of the 28 June 1965. I recall clearly the events leading up to the sapper attack against Da Nang AB on 1 July 1965. I had just arrived and paid close attention to everything we were told. I know the probing started at least three days prior to the sapper attack. A captured VC POW later said they had been planning the attack for 30 days. I knew something was happening three days before the attack. I also knew that a week earlier Air Police chased a VC through the ammo dump – but never caught him.

Anyway, three days prior to that awful 1 July 1965 night I was posted at post 1 (one). During my shift trip flares went off. I called that in to H.Q. and the SAT vehicle came out and made some passes using the head lights to see by and said it was nothing. It wasn't "nothing" to me. Something made the flares go off.

The only Post Instructions we had was a verbal not to chamber a round unless we were fired upon. I don't think any of the guys followed that request-order. No one ever told me where to take-cover or defend myself or a post. I saw a hole full of trash and figured that's where I'm.

supposed to take cover if it hits the fan.

The next night, 29th June 1965, the same thing occurred — trip flares went off in the wire and minefields. The SAT came around and they reminded me that the Marines had security under control on the other side of the fence ... and not to worry about it.

All three nights leading up to the sapper attack were this way In the mean time I continued walking my post each night and sniper fire would come in and bounce off the ramp I was walking. What the hell was I supposed to do? No one told me anything. It was always a “don’t worry about it” attitude. I finally got on the other side of the taxi way lights and the rounds stopped. I knew someone or something was there and using the head lights of a vehicle to search was not good enough.

30 June 1965, I was assigned post. With midnight, 1 July 1965 had arrived—my neverending nightmare was about to begin.

At around 12:50 A.M., July 1, 1965, Sgt. Jensen drove the coffee truck up to where I was. I opened the passenger door and he said the pot was on the floor on the passenger side. It was an 8 cup pot that Terry brought out to me while the large pot was still brewing. He knew I liked coffee, what a guy. I felt like I had finally met an NCO that could help me learn the ropes.

Before I could pour the first cup or ask him any questions, a mortar round went off about thirty yards in front of the truck. I dropped the pot and Sergeant Jensen said for me to contact H.Q. — so I tried to use the radio. I think all I got out was “Post-1 to Desk” and I could see around 15 NVA shoulder to shoulder firing rifles and throwing hand grenades.

Everything was happening at 90 miles an hour! Sapper explosions! Fireballs! The flightline and revetments were lit up by generator flood lights. Everything was that white-orange surreal light and now C-130 aircraft were exploding fireballs and debris was flying everywhere. The noise was jarring to my ears and like a punch to my body.

I dropped the radio, and took my M16 off my shoulder and took the safety off. I had no choice. It was a reflex to start firing – I knew we were dead if something didn’t happen and happen now. I had a round in the chamber and was on fully automatic. All the while Terry was getting out on the driver’s side. By the time I was ready to fire Terry had already been hit and “parts of Terry” were all over the front of my uniform. I saw him drop out of the corner of my eye and that’s when I spent my first magazine of 20 rounds — it took about 1 ½ seconds—and I saw a few of them go down, but the rest were still coming. I put the second clip in and switched to semi-automatic. I didn’t know if I had killed any of them or if they just dropped for cover.

I kept firing at the sappers and by the time I reached the fox hole — which was full of trash from day shift — I spent my second magazine. I changed clips and took careful aim with each shot, knowing I would run out of ammo any second. I saw Terry at the back of the truck with an NVA standing over him and I shot the NVA. I think I killed the NVA. I didn’t know the NVA had had already shot Terry in the back, killing him.

While in that trashed fox hole, rockets were cooking off from the exploding aircraft and racks and bouncing along the ground. One went right over the top of the fox hole I was in and hit an old runway construction crew out house behind me.

With the flashes and shadows and firing everywhere, I at first thought the out house was an NVA running towards me — I almost stood up to shoot him when the rocket hit it. Maybe that sounds funny. It wasn't. It isn't meant to be.

I shot another NVA trying to run pass on my blind side at the end of a large bunker — I saw the leaves on his helmet and shot through a tent in front of him — I don't know if I killed him or not, all I know is he didn't get by and didn't get up. I wasn't counting my rounds but I knew I was nearly empty.

During the whole attack and battle the SAT vehicle tried to reach us, Sgt. Bush was part of that team. The first time the SAT vehicle caught enemy fire and turned around and left. The second time the same thing happened. The third time they made it all the way and I rolled out the back of the fox hole and ran down a drainage ditch between the taxiway and active runway yelling my last name hoping they wouldn't shoot me. When I got to the vehicle all I could think of was I needed more ammo. I didn't get any.

The next thing I knew I was being taken to the dispensary. The attack, as far as I knew, was still happening. But I was not taken to CSC. I was taken to the dispensary. I do know that I was covered with blood and guts from Terri's wounds. I don't know if they thought I was wounded. They made the decision to go to the dispensary. I was cleaned up by the medics and my uniform cut off me from the cramping in my legs from taking cover in that small fox hole.

When OSI showed up they didn't give me a chance to ask them anything about anything. They were very hostile toward me from the first question. I don't know why, but they acted as if they weren't even aware the base was under attack (it still was not secure at that point), and apparently thought for some reason that I had actually shot SSgt Jensen. They didn't ask me "what happened" they just made wild accusations.

While I was there someone came in and wanted to know why I shot Terry —he didn't identify himself or who they were — I said I didn't. They handed me a note pad and told me to write everything down. Write down everything? What the hell had just happened to me? I couldn't believe what was happening now, and didn't know why I was being treated that way. Later I heard they were OSI.

While the OSI was grilling me - and that's what they were doing — a Captain came in to the dispensary. The Captain came in and started loving on me - hugging me and holding me — and he was very emotional. That really caught me off guard - I was being accused of killing Sergeant Jensen and now here's some guy hugging me and telling me I saved his life! It was like some sick good-cop bad-cop routine and I was really at the breaking point of just losing it. I had to push the Captain away and asked him just what he was doing to me. The Captain said he and twenty-five other crew members were in that large bunker on the flightline and saw the whole thing. He thanked me over and over for saving their lives and then just as suddenly left. Just like that. Wished I would have gotten his name for verification now. I had no idea that anyone was out there on the flightline and could see what was happening.

I do know the man was the Captain in charge of the aircraft mechanics and crew that were in the bunker the sappers were going to blow up and that after getting into a fire fight with me the NVA suddenly broke off and took off.

At the beginning of that shift, while being posted, we passed a group (4-5) of Marines huddled in a circle just before you get to the Liquid Oxygen Plant. Never saw one during the battle. I have no idea what actions they took during the base penetration or while the sappers blew up several aircraft, killed SSgt Jensen and got in a firefight with me. I don't know if anyone else shot at the enemy.

Later, when I was back at George AFB, I heard that I was put in for a medal. I never had anyone tell me I had done a good job, and never received any medal.

The truth is, I wasn't prepared or trained how to respond to a sapper attack, nor how to respond to any attack, for that matter. It was hell on earth and everything was happening fast.

Later, at the dispensary, I was indeed a real "basket-case" and I was scared that I would have to go through that again and I was shaking with a real panic feeling. I believe now, at that time, if I was armed I would have been as much a threat to us as I would be to the enemy.

I was then told I was being medevaced and would be flown out on a C130. We flew to Okinawa. I don't remember how or when I got back to Taiwan. My "medevac" turned out to be just another flight back to George A.F.B. I was never counseled by any doctor or psychologist that I know of. No one ever explained to me what happened. I think now that is because no one knew what had happened and just assumed the worst because no one explained it to them either. As a result, they uniformly just treated me like I was a criminal. Just like the OSI at the dispensary, when they couldn't make-me-a-criminal they decided just to get rid of me and ship me out.

On the "medevac" flight I had hours and hours of reliving the entire nightmare. And it was a nightmare. And it is a nightmare. I questioned my own actions. But I did what SSgt Jensen told me to. I called in the attack and I fired at the enemy. That didn't matter — OSI accused me of killing Sergeant Jensen. OSI put me on a plane out of Vietnam. OSI never told me anything or tried to help me get a grip on the absolute hellish nightmare I was tossed in to and out of. OSI left a cloud of doubt and innuendo and an implied mark-of-Cane on me. OSI never charged me with anything.

At George AFB, I was put back on Base Police right away – just like nothing had ever happened. Just like I had only had a long weekend away. Just like Sergeant Jensen was not dead. I was questioned by a 2nd Lieutenant there as to why I did what I did ("Did what I Did" – what the hell does that mean?) and he voiced his opinion that he thought I "handled it badly." How the hell would he know? "Handled What Badly", exactly? And how the hell would I know – no one ever trained me how to handle "it" let alone how not to handle it. Of the lieutenant wasn't there. Soon after he laid down his opinion to me, he got his own orders to go to Vietnam. I wished him the best and hoped he could experience exactly what I went through.

One evening as the sun was setting at George AFB, I was working Base Police. It was not dark enough for head lights but still just about when you needed them, so I was just

cruising around the base. A car going the opposite direction back-fired its engine when along side of me. I ducked down on the seat and when I rose up I had my pistol drawn and my sights on a little boy crossing the street on a bicycle. I almost shot him out of reflex. I drove back the HQ and turned my weapon in related what had just happened to me. I said I will still do my shift but without a weapon. I needed help but couldn't understand what was happening to me.

I was relieved of duty and sent to March A.F.B., CA. for observation. That was the first doctor I had seen since the dispensary room at Da Nang AB. The Doctor told me that I had a normal reaction to the car backfiring. Nothing ever came from his comments. I don't know what I expected from him. I just wanted him to explain it all to me, and make it go away.

I was honorably discharged from the Air Force at the end of my 9 month extension.

Since 1 July 1965, it is true that I still have bad dreams. When I say "bad" I mean beyond anything I can convey. I am sweating. Choking. Burning. Gasping for breath. My wife is more than concerned. I think I scare her. I asked my wife how often the-dreams happen ... I am not really sure. Sometimes I think I am in one long dream. If I only knew what to do – if I had only been trained, maybe I would know how to handle this in the dream? My wife says I probably have these dreams three or four times a week. I think she is minimizing the numbers because her answer somehow makes it ... better. I knew I needed help. I know I need help now. No one will help me. No one has ever helped me. I don't know how to get anyone to listen. I went to a private Christian Psychotherapist who seemed to help for a time. I also went to one meeting with a group from the VA.

I relive 1 July 1965, or part of it, nearly every day or night. I know I'm not the same person I was before the July 1, 1965 event. I'm on my 5th marriage and I know I won't let people get close to me but I can't help myself. It's like, if I just do something, it will be alright. I don't know what that something is.

The VA wants to know if I was exposed to Agent Orange at Da Nang AB. I don't know if I was exposed to Agent Orange while at Da Nang AB. I know there were AO barrels on the flightline and around the base. Why doesn't the VA want to know what happened 1 July 1965?

I read Sgt. Bush's account of that night, and know Sgt. Bush gave the best report he could, but he was not there the whole time. Also, I was a 3 stripper, not 2. And I was TDY from George A.F.B., CA. (Victorville).

Respectfully,
Al Handy