

## Just A Few Crazy Days

From the time I arrived in Vietnam in April of 1967 with D Company of the 589<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, there was a constant vigilance and a never ending series of attacks on our base camps it seemed. There were nightly flares launched from perimeter guard posts, trip flares, and claymore mines outside the area of the perimeter. There were also listening posts, my favorite, situated by itself several hundred meters outside of the perimeter with just a radio to communicate bad things back to the camp. The flare lit sky was frequently accompanied by small arms fire and occasional M79 grenades launched.

Perimeter 'guard duty' was an additional responsibility after working in construction all day in the field. Each guard tower or bunker was occupied by three guards. A normal night guard duty was two hours awake and four hours asleep with one person awake. During high alert times the three guards at each station would alternate four hours awake and two hours asleep with two awake at all times. It was often difficult to stay awake for this duty after working all day but it was a court marshal offence to fall sleep while on guard duty not to mention a security breach. We tried many methods to stay awake including walking around outside the bunker while trying not to expose ourselves to danger. I have walked into the barbed wire perimeter while trying to stay awake while on guard duty. While at Cu Lam Nam at our base camp guard duty was a weekly or every few day responsibility for enlisted men. This constant vigilance at night where one could not see but a few meters ahead was stressful especially with little sleep after a hard day's labor building roads and bridges. The trip flares and noises caused adrenalin surges and fear of the unknown. The occasional penetration by VC to our perimeter caused these fears to be founded.

When we moved to Vinh Tranh to build an airfield for the Special Forces camp there the nightly vigilance only increased as this was a known VC friendly area. The road to the camp was dirt and was frequently mined. Once a satchel bomb was thrown at one of our vehicles from a side of the road. After that a 50 caliber armed  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton guard vehicle accompanied anyone coming to or leaving our camp. Nightly flares and gunfire from

helicopter gunships were a frequent wakeup call. Occasional probing of our fortifications was expected and experienced. Once again the trip flares lighting the sky was a nightly expectation and it was always unknown whether this was preliminary to another attack or just an annoying probe to keep us from sleeping well.

We bathed in the river below our camp with armed guards along the shore because the shower water bladders once contained fuel and the water still smelled like diesel fuel. We worked on the airfield with our M16s always within arms reach. We mounted rifle racks on our construction equipment and hoped that we would not have to use them. We slept in trenches dug by our D8 tractors with a tent for cover. One morning I awoke with an ant in my inner ear which I dislodged with water thankfully. Another morning I awoke with a spider bite on my genitals which caused a swollen awful looking mess which was remedied with antihistamines. It was not uncommon to wake up with rats on or near you. Those cookies from home were loved by all.

I often drove a fuel truck to top-off the construction equipment at our many construction sites. One evening while returning from Qui Nhon between Qui Nhon and Cu Lam Nam just after passing a bridge guarded by South Vietnam soldiers a fire was lit across the road ahead of me and I heard gun fire. I did not stop at the bridge and drove through the fire firing my M-16 from my driver seat. I did not stop until I reached our base camp at Cu Lam Nam. But I was very shaken by this experience since I was alone returning after dark in a supposed docile area and I had had a few beers.

When I got back to camp and my tent, 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant Belland came to talk to me. He said that there was a report of someone firing their rifle along the road to the camp and my truck was the last one to come in. He asked to feel my rifle barrel. After he felt the warm barrel of my M16 he told me to go to bed. He was a large man and he treated his men fairly but he also seemed like a father at times to us young soldiers. I don't know what he told his superiors but it was just another crazy day for me.