



COMBAT ENGINEER IN VIETNAM, 1968

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Combat Showers

In March of 1968, in response to General Westmoreland's directive that the Marines should be more aggressive along the DMZ, we moved the 3rd Engineers from Gia Le just south of Hue, to Quang Tri. We established what was to become Quang Tri Base just west of the rail road tracks near the Quang Tri airport, which already housed several aviation units. Shortly after we built the 3rd Engineers compound, the Seabees, various Army units and other Marine units all added sections around us. For reasons known only to someone at the Army's 5th AirCav Regiment, the Army selected the 3rd Engineers area to locate four ten-thousand gallon bladders of avgas and a landing pad for refueling helicopters. We immediately thought that was a bad idea since we suspected that guerillas all around our base got misty-eyed whenever they talked about the possibility of hitting one of those bladders with a rocket or mortar round. And we were right: they launched round after round, night after night, obviously aimed at the fuel tanks. At least while I was there, they consistently missed.

Over the next six months the base grew and the Seabees built a large Command and Control (COC) bunker for the base, and the wire, the defensive enclosure around the base, became several miles long. We also had mortar sections and a few artillery units, as Quang Tri became a formidable base. And an attractive target. We got incoming almost every night.

By that fall I had assumed command of Headquarters Company for 3rd Engineers. Even though this was not a combat assignment, it sounds important and it did involve more responsibility than I expected or was prepared to acknowledge. I was now responsible for around 50 Marines in the battalion area on Quang Tri and another 25 or so spread across I Corps with the deployed companies. I dispensed wisdom and justice as Marines came and went.

During this period my normal evening routine was to stay or return to my office hootch after supper, perhaps take in the movie, and write letters until it was time to head for the bunk. But first I would wander down to the showers for a private, leisurely and lonely, refreshing shower. If you were not scared to walk out there alone and watched for the huge "water" snakes that still inhabited the old patties, it worked fine. It was too late for most officers and troops to be out, guaranteeing warm water, and normally it was too early for our regular incoming.

Normally. One night I was alone in the shower, enjoying the hot water, and merrily singing a Simon & Garfunkel song, when I heard the whoosh of rockets launching from somewhere outside the wire. They were surely aiming for the fuel bladders which were about 100 meters away. But since they usually missed, I was

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in the wrong place! By now the first rockets were almost on me and without turning off the water or grabbing my towel, I bolted for the nearest trench, tumbling down into the red dirt and mud just as the rockets exploded between the showers and the fuel bladders. I picked myself up, dripping wet, totally nude, and now covered with mud, only to see the entire mess crew staring at me with bemused curiosity. Sergeant Gonzales, who reported to me as the battalion mess sergeant, finally smiled and, with mock formality, stated that he was honored to share a bunker with the Company Commander, with or without a uniform.

Friendly Fire Gets Personal

I still remember this incident clearly and with new pain each time I relive it.

My life settled into a new routine once I was assigned to the COC. The COC was the Combat Operations Center (it was also called other things) and it housed the central communications and was where the base commander had his headquarters. During this period I would wake in the afternoon, perhaps go for a run, and eat supper as scheduled. Then it was over to see what the movie was or write letters.

About 10 p.m. I would assume command at the COC. I would first establish contact with the officer commanding each sector to ensure that all the sectors were manned properly. Nightly, I would remind each sector that no weapon was to be fired without my permission unless circumstances required immediate response. Of course, a sector or Listening Post (LP) that was fired on, or obviously threatened, could always fire in their defense without permission. In any case, if a weapon was discharged, both the sector commander and I were required to submit a written report the next day. The base commanding officer, a bird Colonel, made it clear that if he heard a weapon discharged, he expected to see bodies in the morning. Message: Be damned sure that you are shooting at the enemy and then be damned sure you kill him. I soon discovered this was not as easy as it might sound.

If a firing incident occurred, I would evaluate it and, if I deemed it sufficiently serious, I would send a man to wake the Colonel and then I would explain firsthand what had happened or what was happening. It took a few incidents when the Colonel heard firing and came running without being summoned before he decided he could trust me and we established a reasonable working relationship. Still, the old saw about command being “lonely at the top” became painfully real almost nightly.

One night I was quietly munching my “midrats”—those are rations supplied by the mess hall for folks on midnight watch—which tonight was a sandwich of unidentified origin. I remember because I never finished the sandwich. It was early, close to midnight, and with all my initial duties completed, I could look forward to a few quiet hours since we all knew that the bad guys never did anything until at least 2 a.m. For confirmation of this see the story entitled “Combat Showers.”

A call came in from one of the sectors indicating their LP was hearing activity. This was not so unusual. LPs were supposed to be quiet and heard all sorts of night sounds—a wild boar foraging the former rice paddy, wind rustling the elephant grass, a farmer headed out to deposit “night soil” (looking for a suitable place to take a dump). One night we even had a tiger—yes, a tiger—show up and scare half the camp before it bounded back toward the mountains of the Central Highlands where it came from.

Worse, some of the troops viewed duty on the wire – isolated in a hole with another salty Marine - as the perfect opportunity to misbehave. Most just slept but some were more proactive and, for example, threw rocks at their buddies in the next hole or out toward the LP, trying to provoke an incident. Midrats
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sometimes included bootlegged booze and ladies of the night were occasionally observed entering and leaving bunkers and foxholes. My job was to work down the list and separate the wheat from the chaff before anybody got shot or blown up. Imagine some junior Captain on Oahu in 1941 struggling to reconcile reports of planes approaching Pearl Harbor from the north with the usual stream of false alarms. I seldom had problems staying awake.

On this particular night I calmly intoned the regular warnings and cautions before I began to question the young and obviously eager lieutenant. He was impatient; there were enemy out there and he worried about two things. Naturally, he did not want to get shot, especially since he already knew they were there. But I am sure he also worried that this opportunity for glory, meager though it might be, would pass him by before he could take action.

“Slow down; slow down. Just tell me if they are wearing hats.” “Hats?! Captain! They are moving straight toward my LP. Can I shoot or not?” Well, no, not just yet. I had discovered that the question about hats separated a lot of wheat from chaff. You could not identify faces or uniforms in the dark but hats stood out. Helmets meant that the people wearing them were U.S. troops; the NVA wore a sort of baseball hat with a short brim; and conical hats were farmers. If there were no hats, someone was lost on the way to the head. And if he could not identify what kind of hats they had, then perhaps nerves were a little too active. Of course, a major concern was whether U.S. troops had wandered into the wrong sector.

“OK, lieutenant, find out how many there are—the exact number—and identify the hats.” I could tell he was irritated but without precise information I would not grant him permission to fire. He went quiet while he called the LP to relay my request. In the meantime, I started the process of tracking down any lost Marines. I called the fire control center, which was supposed to know the location of any U.S. patrols or other activities. Then I called the sector on either side of the lieutenant. Did they have any reports of noise from their LPs? Could they see anything? Both sectors came back and reported negative. “Stand by—we may be firing in an adjacent sector.”

I was very clear to each of the adjacent sectors that an LP had seen someone moving, and we needed ironclad confirmation that nothing unexpected was happening in their areas. Both assured me that all was quiet to their front and no patrols were out. Two down, one more to go.

The excited young lieutenant came back on the line and reported that there were three men crawling through the grass and they were carrying weapons. No report on hats; but weapons? That was good. I immediately told one of my sergeants to notify the adjacent sectors to expect firing, shortly but they did not have permission to fire. Also, prepare to notify the Colonel now, since he may still be awake. Then I was clear and firm with the lieutenant: you have permission to fire, but I want bodies. Don't fire until you are sure you can take them out.

As I was finishing that conversation, one of the adjacent sectors called again. Oops, Captain, it seems that our LP fudged the truth earlier. They actually got lost on the way out and wandered off course in the dark. They think they may be in front of another sector. I can now guess what a fatal heart attack feels like; at least I know what it feels like for your heart to stop for several minutes.

I called the lieutenant back, screaming; he had already started moving Marines from two of his holes to prepare to fire. They had observed the people crawling and were moving into a position that would allow them to fire without hitting the Marines manning the LP. Trying to conceal the panic in my voice, I instructed
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the lieutenant to personally go back to the holes and prevent them from firing. He gave the phone to his sergeant while I waited for my heart to start.

When he finally reported back, I could hear the disappointment in his voice. "We could have gotten them, Captain." I was too busy trying to breathe again to explain or even care about a reply. I trust the Colonel slept well that night.

Blasting Off for Home

My orders finally came to return to the U.S. for separation. Normally, Marines spent thirteen months in country but my contract was up in December, so I was rotating almost a month early. I disposed of all my stuff and caught a flight to Da Nang. I was surprised that I felt a bit nostalgic boarding the plane for Okinawa.

I spent a few days in Okinawa, mainly getting my head back together, but was finally assigned a flight back to Travis Air Force Base. After the trauma of my trip back to Vietnam from Okinawa in July, I vowed that I would arrive at the airport early to catch the bird back to the states. And I was. But this time the plane was late. Still, it turned out the excitement was not quite over.

After I had bought all the required photo and audio gear in Okinawa, I was ready. My flight was scheduled to leave about two p.m. one afternoon, and I actually got to Kadena AFB early. To pass the time most passengers simply dozed sprawled out in the departure lounge, which was a simple building on the edge of the tarmac with benches and chairs. There was no lounge and no snack bar. Mostly, I just paced.

We continued to wait as night fell and then sometime before midnight—the plane was really late—I wandered out on the tarmac alone to watch a flight of B52s take off for a bombing mission over North Vietnam. As the huge planes began rolling, I walked out toward the runway until I was about 500 meters from the planes and I can testify to the noise, the visceral feel of the power—the excitement!—of a fully loaded B52 roaring down the runway. Two groups, or flights of a three planes, rolled by and lifted off about even with where I stood.

As the next group of planes thundered toward me, I noticed a fiery discharge from the near outboard engine on the last plane in the formation. That was different. Yes, I thought, that engine is surely on fire. The pilot must have seen the alarm about the time he drew even with me, where the previous planes had lifted off. That was about where he would have reached Vc. V-critical is the speed at which the pilot is committed to leaving the ground; he can no longer safely stop the plane and must continue to liftoff. This pilot knew he could not safely stop but he was now riding in a plane that was on fire, loaded with approximately 27 tons of high explosives: over 100 bombs in a mixture of 500 and 750 lb ordinance. He did not want to take off; he wanted out.

He immediately hauled the power back on all eight engines, locked the brakes, and began sliding down the runway. Now the wing was engulfed in flames and a shower of sparks spewed from the landing gear, which seemed to be collapsing in slow motion right in front of me. Actually, the whole thing seemed to be playing in slow motion. I did not think I was in danger, and I remained rooted to my spot on the tarmac.

A few seconds later either the first wing mounted bomb or a gas tank exploded. Now I decided that, perhaps I was in danger, even though the plane was at least a half-mile away. Of course, I did not actually
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decide anything; I instinctively hit the deck and began trying to dig a hole in the tarmac. The plane had now come to a stop a mile or so down the runway, and additional bombs began to detonate. I regained my wits and decided, again, that I was not in any danger and had started to rise for a better view. About that time the remaining ordinance detonated in a single, monster explosion, knocking me back to the ground.

We did not leave Okinawa that night. The airbase was closed as the debris from the plane was cleaned up and the runway inspected to ensure that it was still sound. Also, the entire area had to be inspected by people walking arm-to-arm to ensure that no unexploded ordinance remained. Apparently, there was nothing left, and we took off for home about two p.m. the next day. Twenty-four hours late. Never before or since have I been that early for a flight.

A B52 carries a crew of eight to ten men, depending on the mission and needs of the flight. This one carried ten, we were told, and I assumed that all ten perished in the final explosion. But they did not; in fact, we were told that all ten escaped alive; injured but alive. When the plane came to stop it had slid on to the grass on the left side of the runway. As soon as it came to a stop the crew dove for the escape hatches. Since the initial fire was on the right side of the plane, they all scrambled to the left as they hit the ground. This fast action saved everyone's life.

The Kadena runway is built up across the gullies and rough ground that is Okinawa and the ground to the left wasn't there. The crew all tumbled about fifteen feet down into a gully, with at least one crewmember breaking an arm in the fall. But the bombs all exploded above them and the blast went right over their heads. We could see the burned spot on the runway and grass when we finally took off.

It is when things seem really dull that excitement happens.

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