

# Vyto's Reckoning –

"... an assault on the Air Base in the dark of night after a rocket attack"

## Đà Nẵng Air Base

1970

submitted by **Richard Beggs**

VSPA LM 436

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### Đà Nẵng AB, 1970

I was a nothing....

I was on the bottom of the food chain in Vietnam, an insignificant nothing....

I had no voice in what went on nor did I know what was going on. We did what we were told by folks not much more informed than we. I marvel at the absence of knowledge... the absence of military intelligence. There were few times when the disjointed pieces of information fit together to form a good picture of the whole, but this was one such time during an assault on Đà Nẵng Air Base in the dark of night after a rocket attack. If that sounds angry, I am.

In 1970, I felt the Air Force Police were pretend military a lot like civilian police. We understood the concepts but we didn't practice them much and when called upon, we barely could execute military things like "Advance in rushes" without serious injury. Today, I understand that at Đà Nẵng AB, at that time, Air Force Police military training was not at the level of the Army as for combat infantry training. The roll of APs and SPs in the early years of the war still primarily encompassed security and law enforcement duties. That made it more difficult when we were called to perform as light infantry within the Air Force perimeter of security, and required to respond to base attacks. It was very necessary for experienced NCOs to lead us through the motions.

It was the practice of the Security Police Squadron commander to have the off-duty men fall-in as reserve after a rocket attack in the event, usually not required, that the rocket attack would be followed by a ground attack. It was early in our tour and we were still "cherries" and jumpy after rocket attacks. The alarm (which sounded like a school bell not unlike my Big Ben alarm clock) to draw weapons and fall-in did nothing to calm us down. We had a plan, one that would allocate manpower to Security Alert Teams which we called SAT Teams.

Likewise, the marines were heavily trained and armed and guarding the exterior perimeter of Đà Nẵng AB. The contradiction about the base perimeter was that it was guarded by three different groups, USAF 366 SPS, USMC (First MP Battalion), South Vietnamese something not sure if QC's or what. If I were *king*, I would have made it the responsibility of just one outfit. We were guaranteed miscommunication and confusion of responsibilities.

At Police Headquarters on Đà Nẵng Air Base, the radio traffic of several branches were being monitored, the perimeter defenses were manned by different units, Air Force, Marine and South Vietnamese Military (I'm unsure if it was Air Force police or South Vietnam Army). Listening to the radio traffic was Col. Russell, a squared-away, white-haired career military man. The volume and pitch of the communications indicated excitement, movement, suspicious things, and the threat of ground attack seemed imminent. Then firing erupted along the south perimeter--a section defended by U.S. Marines. It quickly spread along the perimeter line with M16 and M60 machine-gun fire.

Col. Russell, stimulated by the radio traffic calls of ground attack, pointed to the map and thumped it: "I want two 25-men blocking forces here! And here!" He pointed to a vacant chunk of land off the south end of the two-mile long runway [perimeter secured by Vietnamese troops]. The dispatcher relayed that to the Sergeants-in-charge of the reserve SAT's and vehicles begin to roll to deploy what turned out to be only a 12-men and 14-men blocking force.

Vyto was in one of these SAT's and that night he came to terms with "kill" or "be killed." He was a pacifist by choice. He had always vowed that he could not, would not kill a man. It was not in him morally. If Charlie were coming, he'd put his head down, hope for the best, or take it in the neck; he never knew which outcome would be the real outcome. There is nothing like reality to test one's principles.

On board the deuce-and-a-half bouncing on a dirt road off the paved road south of the runway, fatigue clad off-duty policemen were preparing to be soldiers, donning flak jackets, checking web gear and magazines of ammo, nervously keying the radio microphone as a cheater's radio check. Everyone had their own way of getting their mind right. The sergeant-in-charge would mentally rehearse how to do the blocking force; the guy driving the deuce-and-a-half wondering, "Is this the place?" and "Can I get back from here?" The driver hit the brakes--"Everybody out!" Men vaulted over the sides from four trucks and the trucks hastily departed the area. The "fog of war" is ever present. Another thing is evident, playing soldier is hard enough in the daylight by the untrained, but in the dark, being a soldier and doing it right is nearly impossible.

The area where this blocking force was deployed was near our mortar pits and, also there were two large cesspools in this area. I pieced the story together from information told to me by one of the CSC guys and Airman "Vyto" Vytautas J. Gorinas, Jr. a Lithuanian from Chicago. Oddly, I don't remember what I was doing that night.

The guy-in-charge wonders if they are in the right place and what to do. They take-interval, spread out, facing the sound of the gunfire. It is the only thing to orient them, the gunfire, and it is unnerving. There are no trees in this place but tangle foot scrubs about knee high. To this day, I have no idea what that plant was. The area was a mystery to us. Most of the base perimeter was visible from the road that ringed the base, except on the ends of the runways where the perimeter jutted out to protect the aircraft landings and take-offs. Vyto and the SAT Teams were in one such area and unfamiliar with terrain and distances. Đà Nẵng Air Base was a fortified fence-line, the boundary between existence and nothingness was made up of chain-link and concertina wire.

In each team, the sergeant-in-charge orders advance-in-rushes, ten yards at a time. Blood pumping, they do exactly that. American soldiers are well trained and they have the mentality to follow orders. Like dumb-assed grunts, there wasn't much about the mechanics of defense that Vyto cared about, just that it be good enough to hold out the enemy and keep him from bleeding or, for that matter, shooting.

They advance several times. Each time they went go-to-ground and sense the area for signs of movement, sounds of movement. In front, Marines are firing. Small arms sounds, single shots, bursts of automatic fire, fill the air. Overhead, slap flares pop and shine and waft toward earth under small white parachutes, brilliant, trailing plums of smoke. It feels surreal, the dark your friend, the light your friend, can you see anything? Who lit the flares? Is it our guys in front? Is this the real thing? North Vietnamese Regulars assaulting the base? If so, they have got to be loaded or they wouldn't try.

The two Security Alert Teams halt the advance and the order is given, "Lock and Load!" Each man thinks, "Jesus, God save me." Vyto slaps the side of his M16 with his left hand. Along the line there are rifle sounds, the "clack" as it chambers a round and the ejector port snaps open. Not a conscious movement but automatic from repeated motions, trained memory. Police in Vietnam never chambered a round during normal duty on post for safety reasons. When a round was chambered, the soldier was expecting to use it. At this point, Vyto knew he would kill. Despite his moral training, despite the Ten Commandments, the will-to-live would trump everything. With his right thumb, he rotates the safety off. If something moved, he would shoot it. "Please, God--*nothing move.*"

They wait--hearts pounding. They sense the scene. There is a tree line in front 20 yards or so that obscures the view of the perimeter defenses. The shooting is the same volume as before, single shots and bursts of fire. Where are the Marines? Vyto considers the possibility that movement in front of him might be a Marine. What if the Marines have to fall back? He considers how to challenge a man if it were to happen. No good solution. What forces conspire to place us here? Not good to be a reflective soldier. Vyto decides for a second time, if it moves, he will shoot.

Vyto looks at the immediate surroundings, grass, weedy things, snakes maybe. He hadn't thought of that. When they were rushing forward, the danger was some distance away in their front. But snakes would have been a consideration if he were going to pick his place. Good thing that he was distracted by real danger rather than to imagine more. With time, the heartbeat returned to normal, breathing too. The shooting on the perimeter diminished, slap flares stopped, and time moved on. What was it? Hours maybe.

The danger is over and Vyto experiences adrenaline collapse. He goes from a peak sensory moment into a sleepy withdrawal. There were stars in the sky, hadn't noticed that before. There is the moon and he thinks of the Apollo astronauts standing on the moon looking back on Earth and wondering why we can't live in peace. He thinks how thin our connection to the larger world. Not good to be a reflective soldier. Focus on being alive. Things were returning to normal.

Then dawn, sunlight and behind them on the road, four trucks. The sergeant orders them up, safety on, remove magazines, clear weapons and shag the round that ejected. Down the line, some of the men burrowed in and made good nests for the long wait. But now, it was over. Back to the compound, check weapon, and maybe grab some sleep before post at 3 PM. We never found out if it was for real. Except Vyto knew, if it came to a

choice, he would live.

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***Follow up:** Just so you know, in 1970 I was totally in the dark about Safeside. I don't recall it ever being mentioned while I was in-country, lo these many years ago. My combat preparedness training was in Texas, Lackland AFB and Fort Sam Houston. It was enough to make us feel trained, a lot of weapon's firing and I felt good and confident about that, but then we went and sat on post in Vietnam forgetting most of what we were taught. I think you understand that. These unused skills atrophied with time. Then, thrown into advancing-in-rushes and the blood-lust-of-combat without your head-in-the-game... that's what I was feebly trying to convey.*

*What I discovered from the Washington DC 2007 reunion and the Andrews AFB tour was that there is more clarity now. We understand now that we are more "army" than "police." That our job is more military than law. I enjoyed knowing this now because of the confusion of our job at Đà Nẵng in 1970-1971. We never really knew our primary job--cops or soldiers. I like the new name of "Security Forces."*

*Richard Beggs*

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