

Tet Offensive January 1968

The Tet Offensive, January 1968, found us at Camp Radcliff, in the small village of An Khe in the Central Highlands. It had a big old mountain called Hon Cong with a large 1st Cavalry patch painted on the top that you could see for miles. There were stories of our dozer operators pushing rocks off the top of Hon Kong to see who could get there's closest to the hospital at the bottom of the mountain. I'm sure that wasn't true our mission was to improve the road to the top of the mountain and the communication towers there. One of our primary missions was to pave the road (QL19) from the coastal town of Qui Nhon west to the Central Highlands to An Khe and beyond to Pleiku, This was about forty miles of red dirt, laterite, the geologists called but it got onto and into everything. Before the road was paved it was frequently mined and made getting supplies to the Army forces inland difficult and dangerous. We drivers therefore put sand bags on the floor of our trucks and drove with the door ajar so that we would be blown out of the vehicle and not absorb the full force of the blast should we encounter a mine. We also watched that we did not cut turns too sharply since the inside and outside of a turn was a frequent location for an explosive device.

There were dangers at Camp Radcliff also even though we shared it with the 1st Cavalry Division and the 173 Airborne Brigade. During one January night in 1968 while sleeping in my cot in an actual building instead of a tent, which had been my usual accommodation, we were hit with a steady barrage of mortars. All of Camp Radcliff was under attack this night. The fuel depot was hit and on fire and it lit up the night sky like it was daylight. The, the airfield, the golf course, as it was called, was under attack and many helicopter gunships and supporting buildings were hit and destroyed. One mortar hit our building about 15 feet from where I slept and sent shrapnel smoke and the smell of gunpowder through our building. My clothes, hanging up, had holes through them, my mosquito net had holes, but I was not hit for some fortunate reason. I was the first to awake unlocked the weapons and was outside to defend against what I assumed to be a major assault. The gunships were also aloft and the noise of the staccato zipping of the automatic cannons filled my ears, the flares illuminating the night sky and the fire from the fuel depot created the surreal world of a real war battle. The sound of our artillery

answering back was deafening. So much of the hit and run guerilla warfare as we had experienced thus far was shattered that night as a base as big as Camp Radcliff was proving to be just as vulnerable as anywhere in Vietnam. Qui Nhon was also experiencing this offensive, as was Pleiku, Khe San, Hue, and Saigon. Everywhere in Vietnam, it seemed, was capable of being assaulted by this VC rag tag army augmented by the North Vietnamese Army forces and also supported by who knew what other countries. No ground assault followed that night but it was part of a major countrywide offensive later to be named the Tet Offensive and it was a turning point in the war. Fortunately my roommate, where the mortar struck, was on guard duty that night on the camp perimeter or he would not have survived as his area took the full force of the explosion. Just like so much of this war luck seemed to play a part in your fate. But surviving the war did not mean that you were able to forget the war. For 50 years I have tried to forget the nights of fearing the next moment during an attack or the smells and sights of these attacks. It is these sounds that bring the memories back.

Is it just fireworks? No it is also the helicopters that fly over the beach where I live looking for missing swimmers. It is the depression that lingers at times, the flashbacks, and sometimes it's just seeing a Vietnamese-American. I never wish them any ill-will they just trigger a memory of an experience long ago. I try not to be anti-social but I can count my friends on one hand. I quit jobs because I could not be managed. I sought jobs where I did not have to work with others. I loved being a biologist in the back country of the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Central California but even camping reminds me of my year of camping in Vietnam.

My wife and I leave our neighborhood each 4th of July. It seems like people like to come to the beach where we live to shoot off fireworks, and the local communities put on long firework displays often. Even my neighbors like to set off firework. None of these people are veterans of course. I've tried to discourage such practices and suppress my anger but it is easier to get out of town. It is the dog and cat lovers, it seems, who are most vocal about halting fireworks. It is the dogs and cats who suffer like the veterans. I sometimes think are we not just dogs who once did heroic things?