

Da Nang

Đà Nẵng Air Base SAPPER ATTACK! 1 JULY 1965 THREE DAYS OF HELL

© 2007 Account by Al Handy, A1C
23rd ABG/AP (TDY 831st APS, George AFB)



Danang Vietnam

THREE DAYS OF HELL

A1C Al Handy was TDY from the 831st APS, George AFB CA. (Victorville), and arrived at Đà Nẵng Air Base, South Vietnam, on Monday, June 28th 1965. Within four days, his TDY tour would suddenly end, and he would be unceremoniously returned to George AFB.

I first learned that I was going TDY to Đà Nẵng, South Vietnam, while at George AFB, serving with the 831st APS. I didn't feel bad about the transfer, as I had just rotated from Korea in January of 1965, and was accustomed to the Orient. Stateside, I was assigned Air Base security, which generally meant standing guard at the nose of an aircraft.

Being a TAC (Tactical Air Command) Base we had a Base Alert and reported to the flightline 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 Leave prior to TDY departure to wherever; 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. We were never told how long our tour in Vietnam would be.

This event actually started three days prior to that awful night of 1 July 1965.

I arrived at Đà Nẵng Air Base, South Vietnam, on Monday, June 28th 1965. We knew Vietnam was a combat zone, even if we were supposed to be mainly “Advisors.” I was told I could make the TDY a PCS (Permanent Change of Station) if I wanted to. We received no OJT training nor special instructions at all. Rules of Engagement was a phrase I never heard in Vietnam. We were not combat trained in any way to defend ourselves, Air Force assets, or the RVN Air Base. We were basically treated duty-wise as if we were still stateside—and told we would be on post that night.

Other than basic stateside firearms training (.38 revolver, M-1, and shotgun) which was OJT and nearly worthless, we were neither armed nor trained for an air base combat defense assignment.

My three days of hell on earth 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 Đà Nẵng Air Base on 1 July 1965. I had just arrived and paid very close attention to everything we were told. I know VC probing started at least three days prior to the sapper attack. A captured VC POW later said the VC and NVA had been planning the attack for 30 days.

28 June 1965, the first night - I knew something was happening my first day in country, and that a week earlier, Air Police chased a VC through the ammo dump—but never caught him. The first night, 28 June 1965, I was posted at Post-1. 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. The posting truck drove off without instructions on where to take-cover or how to defend myself or post. I saw a nearby hole, full of trash, and figured that's where I'm supposed to take cover if it hits the fan.

During my shift tripflares went off and I called that in to HQ. The S.A.T. vehicle came out and made some passes using headlights to see by, and said it was nothing. It wasn't “nothing” to me. Something made the flares go off.

29 June 1965, the second night - The same thing occurred—tripflares went off in the wire, and minefields. The S.A.T. came around and reminded me 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 would be this way.

In the meantime, I continued walking my post and sniper fire would come in and bounce off the ramp close to where 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 blue taxiway lights and the rounds stopped skipping in. I knew someone or something was there, and using the headlights of a vehicle to search was not good enough.

30 June 1965, the third night - I was assigned post at the south end of the flightline taxiway, where it curves E/W from the N/S taxiway to the active runway. Nearby, a hole ringed with two rows of sandbags was visible and I wondered if that was a part of my post. Two F-102s were in each of three separate concrete double-revetments about a hundred yards south-SE, and C-130s filled several adjoined revetments about a hundred

yards to the east. Immediately to the rear of both revetments was a line of bunkers, barbed wire and minefields.

With midnight, 1 July 1965 arrived—my never-ending hell on earth nightmare was about to begin.

Around 12:50 A.M., 1 July 1965, Sgt Jensen drove the 1 ½ ton truck up to my post. He was off duty, but came in to make coffee-runs to the posts, and to speed things up had brought out an 8 cup pot, as the large pot was still brewing at HQ. Sgt Jensen knew I liked coffee, what a guy. I felt like I had finally met an NCO that could help me learn the ropes. I opened the right side door, got a cup and was looking for the coffee jug. He said the coffee pot was on the floor of the passenger side, and asked me how everything was. I replied that it was pretty quiet so far.

Before I could pour the first cup or ask SSgt Jensen any questions, a mortar hit a C-130 in a revetment on the far southend—a jarring explosion and huge fireball erupted, and another mortar round exploded with an ear-banging KRUMMPP about thirty yards in front of the truck. I dropped the pot as Sergeant Jensen yelled for me to radio in to APO (Air Police Office). As I started back toward the portable radio and I could see about 15 NVA in dark fatigues with camouflage helmets running shoulder to shoulder firing rifles and throwing hand grenades, satchels at aircraft, and firing in our direction—so I tried to using the radio, and think all I got out was “Post-1 to Desk”.

Everything was that white-orange surreal-light, and now C-130 aircraft were exploding fireballs, with debris flying and raining everywhere. Flightline revetments up the line were still lit up by generator floodlights—everything was happening at 90 miles an hour! Sapper explosions! Fireballs! The noise was jarring to my ears and each explosion's concussions were like a punch to my body. I dropped the radio, and took my M16 off my shoulder and 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 jacked in the chamber and was firing on fully automatic.

All the while, Terry was getting out on the driver's side and took two or three steps and fell. By the time I was ready to fire again, 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 don't know if I hit any of them or if they just dropped for cover. I kept firing at the sappers and by the time I reached the trash-filled foxhole 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 was down and at the back of the truck with an NVA standing over him—I shot the NVA—I think I killed him. I didn't know the NVA had already fired several rounds in Terry's back, killing him.

While in that trashed foxhole, rockets were cooking off from the exploding aircraft rocket-racks, from Munitions Maintenance rocket-trailers, and bouncing wildly along the ground.



Above photo - East view of Munitions Maintenance rocket-trailers, from bunkers.

Photos, by TDY Capt. Roger Pile, F-102 pilot. F-102 Revetments area:

Below Photo - West view from taxiway of tents and trailer area.



A rocket went right over the top of the foxhole I was in and hit an old runway construction crew outhouse behind me. Just before, white-flashes and shadows and firing were everywhere—I thought the outhouse was an NVA running towards me—I almost stood up to shoot him when a rocket hit it. Maybe that sounds funny. It wasn't. It isn't. And not meant to be.

**Photo right, by TDY
Capt. Roger Pile, F-102
pilot:** "These are the two latrines adjacent to the site and behind the alert trailer. "Urinal" was a standpipe in the ground. You had to be careful it wasn't so full that you could pee on yourself. You can imagine the smell in the hot weather. We much preferred the flush toilets at our barracks."



I shot another NVA trying to run pass on my blind side at the end of a large bunker—I saw the camouflage-leaves on his helmet and shot through a smaller empty 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 out and needed ammo.

The brightness of flames totally engulfing C-130s made it possible to see the Viet Cong running in front of the revetments. I immediately counterfired making my way to the portable radio. I had the mic in my left hand and firing with my right hand. Viet Cong fire was heavy all around me. I heard hand-grenades and rockets going off, and my only thought was to head for cover. I dove in my foxhole again and came up firing. I changed magazines at that time and noticed three or four Viet Cong behind one of the tents, and fired upon them. They retreated towards Perimeter road; still inside the Air Base and parallel to perimeter barbed wire and mines. Directly in front of me VC were falling back; automatic weapons fire still continued in my direction.

I saw the SAT stop about 100 yards north of my position then depart, repelled by heavy AK-47 firing. A while later the SAT stopped about 50-75 yards away, and depart due to heavy firing. VC continued withdrawing toward the area of the burning F-102s' revetments. I rolled out the back of my foxhole into a drainage ditch. I ran as fast as I could yelling my name to the SAT vehicle. After the V.C. had moved through the wire, two or three more mortars hit in the F-102 and C-130 area.

During the whole attack and battle, the S.A.T. vehicle tried to reach us three times; Sgt Bush was part of that team. The second time, the same thing happened; repelled by heavy fire. The third time they made it all the way, and I rolled out the back of the foxhole and ran down a shallow drainage ditch, between the taxiway and active runway, yelling my last name and hoping S.A.T. wouldn't shoot me. When I got to the vehicle all I could think

of was, I needed more ammo—now. I didn't get any.

I thought I would be driven to CSC, but the next thing I knew I was being taken to the dispensary. The attack, as far as I knew, was still happening. I didn't know I was covered with blood and guts from Terry's wounds. I don't know if they thought I was wounded and 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 foxhole.

When OSI (AF Office of Special Investigations) showed up at the dispensary, I didn't know who they were. They never identified themselves, nor gave 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 still under attack (it still was not secure at that point), and apparently thought for some reason I had actually shot SSgt Jensen. They didn't ask me "what happened" they just made wild accusations. As far as I knew, they had not seen nor recovered his body.

While I was there someone else 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 AFOSI.

While OSI was grilling me—and that's what they were doing—an very excited Captain came in to the dispensary. The Captain came directly over to me and started loving on me—hugging and holding me—and 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. I knew the revetments and nearby large crew tents and supplies, were brightly lite by large generator-powered floodlights. And, the taxiway lights were dialed up a bright blue. It seemed likely the Captain was right, but at the time, I had no idea anyone on the flightline could see what was happening at my post and area.

The Captain thanked me over and over for saving their lives, and then just as suddenly he left. Just like that. Wished I would have gotten his name for verification now. I do know the NVA sappers had headed toward the tents and suddenly broke off and took off after getting into a firefight with me.

At the beginning of the 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. I learned the VC and NVA did not try penetrate the Marines' perimeter, with its several sandbag bunkers along the east perimeter. The Vietnamese ARVN manned the South perimeter behind the F-102 revetments, and that's where the sappers penetrated the perimeter, aided by ARVN who left their posts and suffered no casualties.

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

Someone told me I was being medevac and flown out on a C-130. 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 AFB. 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 treated me like a criminal, and decided just to get rid of me and ship me back to George AFB.

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 until out of ammo. I had my M-16 and needed more ammo. None of that mattered—OSI had accused me of killing Sergeant Jensen. OSI put me on a plane out of Vietnam. OSI never told me anything, and never tried to help me get a grip on the absolute hellish nightmare; OSI tossed me out of Đà Nẵng AB and sent me back to George AFB. OSI puffed a cloud of doubt and innuendo and stamped an implied Mark-of-Cane on me, and worst, felt free to pass that on to George AFB. OSI—never—charged me—with anything. And, their reports are not to be found anywhere.

At George AFB, I was put back on Base Police right away—just like nothing had ever happened. Just like Sergeant Jensen wasn't dead. I was questioned by a 2nd Lieutenant at George as to why I did what I did ("Did what I Did? What the hell does that mean? Just What had happened? It wasn't as if I had leave or a long weekend away!), and LT voiced his OSI-baised 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". And, the lieutenant—wasn't there.

Soon after the LT laid down his insightful opinion on 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.

Later, I heard that I was put in for a medal. No one ever told me I had done a good job; I 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. Scared? Absolutely. But, I stood my ground while in the middle of hell on earth as everything happened so fast. I still see it playing over and over in my thoughts and dreams, and I can't make it stop.

One evening as the sun was setting at George AFB, I was working Base Police; general patrol, working traffic and handling calls. It was not dark enough for headlights, but just about when you needed them, so I was cruising around the base. A car going the opposite direction back-fired its engine when alongside 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 to the HQ and turned my weapon in, relating what had just happened to me. I said I will still do my shift but without a weapon. I needed help and couldn't understand what was happening to me.

I was relieved of duty and sent to March AFB, California for observation. That was the first doctor I had seen since the dispensary room at Đà Nẵng Air Base. 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; that didn't happen.

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 happened; 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. Then 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 just wants to know if I was exposed to Agent Orange at Đà Nẵng Air Base. I don't know if I was exposed to Agent Orange while at Đà Nẵng Air Base. 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 A1C 3-stripper, not A2C 2-stripper, and I was TDY from George A.F.B., CA (Victorville).

Respectfully, A1C Albert L. Handy, 476th T.F.S.