1967 Dong Ha Deployment Memories

By Bernie Perry, CM3

After high school graduation in 1962, I completed a two-year automotive program at a junior college in my home state of Colorado. Afterwards, I spent a couple of years repairing vehicles in auto repair shops until I received my military draft call soon after my first wedding anniversary in early 1966.

A couple of weeks after I passed the physical examination, I volunteered for a four-year enlistment in the Navy instead of being drafted into the Army or the Marines. While in boot camp at San Diego that summer, I was assigned the rating of construction mechanic in the Seabees and given orders to report for duty with M.C.B. 11 in early October. I was a member of the sixth platoon in Alpha Company as we spent the next few months preparing for our deployment to Vietnam.

We began the Dong Ha deployment on the evening of April 26, 1967 with a flight from Point Mugu Naval Air Station in California. I remember how jovial our platoon commander was as we boarded the Air Force Military Airlift Command C-130 aircraft. He was a 47-year-old chief petty officer and a veteran of World War II. He was celebrating our departure by smoking a cigar before takeoff. I asked him why he seemed to be so happy? His answer shocked me. He told me that he was looking forward to spending a few months away from his wife! That was very puzzling to me, since I was having a difficult time with the idea of having to be away from my wife and going off to a war zone with all the unknowns.

During our first stop for a meal in the Air Force chow hall at Travis Air Force base, cardboard-crated refrigerators were placed in the center section of the cargo plane, resulting in very little leg room. We were seated in nylon webbings that ran alongside the interior walls of the plane. I was fortunate to have a seat on the right side of the aircraft near a small window located under the wing as we island-hopped our way across the Pacific. We had refueling stops at Hickam Air Base in Hawaii, Midway Island, Guam, and Clark Air Base in the Philippines. During those stops, we ate in chow halls and loitered nearby while the pilots rested for several hours.

We landed on the metal runway at Dong Ha Combat Base around 10 a.m. on April 29, 1967 which was a very hot sunny day. We had been gone from Point Mugu for over 50 hours and it was nice to get away from the noise of the turbo-prop engines. I had an anxious feeling as we stood at the side of the runway a few minutes later and watched the plane lumber down the airstrip and lift off into the clear blue sky. We

had just been inserted into the Vietnam War where there were no front lines and just being in the country made us a target.

Soon afterwards, a cargo truck took us to the Seabee compound a few hundred yards south of the airstrip where we began helping with pitching tents. We drank warm water laced with lime flavored Jell-o and ate c-rations for the next few days. We slept fully clothed on a cot in the tent with a slit-trench nearby and spent hours filling sandbags to place around the tent and over the trench for protection from flying shrapnel in case of enemy mortar and rocket attacks.

We had no perimeter wire for the first few days on the east side of our camp and I remember pulling guard duty in a sand-bagged bunker several yards beyond our tent about two nights after we arrived. There were two of us in each bunker facing the Vietnamese countryside with nothing between us and a potential Viet Cong assault, but an open area. We took turns staying awake with our M-14 rifles at the ready while the Marines just north of us popped flares every so often to see what was out there. We listened to machine gun fire in the distance and felt a little spooky all night long.

Within a few days, I was part of a detail that built the section of concertina wire that was erected on the east side of Dong Ha Combat Base adjacent to our Seabee compound. We stood on the tailgate of a deuce and a half multi-fuel cargo truck to drive the steel posts in with a sledge hammer. After they were in place, we strung five or six layers of concertina wire among the posts to create a barrier to slow down any assault that the enemy might wage against us during the night. While working on the project for several days, there were many curious Vietnamese civilians (or possibly Viet Cong) that came up to observe what we were doing and attempted to ask questions. Because of the language barrier, we mostly communicated with hand gestures and laughter.

We also had a very good vantage point to watch Air Force B-52 bombers drop their loads of bombs in or near the DMZ; which was a few miles north of our position. I can still see in my mind, the large number of bombs tumbling through the sky as they fell to their targets. I was in awe of the debris clouds they created along with

the severe earth tremors that vibrated the ground beneath our feet for several minutes even after the planes had left the scene.

The first mortar and rocket attack we experienced was in the middle of the night on May 8th. Most of the attack was with 140mm rockets which screamed in with an eerie siren-like sound.

The airfield and helicopters parked north of us were the main targets. Some of us peered out from our trench to see lots of red-hot shrapnel fly through the night sky. It reminded me of a fourth of July fireworks display. Most of my squad spent the next day, which was my 23rd birthday, filling more sandbags to stack around our tent. Some of us were in denial about the war we were in, but seeing all that shrapnel and hearing all that noise brought us into the reality that we just might have a long and miserable deployment.

After a week or two, the steelworkers completed our mechanic's shop and we settled in to repair the trucks, jeeps, and other construction equipment. I remember rebuilding the front end of an International dump truck after one of the front wheels had been blown off, as an equipment operator drove it down Highway 1 and hit a Viet Cong land mine that had been planted in the road overnight.

We endured another mortar attack on the night of May 18th. We heard the mortars coming out of the tubes which the Viet Cong were firing from a short distance east of the perimeter wire which I had helped to set up a few days earlier. Most of the mortars fell in a low-lying area a few hundred feet west of us where a unit of newly arrived Marines was sleeping. I have always wondered if some of the Vietnamese civilians who worked on the base may have had something to do with the timing and accuracy of that attack. The next morning, we observed a dud mortar round half-buried in the ground a few hundred feet north of our tent area while we were walking to the mechanic's shop.

One day in late May, one of the married guys in our mechanic's shop decided that he missed being with his wife and had seen enough of the war. So, after our mid-day

meal at the chow hall, he went outside and sat down on the south side with his back against the wall and just sat there. Some of us who knew him stopped and suggested that it was time to go back to the shop for more work. He informed us that he was "quitting the Navy." After the chief in charge of our shop talked to him with no change of his mind, he was taken to the hospital ship that was sailing off the coast and placed in the mental ward for evaluation. We never saw him again and never learned what became of him. There were times later when we wondered who was really the mental case?

Our only way to communicate with loved ones back home was by mail. It took several days before we received our first letter and then sometimes we received 2 or 3 from the same person on the same day. I remember how special mail call was to all of us. To get a letter from home was about as good as it ever got during my time in the Vietnam War!

One evening in June, about 30 minutes before dark, we saw an Army helicopter gunship hovering a short distance northeast of our perimeter wire. Soon, there was a hail of tracer bullets being fired from the machine gunner in the chopper towards the ground under them. Within a few seconds of the first volley of fire, we saw different colored tracer bullets coming from the ground up to the helicopter. That only lasted for a short time as the gunner in the chopper overwhelmed the return fire. After another minute or so, the helicopter flew away. We speculated that the enemy was probably in the early stage of sitting up mortar tubes for a late-night attack on our base.

The Marines had outposts north of us near the south edge of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) which was supposed to be a buffer zone separating North Vietnam from South Vietnam near the 17th degree parallel. Con Thien was a few miles northwest of us and Gio Linh was a few miles northeast of us. Around July 2nd, the North Vietnamese began an attack on these two outposts with heavy shelling using artillery, rockets, and mortars. They soon followed up with ground troops using tear gas to breach the perimeters of these bases. My squad was issued gas masks at that time in case the enemy made it to our base and attempted to use the same tactics on us. We had reactionary squad duty where we scrambled to the perimeter wire during the night on a cargo truck to reinforce troops already in the trenches behind the wire. This intense enemy activity lasted 5 or 6 days before superior American firepower overwhelmed them, but it was a very stressful time.

Early in the deployment, some of us took competency tests in the chow hall for potential advancement in rank. Several of us passed the test and a few weeks later

were promoted. I became an E-4 on July 16. I think the base pay for an E-4 in 1967 was about $178 per month. Of course, we also received another $65 per month for hostile fire pay because of being in Vietnam.

I remember that about mid-July, we started getting harassed by “one-gun-Charlie”. Usually during the daytime, the North Vietnamese Army, would fire two or three rounds of 152mm artillery shells into our area and then it would stop as suddenly as it had started. They were firing from northwest of us in their own territory several miles away. They would do this at random times, so we never knew when or where the next round was coming in.

I do remember that it played on our minds and created quite a bit of fear for most of us. It was difficult to concentrate on our jobs wondering if a shell would explode nearby. Years later, I often hear people say they are “under the gun” when they feel pressure to meet a deadline. For those of us who lived through those days, I think we have a different understanding of what that phrase really means.

Another time when we were working in the mechanic’s shop one bright sunny day, the NVA opened-up on us with a bombardment of about 50 or 60 artillery shells. We all ran and jumped into the lube pit that we had in the shop and were cowering there with a great deal of fear while the shells exploded nearby. One of the younger mechanics, who was about 20 years old, commented that he wished the enemy would run out of shells. Our 47-year-old chief, who was a veteran of World War II, tried to calm us by telling us that: “you know we are all going to die someday and maybe today would be as good as any.” The young man told the chief: “that is easy for you to say since you have already lived your life, but we younger guys want to stay alive for a while yet!”

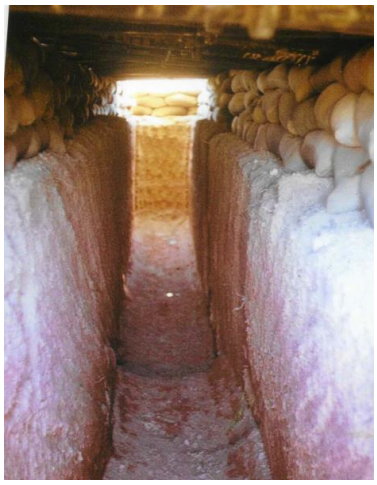
In late July, a fellow mechanic and I flew to Da Nang on a C-130 for a few days of R & R at China Beach. We shared the plane with several U.S. Marines and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers who were all armed with M-16 assault rifles. While we were loading, there were more of us who needed to take that flight than there was adequate space available. So, we were packed in very tightly while seated on the deck facing the rear with the rifles pointing up and our knees in the rib cages of those in front of us. After the crew chief closed the rear ramp hatches, it became very uncomfortable in that environment for a few minutes with intense heat before the air conditioning system kicked in. One of the Marines took exception to the ARVNs being so close to him and attempted to shove a couple of

them away and called them derogatory names. It was very nice to arrive at the Da Nang airport a few minutes later and get out of that hostile environment.

China Beach was a sandy shore on the South China Sea in Da Nang that had a nice beach and recreational areas for relaxing to get away from enemy activities. We went swimming at the beach the second day after we had settled in to the quiet environment. I had never experienced a rip tide before, but within a few minutes the under-current washed sand from beneath my feet and carried me away from shore with great power. Soon, I was a hundred yards or more out to sea and began to wonder if I might drown since I couldn't gain headway by attempting to swim back to shore. I told myself that I hadn't come to Vietnam to drown, so I concentrated on just relaxing and treaded water for a few minutes with my friend who stayed with me and was a much stronger swimmer.

Soon, a Marine life guard came out on a surf board and rescued me. When we got back to shore, he explained that when a rip tide takes you out to sea like that, don't attempt to swim against the current. Instead, swim parallel to shore for a few yards then swim in where the current isn't very strong. That was nice to learn, but I had no desire to ever swim again at China Beach in Da Nang.

On August 6th, we moved into the tin-roofed hut that the builders in our battalion had finished. It had three cubicles with plywood floors and partitions. There was enough space for 4 men in each cubicle. We had an actual bed with a mattress and a steel locker to store our gear in.



There were trenches dug under the hut with holes cut in the floor between the beds for quick access in case of enemy attack. This was a great improvement over the tents and cots. We spent many hours placing sandbags on top of the steel barrels that were placed alongside the outer walls then filled with dirt to protect against shrapnel.

I remember one day after we had moved into our hut, we were given some time to read our mail after mail call. We had just eaten lunch in the chow hall and were relaxing in our bunks enjoying the letters we had received from back home. Everything was quiet and peaceful, and then out of nowhere came this extreme noise right over the top of our roof. As the adrenalin in our bodies skyrocketed, we ran outside to find out what was happening. One of our jet fighters, that was probably heading back to base or an aircraft carrier after a bombing run over enemy territory, had flew just a few feet above us at an extremely high rate of speed. I suppose the pilot did that to scare the heck out of us. In my case, he succeeded since I imagined the North Vietnamese had sent their Russian-made MIGs down to bomb our base.

As time went along, the Army fired larger numbers of shells from our base with their big 175 mm artillery pieces. I still remember the sound of the shells whistling through the air as they flew overhead on their way to targets in or near the DMZ.

The concussion of the explosions necessary to propel them several miles to their targets always rattled the metal roof on our huts and buildings.

Around 0600 on the morning of August 28th, most of the mechanics in my squad had left our hut earlier to eat in the chow hall. We had the option to skip breakfast and sleep a while longer before muster at the shop at 0700. One other mechanic and I were getting that last few minutes of peaceful sleep, when suddenly there was a thunderous explosion. We both responded by jumping out of the rack and sliding through the open hole into the trench below. Several more blasts soon followed. The North Vietnamese had fired several rounds of 152mm artillery into our base. One of the first shells had scored a direct hit on one of the builder's hut a short distance from us. We later learned, from some of the men returning from the chow hall, that 4 of our fellow Seabees had lost their lives in that first loud explosion. That was devastating to all of us and was the low point of the 7-month deployment. The enemy hit our base a few more times that day. The chow hall closed, so we ate c-rations or canned tuna fish and Ritz crackers that had been sent from home.

On August 31st, I got a small metal shaving in my left eye while drilling a broken motor mount bolt on one of the International dump trucks. I went to sick bay for help and after an attempt to remove it, the corpsman informed me that I would need to be taken to the USS Repose hospital ship that was sailing off the coast. So, later that day, I caught an Army med-evac helicopter which airlifted a few other military personnel and me to the landing platform on the rear of the ship. The

doctor, who removed the metal sliver, treated it with medication to prevent a full-blown infection. He kept me on board the ship for a few days for daily observation. Because I was otherwise able, I was required to assist the staff with emptying bed pans, swabbing decks, and cleaning patient's rooms.

On September 6th, the ship anchored in Da Nang harbor and I was dismissed from the doctor's care and taken ashore in a small boat. A few other military personnel were also released and shared the boat ride with me, but disappeared once we were ashore. I was alone and did not have my rifle, since I hadn't brought it with me when I was flown to the ship. I knew that I needed to get to the Marine air terminal at the airport to catch a flight back to Dong Ha, but I didn't know which way to walk to get to the airport. So, I began asking other American military people who I met, which way to the airport? One guy told me to go in one direction and when I ended up in a neighborhood that was void of any American military people, I decided to turn around and go back.

Finally, I asked an Air Force airman, who was sitting in a military vehicle at a stop sign, how to get there. He told me to get in and he would take me, so I hopped in the back. After a few minutes, he let me off at the Marine air terminal. That was a welcome relief to be on the base where I felt much safer.

The next available flight to Dong Ha wasn't to leave until the next morning, so I found a tree nearby to get some shade from the blazing sun. While I was sitting on the ground with my back against the tree trunk, a Marine C-130, which had flown in from Okinawa, landed and taxied up near the terminal. Soon, several U.S. Marines in clean green uniforms and large manila envelopes with their orders inside emerged from the rear hatch of the plane. By the look of their faces, most were probably 19 or 20 years old. As I watched them file past, I recognized one of them. He was a Navy hospital corpsman who was in my boot camp company a year earlier in San Diego. We talked long enough for me to find out that he was assigned duty with a Marine combat unit as their medic. After an evening meal in a base chow hall, I attempted to get a cot to sleep on at a transient troop center, but not one was available due to hundreds of other military transients passing through the Da Nang air base on their way to or from various units in the northern reaches of South Vietnam. At that time, American troop strength in the war was at or near it's' zenith of well over 500,000 men. Da Nang airbase was a very busy place with planes constantly coming or going.

With no sleeping cot available, I went back to the Marine air terminal to spend the night. There were no benches, only single folding chairs, so I decided to sleep on an

empty wooden baggage table positioned in a corner of the large room. Despite not having a pillow and no padding, I stretched out and fell asleep without much effort. I probably was asleep for less than an hour when the sound of a jet engine under full thrust came roaring past me streaking down the runway and into the night sky. There was a squadron of Marine fighter jets stationed nearby and they used that runway, which was only a few feet from the terminal building, to go on bombing runs in support of troops out in the field. I got little naps in between each takeoff, but I think there were at least 20 flights that night. It was one of the noisiest and miserable nights I spent in Vietnam, but at least I didn't have to contend with what the combat troops had to deal with each night out in the jungles.

Mid-morning the next day, I caught a flight back to Dong Ha aboard a Marine C-130. Once again, we were packed in very tightly, seated on the deck facing rearward with our knees in the ribcages of those in front. I was the only Seabee among all the newly-minted young Marines in their clean green uniforms and M-16 rifles pointing upwards.

Because my uniform was stained with use in the Vietnam environment, it stuck out in contrast to theirs and those seated near me asked questions about Dong Ha and life near the DMZ. I sensed their apprehension, so I kept the conversation upbeat and minimized the situation. When we got off the plane in Dong Ha, I wished them the best knowing that they were going to experience some very harsh things in the coming months.

When I got back to the Seabee compound, others in my squad told me how fortunate I was not to have been there on September 3rd when the North Vietnamese fired shells into the combat base ammunition dump. They told me about the severe noises and earth-jarring concussions created by over 8 hours of explosions from tons of ammunition going up in flames. Some of the mechanics spent the day in the lube pit in the shop unable to escape by running for the hut further away, because of constant munition explosions.

In the middle of September, we had what was probably a typhoon in the area. Newspaper accounts say we received 18 inches of rain in a 24-hour period. I

remember we baled water from the trenches under our hut in the middle of the night only to find it full again the next morning.

During the monsoon season, B-52 bombing of the DMZ area occurred quite frequently during the night. The shaking of the ground and the rattling of the metal roof in our hut would awaken us, while the dense moist air muffled the noise of bombs exploding in the distance. Each of those incidents usually lasted 30 or 40 minutes as several loads of bombs were dropped from several planes. I always had a tense feeling in my gut when that happened as I laid awake thinking about the war and wondering if we would survive it. Evidently, others in my squad probably were thinking similar thoughts, because no one said anything, we just laid there in silence. Finally, after a while it would quiet down and we would go back to sleep.

One Sunday morning in October, "one-gun-Charlie" fired a few artillery rounds into the base at random. One of the shells hit a fuel storage facility located a few hundred yards west of our camp. We watched it burn for an hour or so, as we all got our cameras out to take pictures of it. That kind of incident left us feeling uneasy. It always brought us back to reality that we were indeed in a war zone. I think a lot of the time; we were in denial telling ourselves that we were safe on the base. Maybe it was a way of helping us to cope with the insanity of war?

On the night of October 23rd, our squad was ordered to get our flak jackets, helmets, rifles, and gas masks. We were taken to the perimeter wire to reinforce the troops who were already in the trenches between Marine tanks. After we were issued extra ammunition, a Marine captain told us to stay awake because intelligence believed there were several thousand NVA troops in our vicinity and there was a good chance they would attempt to overrun our position. That was very sobering news to me and I experienced a lot of anxiety while hunkered down in the trench that night. As time slowly passed, the sounds of war were very loud with fighter jets streaking past us and artillery fire from our base could be heard, as well as machine gun fire in the distance. Later, the eastern horizon lit up with flashes of orange-colored light. U.S. Navy ships, sitting off the coast, were firing their big guns and the large shells were screaming over us as they impacted an area northwest of us. This sort of activity went on for most of the night. When it finally quieted down and the sun came up, I was very tired from lack of sleep, but extremely happy that no attack from the enemy had occurred in our sector of the base.

When our platoon rotated out of Vietnam on the morning of November 29th, we were at the airstrip, with our full gear, waiting when the plane landed with members of another Seabee battalion there to relieve us. That was one of the most exciting days in my life! When we cleared the air strip and were airborne, shouts of pure joy rang out from every one of us!

We flew to Cam Ranh Bay for refueling at a Navy base much further south on the coast of South Vietnam, then to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, and on to Wake Island. We were there for several hours while the pilots slept. We rented bicycles and explored the island, which was a scene of action between Japanese and American forces during World War II. There were still lots of Japanese concrete bunkers with 3-feet-thick walls and old artillery pieces that were used some 25 years earlier to fire at American ships and invading troops. Later, we again stopped in Hawaii and on to Point Mugu and soon were back at our home port in Port Hueneme, California on December 1st. We were very happy to be back in the USA.

Later that evening, I began a 30 day leave and took a commercial flight from Los Angeles to Denver. When I arrived, my beautiful wife Betty was there waiting for me with open arms.

Life doesn't get any better than when you return from a war without physical injury and resume life with the love of your life. Those seven months were the most difficult days of my life that I will never forget.

Time in the Navy and since

I was promoted to E-5 on December 16, 1967 and attended Construction Mechanic B-school in Port Hueneme from March to early August 1968. I served another Vietnam deployment with MCB 11 in Quang Tri from August 15, 1968 to January 19, 1969, for a total of 12 months in country.

I was transferred to Norfolk, VA in March 1969 for a 5-week instructor training class with other Navy personnel from the regular fleet. Afterwards, I taught Construction Mechanic A-school from May to October 1969 at the Seabee base in Davisville, Rhode Island. I had begun active duty on July 7, 1966, and was not due to complete

my four-year enlistment until July 1970. On October 6, 1969, I was granted a 9-month “early-out” because of defense budget cuts.

We moved back to our home state of Colorado and I attended Colorado State University from early 1970 until I graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree in August 1971. I attended college year around while I held a 20 hour per-week job in a truck maintenance facility. I taught auto mechanics to over 1700 high school students during a 28-year teaching career from 1971-99. Betty and I have been married for 52 years, since January 10, 1965. We have 2 sons, 3 grandchildren, and 2 great grandsons. Life is good!

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